

Formal Transformation and Faith Distortion

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Re-Published* in Global Missiology, Spiritual Dynamics, July 2006, www.globalmissiology.org

In my first chapter I considered *syncretism* as over against indigenous Christianity and found their common drive in a “striving for meaning,” with institutions and terms that were relevant for specific historical cultural situations. Looking at syncretism anthropologically, we found that it was frequently activated and held together by any one or more of a number of identifiable *forces*: the persistence of cohesive clusters of ideas, art orientation to mythological thinking and belief, the demand for a therapeutic system or the notion of the living dead. Very briefly I described indigenous Christianity only enough for it to be recognizable as a viable alternative to syncretism as a “culturally relevant striving for meaning.” In other words, my focus was rather on the nature of syncretism rather than on indigenous Christianity.

In this chapter which I am calling “Formal Transformation and Faith Distortion,” I shall dig more deeply into the subject *from* the position of the indigenous church confronting syncretism, and the dynamics of the experience of the Christian fellowship group (church) in its encounter with the world and with its culture. Let me begin with an analogy.

RELIGION OR GOSPEL

I once lived near a place called Wangaratta. That is an Australian aboriginal name meaning “the meeting of the waters.” For the aborigines it must have been a most exciting place as the flood waters spread out across a great swamp that teemed with wild life, and through the center two significant rivers ploughed deep courses and came together in a tempestuous meeting. As far back as the aborigines could remember it had been the same, and the meeting of the waters figured in their myths from the dreamtime. Every generation of aborigines as far back as their history went knew those streams, the meeting of the waters, the flooding, as I have known in my own day.

Let me use this as an allegory of the confluence of those two streams of intellectual endeavor known as the “history of religion” and the “history of mission,” which, when they meet, create a whirlpool. No missionary who navigates these waters can escape that whirlpool. It is a timeless hazard, and every missionary must navigate it for himself, and likewise every generation of missionaries. The missionary will focus on either the universals and commonalities of religion, per se, or on the uniqueness of the gospel.

I am using the terms *religion-man* and *apostolic-man* as descriptors of missionary attitudes to cross-cultural evangelism, because I believe that most missionaries (including mission executives) do, in point of fact, navigate one of these two streams. This is manifest when they bring their respective crafts near the whirlpool. The vortex of the whirlpool, of course, is precisely the same as McGavran calls “the eye of the storm” (1972): we are dealing with the very nature of the Christian mission, bringing the pagan to his “moment of truth,” helping his faith reformulation and setting him on the Christian way without destroying his cultural life style. It is in these matters that a missionary reveals whether he is a *religion-man* or an *apostolic-man*. The former may opt for some form of coexistence between Christianity and the non-Christian faiths — say, a kind of non-persuasive dialog — or he may prefer the notion that Christ is already there

as a Presence and all we need to do is to be there and to be faithful, leaving everything else to him. Or he may even settle for some kind of syncretism in the hope that the second or third generation, with more Christian education behind them, will be more truly Christian. On the other hand, the *apostolic-man*, operating on the traditional definition of mission in terms of the Great Commission and other utterances of our Lord, will call for a definite and demonstrated change of faith — a conversion experience. In one sense, the recent debates about the definition of mission are beside the point: down through history these two categories may be found, and they have continuously demonstrated the disagreement, both inside and outside the church.

The notion of the whirlpool has something ominous about it. It rather suggests the possibility of being sucked in and destroyed. In my studies on *power encounter*, I have used a model for demonstrating the nature of the conversion process and have stressed a number of these danger points. In that process the ocular demonstration of an animist's faith-change is followed by his incorporation into the fellowship group; or if enough persons are involved at the same time, a young church is planted (1967a).⁷ In this chapter I want to focus on that point of time in the process and take a look at the whirlpool caused by the meeting of the waters.

