

## **GOSPEL PROCLAMATION AMONG THE URBAN POOR**

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In most Third World cities around the world, the problem of poverty is acute and growing. Far from finding solutions to the problem, local governments are frustrated by the fact that previous efforts and programs have at best served only to slow the spread of poverty, rather than to actually decrease the incidence of poverty. Jesus said, “the poor you always have with you” (Mt. 26:11). We know that there will always be poor people among us, but the question for us as Western missionaries is, “will we be among the poor?”

In many cases that I have witnessed, the answer to that question has been, “no”. Often it seems that missionaries in the cities of Developing nations decide to target the “middle class” or the wealthy, usually justifying their decision on strategic grounds. Those who have means are usually better educated and are therefore more qualified to be leaders; they are able to financially support their own ministry so that the missionary can move on to another work; and they are less likely to be side-tracked by the missionary’s skin color, accent, or material possessions. The urban missionary needs to select a target group from among the teeming millions of the cities, and there are plenty of people in every socioeconomic strata who have not been reached with the Gospel. From a logical point of view, there is no reason not to target people outside of the poorest classes.

My own sense of the situation, however, is that Western missionaries feel uncomfortable and “out of place” working among the poor. They don’t seem to be able

to “connect”, and their presence often produces a circle of people looking for financial assistance rather than producing a community of believers in Jesus Christ. As a result, Gospel proclamation among the poor is left to “the Pentecostals”, who seem to be doing a pretty good job of it, anyways.

Missiologist Jonathan Bonk would argue that the lack of connection which Western missionaries feel with the poor is a necessary and inevitable result of Western affluence. Bonk states that “Western missionaries cannot identify with the life situations of the poor which their message is intended to address.”<sup>1</sup> Because they are unable to identify with the poor, their communication of the Gospel is distorted. This is because there is a direct correlation between “a missionary’s level of identification and (the) effectiveness of his communication”.<sup>2</sup>

While Bonk’s discussion of Western affluence in the context of global poverty is important, I believe that he has missed the reason for the “disconnect” between Western missionaries and the world’s poor in Gospel communication. Bonk seems to assume that identification is somehow dependant on economic parity. If this were so, then all people of the same socioeconomic class would be able to “connect” and communicate with each other without a problem. The fact of the matter, however, is that effective communication – especially Gospel communication – is always a struggle. Pastors in a Midwestern United States parish frequently are unable to “connect” with their parishioners. Parents of teenagers find it difficult to “connect” with their own offspring. Missionaries working side-by-side frequently do not “connect”, and end up talking past each other and misunderstanding each other to the point of jeopardizing their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Bonk, Jonathan J., “Missions and Money: Affluence as a Western Missionary Problem”, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> Bonk, p. 62.

Interpersonal identification, which is so crucial to effective communication, is not wholly dependant on the similarity of economic circumstances. Since it is not wholly dependant on economic sameness, identification therefore cannot be entirely derailed by economic disparity.

If difficulty which Western missionaries have in preaching the Gospel to the urban poor is not a product of Western affluence, what, then is the problem? In order to answer this question, we first need to understand some of the basic dynamics of poverty and of the role of religion among the poor.

For an outsider, the worldview of the urban poor in the developing nations is hard to comprehend. Aside from the squalor and daily struggle to live, the poor often share a mindset or worldview which has been referred to as “the culture of poverty”. In my own experience, a critical factor of poverty is that the lack of economic resources puts the individual in a "weak" position relative to his surroundings. If circumstances should turn against him, he has relatively little recourse to those things which resolve problems (i.e. money, friends in high places). As such, the poor typically live in fear which is inversely proportional to their income. They are fearful of things which could cause problems or create a situation which is beyond the potential of their resources to solve. The very poor may exhibit a fear of bugs, animals, dirt, rain, cold, or heat (things which may cause sickness); police, officials, or important people (who may demand a bribe or lock a wage earner in jail); heights, machinery, or automobiles (things which can cause accidents or injuries); strangers (could be thieves or con men); or many other such things.

Additionally, the poor must figure out how to address their needs in ways that are not dependant on financial resources. In my own observations in Latin America, a

situation which would normally require money to resolve is a “problem”. For example, having no diapers for the baby is a “problem”; an unpaid electric bill is a “problem”, worn-out clothing is a “problem”, and so forth. The current “problem” occupies the thoughts and efforts of the person until the problem is solved in one way or another.

These two factors - fear and unmet needs – create (or at least, contribute to) the desire for protection and for supernatural assistance, which are key for understanding the widespread practice of various forms of popular religion or “folk religion” by poor people around the world. Christopaganism<sup>3</sup>, voodoo, spiritism, santeria, ancestor worship, folk islam, and tribal religions are all examples of the types of religious expression which are found among the urban poor.