To do this I shall have to distinguish between *formal cultural transformation* and *faith distortion*. The former is a qualitative change within continuing cultural forms due to the acceptance of the Christian faith. The latter is a compromise of the core of the Christian faith for personal, economic or religio-universalistic advantages. The former leads to a new set of values without seriously disrupting the cultural life style. The latter leads, via syncretism perhaps, to another kind of paganism. Once the Jerusalem Council agreed that Greeks could become Christians without first becoming Jews (Acts 15), this problem arose, but it was a risk that the church had to take if it was to evangelize the world — on the human level it was the same kind of risk which God took in creating man in his own image and which Christ took with the incarnation and the cross.²

To show the continuity of this problem through Christian history, I shall now discuss the concepts of formal cultural transformation and faith distortion as Irenaeus encountered them in his congregation of Celts at Lyons in the second century. Subsequent to this I shall come down to modern times and try to show the similarities between the two periods of history. To return to *my* sustained metaphor — the meeting of the waters and the whirlpool are always there, and the dangers for our navigation are the same as those faced by Paul in the first century and Irenaeus in the second.

A SECOND-CENTURY ENCOUNTER: IRENAEUS AND THE GnostICS

Irenaeus has gone down in history as a Christian apologist and writer. His writing is significant as a contribution to ecclesiology, theology, church history and biblical criticism. Yet to leave the name of Irenaeus there is to miss the whole point of his life and work. Irenaeus was no armchair theologian. He was a pastor of the church *in a precise situation*. The purpose of his writing was to strengthen his flock in the belief in one God and in their faith in the redemption of man through Christ, the Son of God alone. His claim to our consideration is not that he was an early Christian scholar, but that in the cultural complex of a second century Christian community he found the forces of gnosticism impinging on and penetrating his pastorate, upsetting his young converts. Irenaeus is a concerned pastor in a precise situation. *Against Heresies* is not a theologicophilosophical treatise but the reflection of a dynamic situation and the struggles of a shepherd caring for his flock.

The gnosticism of both Valentinus and Marcion invaded his pastorate and ramified through the life and thought of his parishioners. He was dealing with a practical, not a philosophical matter, which threatened the faith of his people. *Against Heresies* does not stand as a theological thesis

per se. It is merely the contemporary and culturally relevant means he chose to handle a practical problem. The important thing is not that Irenaeus wrote such a work in five books, but that he confronted a threatening situation in the church. That threat was to basic Christian doctrines — the incarnation, the resurrection, the sacraments, the Person and work of Christ among them. The fact that he explored critical and exegetical method and thereby established an approach to Christian scholarship which became a tradition, is, for the moment, beside the point. He was not to see the course of church history in the centuries that followed. He was dealing with a threat within the church at his own point of time in history — as first John, and then Ignatius, in whose tradition he stood, had done before him. The fact that *Against Heresies* was received by the church at large suggests, not so much its brilliance, but the fact that the situation he was combating was widespread and not confined to his pastorate. Thus his writing became a bridge between the Johannine/Ignatian tradition before him and the work of the later apologists. No doubt, in the long-time purposes of God, this was good and important for “the church through time,” but the real significance of this work is *within a cultural complex at a specific point of time in history*, and if that speaks to us at all it surely says that as God’s servants and stewards we are concerned with dynamic confrontations in the life and culture of our own day, and with the mental, technological and spiritual equipment we have at our disposal.

Against Heresies begins with a brief description of the situation in which certain men “by skillful language” are introducing “impious views” which the “hearers cannot always distinguish from the truth,” because they are “decked out in attractive dress.” The argument of Irenaeus stands on the restatement of a biblical creedal statement and the claim that the Christian faith remains firm as one cohesive thing, even across the barriers of geography, culture and language.

Against this straightforward faith statement he outlines the views of several patterns of gnosticism, themselves by no means one. The gnostics used the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and other Christian terms, but attributed non-Christian meanings to them. Thus, for example, “the Holy Spirit was produced by the Truth [identified as one of the second Dyad, offspring of Ineffable and Silence, in the first Ogdoad] to inspect and fructify the Aeons, entering into them invisibly, through whom the Aeons produced the plants of truth” (I. 11). Again, the Logos is one with Zoe, Anthropos and Ecclesia, as coming from the Tetrad of the first and second Dyads. And again, Christ was conceived by the Mother, who was outside the Pleroma, with a shadow. Christ cast off the shadow and returned to the Pleroma, leaving the Mother with the shadow outside. Thus they assembled all manner of strange notions and peddled them by giving them biblical names arid, therefore, biblical status.

Had it not been for apologists like Irenaeus, the gnostics might well have taken over the church and made it merely another form of paganism by faith distortion.

How could the church ever have been tempted to accept such doctrine? We ask this question every time a nativistic prophet leads a breakaway from a modern mission field church. Let me put up a few feasible reasons for the success of the gnostics that occur to me as I read *Against Heresies*, and put myself back into that second situation.

1. The written Word was not then in the hands of every believer, as it is today. Their knowledge of Scripture depended on what their leaders read or expounded. Therefore, they had no personal criteria for judging a heresy.
2. There were many formal similarities between gnosticism and Christianity. Gnostics met regularly for congregational worship, used preaching from a supposedly sacred book on which they had commentaries, and they sang hymns.

3. They struggled with similar ideas — the redemption from evil and reunion with the Supernatural, for instance.
4. They engaged in missionary programs to win people to their faith.
5. They used similar terminology in pressing their theological ideas, and appropriated, not only scriptural names, but episodes for allegorical reinterpretation: the baptism of Christ, the request of the mother of the sons of Zebedee, the experience of Eve and Mary, and so forth. The young Christians recognized these as biblical.

Thus was Irenaeus much exercised because his Christian flock was unable to discriminate clearly what was the truth, because it was skillfully presented and “decked out in attractive dress.” Apparently the second century saw Greek nativistic movements, which claimed to be genuine reinterpretations of Christian Scriptures. This has very close similarities with the Hauhau Movement of the Maori Wars, the John Frum Movement of the New Hebrides or other nativistic movements in Oceania and Africa.³

THE CONTINUITY OF ENCOUNTER

In my allegory of the meeting of the waters and the whirlpool, I made the point that each generation in its turn passes by this way. This pressure on young Christians for faith distortion is ever with us. Every Christian community with a sense of mission must inevitably come into encounter with non-Christian faiths. Sometimes it is another faith that just enters the scene like the Hare Krishna in Los Angeles today, or the Soka Gakkai, each of them using Christian missionary and witness techniques on the streets and from door to door,⁴ and like the followers of Valentinus who worried Irenaeus, with carefully honed emotional jargon and attractive trimmings. We cannot escape this kind of engagement — not unless we shut ourselves off from the world in isolation, which, unhappily, some churches have done, and for which they must some day surely give answer to him who sent them into the world as he was sent into the world.

If we suppose that the cultural structures themselves are amoral, there are only two feasible directions for young converts and new congregations to move. First, using the structural and formal similarities of the religions — prayer, worship, art, music, liturgy, etc. — as stepping stones, the church may strive to win them for Christ, what Bavinck calls *possessio* (1964:178-179)~ and the ethnolinguists call *transformation* (Kraft 1973h:237-248), to transform the cultural forms by making them Christocentric. Formal cultural transformation is thus a *faith reformulation*.

Second, over against this is the possibility of *faith distortion*, which is often the easy way out. One accepts the presence of gnosticism (or paganism or animism) on the basis of formal similarities regardless of the faith content. This may be an unintentional acceptance — maybe a mere resignation to coexistence or rationalization about it. It may be accepted in the hope that with time and Christian education the faith will come. In any case it is bound to lead to syncretism and eventually to another form of paganism. In the case of Irenaeus, he recognized the subtlety of using biblical incidents and the names of the three Persons and the Trinity as “validation” for a spurious doctrine. He accused the gnostics of using the name of Christ “as a kind of decoy,” misguiding the people and “spreading their evil poison of the Serpent, the prince of apostasy” (I. 27:4).