Gailyn Van Rheenen proposes a useful distinction which helps to explain the popularity of folk religion among the poor. In general, the institutionalized Church is more concerned with addressing the ontological questions of life, rather than the practical or problem-solving questions. This is one of the characteristics of what Van Rheenen calls “high religion”<sup>4</sup>, and what Rudolph Blank refers to as the “grand tradition”.<sup>5</sup> The Lutheran Church in the United States is an example of “high religion”. The poor, on the other hand, are more concerned with the practical or problem-solving issues in life rather than with ontological questions, and the religion which they believe and practice is referred to as “low religion” or “the small tradition”. Folk religion in its numerous manifestations is an example of “low religion”.

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<sup>3</sup> Nida, Eugene A., "Understanding Latin Americans", Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974., title of chapter 6.

<sup>4</sup> VanRheenen, Gailyn, Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts, Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1991, pp 57-59.

<sup>5</sup> Blank, Rodolfo, Teología y Misión en América Latina, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1996, p. 56

The principal difference between high and low religions is that in low religion, the people are more concerned with ‘blessing’ than salvation. Blank penetrates the mystery of Latin American popular religiosity with his insight: “Popular Catholicism is more interested in the communication of blessing than in the communication of salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

In the Latin American context, “blessing” is understood as divine favor, help, or protection. Most, if not all, of the practices of popular religion are geared toward obtaining a blessing in life. Birth rites, the use of sacred objects, religious festivals, devotional life, death rites, the use of amulets and charms, and healing ceremonies are a few of the areas in which the distinctives of popular religiosity manifest themselves.

If people are looking for a “blessing”, they why don’t they simply pray to God? At least a part of the reason is found in the concept of God that Blank identifies as *deus otiosus*, which is common in many world religions. According to this construct, God has distanced himself from His followers to such an extent that for them, He has become unreal and useless.<sup>7</sup> Venezuelan anthropologist Angelina Pollak-Eltz applies this concept to popular Venezuelan religiosity: “The transcendental and absolute God is found on the periphery, far from the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Since God is so far removed from the sphere of daily activity, help must be sought from those spiritual powers which are closer and more accessible. This is where animism<sup>9</sup> (or “folk religion”) comes into play. Animism is essentially a problem-solving religion. At the heart of animism is the belief that human beings are able to manipulate

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<sup>6</sup> Blank, p. 122. Original text: “El catolicismo popular está más interesado en la comunicación de bendición que en la comunicación de salvación.”

<sup>7</sup> Blank, p. 109

<sup>8</sup> Pollak-Eltz, Angelina, *La Religiosidad Popular en Venezuela*, Caracas: San Pablo, 1994, p. 18. Original text: “El Dios transcendental y absoluto se encuentra en la periferia, lejos del mundo.”

<sup>9</sup> Although the summary of animism is my own, I am indebted to VanRheenen’s book, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* for the theoretical framework of animism.

the spiritual forces. This manipulation takes place by ceremony (performance of rites, words, dances or incantations); by bribery (offering, ablations); or by force (pitting one spiritual power against another, or by a personal act of sacrifice that necessitates a response). Where Christianity has made inroads, the popular Christian expression is often syncretistic in nature – a mix of terminology, symbols, rites and beliefs from both Christian and pagan (animistic) sources.

In Latin American Christopaganism, for example, the saints are the most likely candidates for rendering assistance. The image of the saint is placed on the home altar, in the bedroom, the living room, or the foyer. The devotee provides regular offerings of candles, flowers, holy water, or even food or alcohol. Favors are asked of the saint, and received.<sup>10</sup>

In the event that the personal saint is unable or unwilling to help, there exists a whole host of other saints and intermediaries, some which have been canonized by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and many which have been canonized only by the popular sentiment of the people. The intermediary which is invoked often depends on the need of the supplicant – most saints are ascribed specific powers, and are effective only in their area of specialty. The saints with their ascribed powers are often confined to a certain locality, and therefore may be completely unknown to one from a different town or city. A regional sampling of saints from Venezuela would include: St. Barbara for people who are tormented; the Virgin of Carmen for protection from every evil; St. John of the Money will grant luck; St. Peter will drive away poisonous snakes; and St. Blas will help when there is something stuck in your throat.<sup>11</sup> Help is requested by means of a pre-

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<sup>10</sup> Pollak-Eltz, p. 34

<sup>11</sup> Pollak-Eltz, pp 127-136

formulated prayer, which is often accompanied with a specific rite or activity. The prayer must be repeated a specific number of times, and then public thanks must be offered to the saint, often in the local newspaper.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that the urban poor have specific expectations in regards to religion– it needs to somehow address the need for protection and blessing. If the urban missionary hopes to effectively proclaim the Gospel among the urban poor, he must present a Christianity which is at once faithful to the Scriptures and which provides for protection and blessing.