The apostle Paul had felt the same dangers in the first generation church, and dealt with it firmly in his letters, which, like *Against Heresies*, are not merely literary documents but products of

dynamic situations: “Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils” (I. Cor. 10:21), he asserts. And yet Paul drew on many of the cultural forms and values of the Greek colonial world, enough to serve as a data base for a textbook in anthropology.⁶ Nevertheless, the one thing on which neither Paul nor Irenaeus would budge one inch was the nature and work of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the way of salvation they opened to the believer. And, of course, they had the authority of Jesus for this (Jn. 14:6).

Thus, in our own day, Visser’t Hooft resists the notion of Christianity as a “species of the genus religion,” just one other expression of the universal religion. He argues that Christianity is an “adequate and definitive revelation of God in history,” that classifying Christianity as one expression of “a general phenomenon called religion is to set it in a framework which is foreign to its nature” (1963:94-95).⁷ This, of course, is just what the *religion-missionary* does when he permits coexistence or syncretism in the hope that Christian education will correct the matter in a generation or so, or when he allows Christ to be regarded as on a par with the Indian holy people,⁸ for example. Christ can break into a cross-cultural situation and possess or transform a social structure, an institutional complex or a language, but *the transformed form must be Christian*: there must be no tampering with the Persons of the Trinity or the saving work of God for mankind; the basic core of the gospel, the supracultural, must stand, Formal cultural transformation by all means, but faith distortion, certainly not. There is no place in Christian mission for any theological Walt Whitman:

I respect Assyria. China, Teutonia and the Hebrews,
I adopt each theory, myth, god and demi-god,
I see that the old accounts, bibles, genealogies, are true, without exception.

or again:

Thee in thy all-supplying, all-enclosing worship –
thee in no single bible saviour, merely,
 Thy saviours, countless, latent within thyself.
 thy bibles incessant within thyself,
 equal to any, divine as any, . . .

Despite its cultural dissimilarities, our day is not very different from the day of the Christian conflict with gnosticism. Many of our would-be policy makers are indeed “gnostics”. They would engage in faith distortion by removing Christ’s place as only Savior and the biblical emphasis of persuasion for decision in Christian witness to the nations. They compromise with the religions by seeking a universal religion, which supposedly finds Christ or the Spirit in all the religions. These are the “gnostics” within our ranks. Out in the streets the missionaries of the religions buttonhole people with enticing words of self-realization, calling on Christians in their homes, striving for a faith distortion. Our worship patterns are borrowed and people sing, “Buddha loves me, this I know.” Our theological terminology is used to their ends and the meanings are manipulated. Christ and the Spirit are sweet and beautiful names that “become decoys,” offering instead a “bitter poison from the prince of apostasy.” One has to ask if we are with Irenaeus in Lyons or in the Christian West. The only difference is that all our lives we have had the written word of God in our hands, and therefore surely we are more responsible for the preservation of the faith.

Manifestly we are dealing with an aspect of the Christian encounter with the world that runs through history, and will continue to do so as long as we are called to Christian mission. If this be so, then maybe *we* should take a hard look at a few cases of formal cultural transformation and faith distortion, so that we may understand it better as we meet them in cross-cultural mission today. We are not hard pressed for examples.

CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

The case of the Chamula Indian, who supposed himself to be a Christian, we have already discussed at length. The supposedly Christian features of his faith touched on the Virgin Mary, the symbol of the cross, the trinitarian formula and the patronage of the saints, all appropriated somewhat magically. His attitude to the spirits of the dead, his communion with his ancestors, worship of the sun, his totemistic and shamanic beliefs and practices were all thoroughly animistic. The festival performances and mythical worldview were syncretistic. His anchor in Christianity was rooted in the names of the Godhead, the Saints, biblical characters and events, all wrenched from their true context. What purported to be the life of our Lord —the nativity, flight into Egypt, death on the cross, etc. — was interwoven with sun and moon worship, animistic *pukujes* and *Chulels*, demons on the mountains, a Maya myth of the cornfield, a legend of biting flies (equated with the Jews) and so on. The Virgin Mary was confused with a local fertility goddess and also with the moon divinity. The trinitarian formula was a magical chant. The Father was beyond the reach and knowledge of man in the place of the dead. The Son of God was equated with the sun, who goes to visit the absent Father by night and returns for the day. The moon was his mother.

Each time I dip into Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* and consider the gnosticism that troubled him, I am reminded of Juan, the Christopagan Chamula. The similarities between the two syncretisms are remarkable, and the fallacies on which the respective faith formulations were accepted are identical. The distortion is due to the acceptance of biblical characters, places, names and events as truth, purely for their own name's sake; the words being biblical but the myths pinned onto them being quite false.¹⁰

This is why the post-conversion instruction is so important when new believers are being incorporated into the Christian fellowship group. It also shows why the Christian pastor or teacher must be quite clear in his own mind about the difference between the transformation of forms and the faith formulation which goes with it. Let me develop this a little by comparing formal transformation and faith distortion, first, in the field of indigenous art and crafts, and then in the rhythms of a people whose social regulations are preserved by oral tradition; art and rhythm being mechanisms of communication.

(1) *Formal Transformation and Faith Distortion in Art*

A converted Navaho Indian woman, an expert rug maker by pre-Christian profession, who had always hitherto depicted such things as the activity of the corn spirits in the rug design, now worked out a Christian design based on symbols like the cross and Scripture references. She presented the rug to the church for use in the worship service — a most appropriate gift. In another nearby congregation, the church is ornamented with Navaho paintings. They feature the corn but not the corn spirits. They rather point to the Lord of the harvest. In the case of the rug, the materials, the Navaho vegetable dyes and the technology are indigenous. In the painting, although the paint medium is introduced, the style of indigenous sand painting is preserved. In both cases the skills and psychological satisfactions are all preserved both for the craftsmen and the audience, which knows and understands the meaning of these forms of communication. They recognize that the message and not the form has changed. This formal cultural transformation speaks to them to the effect that Christ is glorified and not the corn spirits.

By way of contrast, let me comment on a ‘beautiful book I received the other day — an anthropologist’s delight. It is a well-written account of the origin myths of a community of Australian aborigines, hitherto nomadic but now practising transhumance, with their central location under missionary patronage. The book is beautifully illustrated from a series of panels painted with the indigenous pigments in native style by aboriginal artists. These panels depict the spirit people and fauna of the tribal origin stories. I am certainly pleased that this tremendously interesting folklore is to be preserved both in art and narrative. However, I would expect it to be done in a museum or a culture center. One is certainly surprised to find the panels arranged as a background to the communion table in a Christian church, not because aboriginal art should not be there — I believe it should — but because the display is a *record of what they are supposed to have left behind them*. It will undoubtedly force the converts who worship in that church to so dwell on the dreamtime that their worship will be a coexistence and probably in time highly syncretistic — for *the panel and the altar cross symbolize two incompatible belief systems*. Over against the empty Christian cross which symbolizes the death and resurrection of our Lord, the Christian hymn books in the pews and the lectern with the Bible on it (i.e., the pull towards the gospel) is set the record of spirits with an eschatology and origin of the dreamtime, the totemism, the ritual bag, the animism of Thunderman, the totemic tree of life linking earth with the spirit world, and its totemic animal messengers going to and from between the two with communications (i.e., the pull towards the ritual song cycles and Australian totemism).