While Western missionaries have often been ineffective in bringing the Gospel to the poor, the independent, charismatic, and pentecostal churches led by nationals frequently experience tremendous growth in the *barrios* and slums of the cities. An interesting explanation of this phenomenon was proposed by H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, published in 1929. Niebuhr builds upon the Church /sect typology postulated by Ernst Troeltsch, and proposes that the rise of denominations (“sects”) is at least partially due to the prevailing cultural and political conditions in society at the time<sup>12</sup>. He therefore concludes that “the religious life is so interwoven with social circumstances that the formulation of theology is necessarily conditioned by these.”<sup>13</sup>

Niebuhr proposes a sort of “denominational life cycle”, in which new churches arise because the established churches are no longer addressing the needs of the marginalized people in a society. In his words,

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<sup>12</sup> Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, Hamden, CT: Shoe String Press, 1929, p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr, p. 16.

“...(O)ne phase of the history of denominationalism reveals itself as the story of the religiously neglected poor, who fashion a new type of Christianity which corresponds to their distinctive needs, who rise in the economic scale under the influence of religious discipline, and who, in the midst of a freshly acquired cultural respectability, neglect the new poor succeeding them on the lower plane.”<sup>14</sup>

If Niebuhr is correct, one would expect to see differing theological emphases between churches of the upper and lower classes. Throughout the book, Niebuhr contrasts the characteristics of lower class and middle class denominations. A complete list of his distinctions is nearly impossible to produce, but a partial list will suffice for the purposes of this study.

Amongst the poor, Niebuhr names these characteristics: an emphasis on “religious experience of the members prior to their fellowship with the group” (i.e. personal testimony, p. 18); emphasis on the priesthood of all believers (p. 18); separation from society (p. 19); emotional fervor (p. 30); informality (p. 30); spontaneous (p. 30); intellectual naïveté (p. 30); preference for lay leaders (p. 30); emphasis on social salvation (p. 30); practical (p. 30); millenarianism and apocalypticism (p. 31); emphasis on radical morality (p. 31); fatalism (p. 82); and viewing faith as a promise of better things to come (p. 83).

In the established churches of the “middle class”, Niebuhr identifies the following characteristics: systematic doctrine (p. 18); affiliation as social membership (p. 18); emphasis on the means of grace (p. 18); ritualistic (p. 30); preference for an intellectual and liturgical clergy (p. 30); creedal conformity (p. 30); abstract thinking (p. 31); philosophical (p. 31); formal (p. 31); focus on personal salvation (p. 82); redemption as a future hope (p. 82); emphasis on ontological questions such as “the problem of evil”

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<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr, p. 28.



(p. 82) and the character of God (p. 83); “self-hood” and personal activism (i.e., you can control or manage life, p. 83); and viewing faith as a task to be accomplished (p. 83).

In order to better manage and visualize these distinctions, they could be organized into the categories of psychological preferences, organizational preferences, and theological preferences.<sup>15</sup> Locating the characteristics in contrasting pairs would produce a table as follows:

**Psychological Preferences**

<b>Upper Class</b>	<b>Lower Class</b>
Abstract reasoning	Emotional fervor
Philosophical/Complex	Intellectual naïveté/Simple
Self-hood – you can control/manage life	Fatalism – you are a victim of life

**Organizational Preferences**

<b>Upper Class</b>	<b>Lower Class</b>
Ritualistic	Spontaneous
Formal organization	Informal organization
Intellectual/Liturgical clergy (professional)	Lay leaders
Church membership is socially congruent	Church membership is socially separatist

**Theological Preferences**

<b>Upper Class</b>	<b>Lower Class</b>
Systematic doctrine/theology	Pragmatic/practical theology
Membership defined by creedal conformity	Membership defined by personal testimony and radical morality
Emphasis on the means of grace	Emphasis on the priesthood of believers
Focus on ontological issues	Focus on social issues
Heaven and Hell are in the future	Heaven and Hell are in the here and now
Faith is seen in working toward a better life	Faith is a promise of a better life

In reviewing the charts, the urban church planter will immediately notice several potential “disconnects” between the Western ideal (or preference) of a church, and the preferences of the poor. Any one of the charted differences can contribute to a less-than-

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<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr makes the distinction between “psychological characteristics” and “ethical characteristics”, although my categories do not follow his distinctions.

perfect identification between the wealthy and the poor; taken in combination, several of the differences together could neutralize the effectiveness of the proclamation of the Gospel. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of Niebuhr's distinctions, a selection of at least one distinction in each category will assist us in developing a strategy for Gospel proclamation among the poor.