The two represent quite different theologies and confront the congregation with two different focal points for today’s and tomorrow’s religion. The placing of the two conflicting views before the congregation at every worship service is bound to be confusing. In an historical culture center, the presentation might have been preserved with historical respect and treasured as tradition, but it is not the kind of thing to put before young converts when they enter the place where they specifically want to worship the Lord. In that church they must find the supports they need for a religion which will stand by them today and tomorrow. For the Australian aborigine this is a day of acculturation, it is anthropologically unsound to build in the archaic features of totemism, which will only let them down in more ways than one. More important still, if they have really become Christian, they need a worldview that is relevantly Christian. One is surprised that the missionary invitation to the aboriginal artists should have been in terms of “whatever they would like to paint” and not in terms of using their art forms to paint something Christian. This suggests a “religion-attitude” rather than an apostolic one. In that it has set a “hone of contention” before the young converts, it is regrettable. In that it fails to provide for the problems of today and tomorrow, it is again regrettable. In that it fails to present the Christ in a Christian church it is, in my opinion, misguided and irresponsible and will be seen as such even by anthropologists who rejoice that the folklore is preserved. It was the anthropologist Malinowski who pointed out what a missionary was bound to be and do if he was to be true to himself (1965:xv).¹¹ What I can only speculate on is why *it* was put there. Was it an attempt to make a western church building more indigenous? Was it to reduce the culture shock of rapid culture change by letting the converts see that the missionary was not anti-cultural? Was it to help the converts retain their sense of ethnic entity? Was it to impress upon the aboriginal converts that it was their church, not that of the westerners? Was it the “religion-attitude” which claimed that we should look at totemism and find Christ already there? Many of these would have been valid reasons for setting an aboriginal panel there in the central place in that church. But the fault lies in the fact that it is a totemistic panel, a belief system which by profession they have left. Anthropologically it does not relate to their current profession. Theologically there is nothing Christocentric about it. Both anthropologically and theologically it offers nothing for

today or tomorrow in a rapidly changing world: it offers nothing but a conflict of values. Furthermore, the fact that the aboriginal artists elected, with the approval of the people, to depict the dreamtime as the subject for the panel!, shows something sad or disillusioning about the depth of their conversion and their need for Christian instruction.

For a non-literate people like this, with whom symbolic communication is by art instead of letters, it is essential for their art to be won for the purpose of communicating the Christian faith and ethic. For semi-nomadic people like this, the notion of the journey is a key image for the preservation of their faith and the establishment of ethical and procedural reference points in the traditions of the people. This is one reason for the tremendous value of *Pilgrim's Progress* in so many societies for reinforcing and applying biblical values.¹² Furthermore, it is narrative in form. In the light of this, what can be done to correct the problem panel in the church, short of removing it and offending the tribes concerned?

Anthropologically and historically it is incomplete. It could be completed in the same art style so that the last panel depicts the conversion of the people to Christianity. This would bring it into line with their present belief. A Christocentric panel as the end of the journey would change a faith distortion to a formal transformation, and remove the perilous dichotomy of the panel over against the altar cross. As things are at present this dichotomy can lead only to unnecessary conflict, a phony coexistence or syncretism. If the panels show the journey from totemism to Christ, there is harmony in the belief system and considerable teaching value, as there was when Ratu Cakobau, the cannibal Fijian, had the killing stone at Bau transformed into a baptismal font and set it before the congregation as "a reminder of the greatness of their salvation."

To build in the conflict between totemism and Christianity, for whatever motivation, is to misunderstand the whole nature and function of these cultural art forms and tribal story-telling. These things are never static. The whole idea is that they represent the ongoing process of tribal history. The events of the journey depict the characters who have molded history and the significant innovations at their historic points of time. They tell the living how things came to be as they are. Therefore, if the art and story-telling techniques are to be genuinely preserved, the total art or story complex must tell the Christian congregation how they came to be what they now are. Thus the most recent panel will show the foreigners bringing the good news, the people accepting it, the discovery of the Bible from which they read at worship, the building of their church * all in the same artistic medium. Thus would the art and narrative show the people how they became what they currently are. Unless something like this is added, the totemic panel will not be credible in a Christian church, or else it will injure the Christianity by faith distortion. The road is perilous but it has to be followed if the church is to be indigenous, and if the passage from animism to Christianity is to be meaningful and smooth. The history of schism, syncretism and nativistic movements in the church shows how long we have taken to learn the lessons of the whirlpool at the meeting of the waters.

(2) *Formal Transformation and Faith Distortion in Rhythmic Transmission*

Much of what I have said of the aboriginal panel series of paintings may also be said of oral traditions — stories, songs, dirges and rhythmic history. The people are brought along the road to their present state. If that is a state of Christian experience, at least for the first generation of Christians, that must be reflected in their songs and sagas. What happens fifty years thereafter is the business of the church of fifty years after - and that is a different matter, which we are not discussing at the moment.

The question of what is to be done with pagan dances and chants when a people becomes Christian has long been a bone of contention among missionaries and missionary supporters, but

it is a foreign and western problem. The fear of syncretism has led many missionaries to reject the dance and chant as a communication form, lest the people continue to cling to their pagan associations, but the argument is not rational. The fallacy of the reasoning is that all these media of rhythmic transmission are bundled together under one judgment of the form rather than the content. Would it be reasonable, for example, to deny ourselves the use of language itself because it can be used for communicating profanity?

Yet many missionary supporters have advocated this with dances and chants among their converts, equating a native dance with the sex associations of its western analog. Many anthropologists have grouped all missionaries under the condemnatory generalization for prohibiting and destroying these art forms. The charge is not fair. Where it has been true, the converts have usually felt a cultural void, social needs have been unmet and sooner or later there have been reactions. But all missionaries have not been like this.

The British missionaries in Fiji, for example, prohibited certain dances, like the *wate* and *dele*, which were associated with victorious return from war and sexual abuse of the bodies of the victims, followed by cannibal festivities. They demanded that their converts reject any dances or entertainments which were vulgar and sexy, but they did not prohibit the dance and chant per se. In this way they taught their converts to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate dances and songs. Dances were retained for social entertainment, even for church festivals. The people still preserved and dramatized their sagas. They composed new chants to cover their unfolding history in Christian times. They commemorated their church building instead of pagan temples. They created dirges in their bereavements; in their lighter moments, opened the door to satire and hilarity. I have seen all these dances and have the accompanying chants of many of them. One of them covers the history of a century of the expansion of the church in their islands. With their own peculiar cultural rhythmic media they did exactly what we in the West have done with radio, television and the printed book — used them for communicating the gospel. Indeed, one of the most dramatic dances I have ever seen was an old Fijian war dance resurrected for a precise instructional purpose, years after the acceptance of Christianity. It ended with a declaration of the coming of the gospel at the climax of the dance, whereupon every dancer gave a shout (an honorific act) and broke his beautifully carved spear across his knee. A white man in the audience bewailed this destruction of native artifacts. What he failed to realize was the dramatic symbolism of this act in the chant and dance, which the Fijian spectators understood full well: the gospel had broken the spear. The dance was the talk of the countryside for weeks. This was a true indigenous creation in the best form of oral tradition. It brought the audience out of the past and left them in the present. It demonstrated that Christianity did not destroy the indigenous creativity in chant and dance, and distinguished again between “formal transformation” and “faith distortion” — for in this case, however old the transformed form, the new faith formulation was no faith distortion: its meaning was truly Christian.

Another feature of the transmission of faith and ideas through rhythm is the chant, which, in many societies whose traditions are orally transmitted, was used in pre-Christian times for both educational and liturgical purposes. An indigenous church in such a society would be one which retained the form, transforming it with a new faith formulation. It will be no surprise, then seeing I have been speaking of the dance in Fiji, to find beside it the educational and liturgical use of chanting. The old Fijian pre-Christian chant has been sanctified and made holy unto the Lord.’³ In the traditional manner, led by the matrons in the village congregations, for over a century, the Psalms of David and the lyrical and descriptive passages of Scripture have been chanted both before and as part of the regular church worship service. Here the story of the creation, the building of the temple of Solomon, the glory of the New Jerusalem, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes and David’s lament over Absalom (to name but a few of many I have heard) have been features of Fijian worship.

This was a learning experience, but it was far more. It was a communal participation in worship,

which was thoroughly Fijian in form and thoroughly scriptural. Originally the *form* was used over the bodies of the slain, as the triumphant villagers lauded the exploits of their fighting men before a cannibal feast, and at the time of the presentations at the pagan temple. But by the gospel it was *transformed* and found appropriate for use in transmitting a new and better message from Scripture and catechism.

Events in the life of the village church were also commemorated through chants. This preserved the creativity of the village poets and made the church a center of village life. In the same way, songs of farewell and dirges in memory of those who had died in the faith were composed and chanted.