In the area of psychological preferences, it seems to me that a key to Gospel proclamation is to involve the emotions. The person who belongs to the lower class, or who has a lower class mentality, is generally an emotional person. He employs all five senses in order to evaluate the truth of the message that he is receiving. If his heart is not convinced, then neither is his head convinced. Many Pentecostal churches that have experienced rapid growth have been able to successfully connect on an emotional level with the poor.

In order for our message to be effective across the socioeconomic strata, we need to preach and teach in a way that touches not only the intellect, but also the heart. The wealthy man may be persuaded to Christ on the basis of logical reasoning; the poor man will follow Christ because his heart tells him to do so. The poor majority want to feel and experience the love of Christ rather than just hearing the words, "Jesus loves you". Our Sunday worship services in the city need to speak to both the intellect and the emotions, to the mind and to the heart.

Western missionaries often do not realize how much we have to offer to satisfy the emotional cravings of lost humanity. We are deeply convicted and convinced of what we believe, and that conviction should be evident in our preaching. We do not have to

preach as though we were talking in our sleep. If we can discuss theological issues with passion, then we should also be able to preach with passion.

In addition, we should not be afraid to use visual symbols, colors, and other representations in our worship. These are things that speak straight to the heart. Pierre Babin calls for Christians to communicate the Gospel not just in words, but also in the “symbolic language” – “what counts in symbolic language is not so much what it says as the effect it produces on us.”<sup>16</sup> Churches with a rich liturgical tradition (Lutheran, Anglican, and Presbyterian, to name a few) have a distinct advantage here. They should take advantage of their heritage, and uncover those symbols and visual “aids” that speak to the heart of the people whom we are trying to reach with the Gospel.

In the area of organizational preferences, often one of the first tasks of the Western missionary is to write the church constitution and organize the church. Amongst the poor, however, the relevance and usefulness of organizational documents is extremely limited. In my own experience, about the only time the people referenced such documents was during a conflict, and both sides used the same document to demonstrate that they were right and the other party was wrong. If this is the only use for organizational documents, it would be better not to have them, at all.

The poor are not able to schedule and organize their lives so tightly because, in order to survive, they need to leave their options open as to where they will go and what they will do. If an opportunity arises to solve a “problem”, the poor need to be ready to capitalize on the opportunity. As a result, a spontaneous and informal approach to church organization is most effective. Ad-hoc groups, which are organized around a task, will

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<sup>16</sup> Babin, Pierre, "The New Era in Religious Communication", Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, p. 152.

work much better than elected committees or boards. An event which is announced with very little lead time (from one week to one day in advance) will often draw a larger group than one which is announce a month in advance. An outdoor evangelistic event, for example, should be held at a time when people are in their homes. If the missionary discovers on the day of the event that for some reason many people are not at home, then the event should simply be postponed until people are there. Our Western passion for scheduling and organization often runs against the ebb and flow of the tide of life among the poor.

In the area of theological preferences, the missionary who examines his own sermons may discover that he is wasting his time answering questions that no one is asking. In my own experience, my church body in the United States (the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod) has been concerned in her theology with formulating responses to the great ontological questions of life: How can we know that God exists? What is Man’s purpose in life? How can the teachings of the Scripture be reconciled with scientific discovery? How can I know that there is a heaven? Our teachings are formulated to give responses to these kinds of questions. In the real lives of the urban poor, however, people are asking an entirely different set of questions. They want to know how they can avoid sickness or bad luck; they want to know how to succeed in life; they want solutions to their problems. The attraction of popular religion is that it promises to provide answers to these questions.

Due to our professional training and “middle class” mindset, it is difficult for missionaries who work among the poor to direct their preaching to the theological preferences of the poor. Yet the urban missionary who neglects the real spiritual and

physical concerns of the poor runs the risk of being irrelevant. In order to reach the urban poor, we must address their concern for protection and blessing. This is the essence of incarnational preaching - the great spiritual reality that has been revealed to us in Scripture intersects the practical concerns of the common man. As we are able to bring to the poor a Christ who identifies with their needs and speaks to their “issues”, we will find that Western affluence isn’t an insurmountable barrier to ministry among the poor. In the end, it is Christ who identifies with the people, and the missionary is simply a tool to introduce Christ to the people. As the missionary is able to introduce Christ to people in their need, He will dwell among them.

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