For a century now in Fiji, the ongoing operation of the life of each village community has been stimulated by these transformed indigenous forms and patterns, and the strength of the church today is partly due to them. A secular anthropologist working in Fiji described this Church as “a Fijian-orientated institution . . . guided by a spirit of tolerance. . . .” (Belshaw 1964:14).

THE RISK TO FAITH

To this point we have been considering the experience of the Christian fellowship group in its encounter with the world and the culture to which it belongs. We understand that the church has to maintain its life and witness in the world, with a message which is transmissible in the cultural forms that are comprehensible in that familiar world. Yet there is always a danger of becoming so accommodated to that world that it is no longer recognizably Christian. I have spoken of the *risk to faith* which comes with involvement in the world. Here is our paradox. Here we could well be sucked into the vortex at the “meeting of the waters.” Yet our Lord pointed out to his disciples that this was the inevitable risk in the Christian mission, when he prayed for them whom he left *in the world*, but not *of the world* (John 17:14b, 18).

Encounters there had to be, but encounters need not necessarily bring about syncretism or faith distortion. Syncretism is not the only kind of faith-reformulation. Cultural forms may be transformed. How this can happen I have tried to demonstrate with examples of forms of art and rhythmic mechanisms, It might have been done in other areas of culture also, but the point is clearly made. The notion of consecrating, or dedicating or sanctifying a cultural artifact or institution unto the Lord is not uncommon in Scripture. Where Scripture is iconoclastic, it is the faith-formulation and not the cultural form that is under attack. Elijah’s encounter on Mt. Carmel was an attack on the worship of Baal and its pagan associations, not an attack on the idea of sacrifice.¹⁴

Despite the great social differences between the world of Elijah and that of the New Testament, the basic principle of the divine word spoken and demonstrated to man through man is the same. The notion of salvation certainly developed through Scripture history, but the human problem is still the encounter between the *religion-man* and the *apostolic-man*. In his work, *No Other Name*, Visser’t Hooft demonstrates numerous New Testament forms of the same conflict. There was the case of Simon Magus, where the issue was the incompatibility of the service of God and the exploitation of divine gifts for self-glorification. There was the disturbance in Ephesus, where folk believed their social stability depended on a harmony between the gods, and where the notion of the uniqueness of a revelation in Christ alone had disturbing consequences. There was the letter to Colosse, where folk in the young Christian communion were faced with elemental spirits and cosmological speculations, which Paul dealt with by a dogmatic statement of the exclusiveness of Christ, who was certainly not trying to establish another mystery religion. And then there was Pergamos, the center of great gods and powerful cults, to whom the word was decisive: no compromise with other gods (Visser’t Hooft 1963:56-62).

Faith formulation may be developing or distorting. Developing faith has to be related to formal transformation. If the form is not transformed, the faith will be foreign and distorted and its meaning confused. This builds up problems for the next generation. Any form of religio-social change involves some degree of encounter, and this certainly applies to the Christian mission as it brings the gospel to the non-Christian world. The only tenable and reasonable base for Christian mission, as Kraemer pointed out, is the "apostolic attitude." With him also, while requiring a respectful and humble approach to the non-Christian religions, and refraining from too critical a mind against their infusion with Christian values, and recognizing the religious possibilities in the spiritual unity of mankind (the voices *of* religion-man), I endorse his italicized qualification of these approaches: "*provided they are kept in their place.*" He goes on:

If they usurp the place of the apostolic motive, which is the alone valid and tenable one, they transform the Christian Church into a goodwill agency for the diffusion of refined and cultural idealism, which has lost all intrinsic relation with the central apostolic consciousness that we are to be witnesses to God and His revelational dealing with man and the world (1938:293).

If the gospel is to be communicated to the non-Christian world, as our Lord instructed, the risk of faith (the risk of the emergence of syncretistic communions) is always a dangerous possibility. But that is no reason *why* the Christian mission should not continue as he directed unto "the end of the age." My own missionary and research experience suggests that there is a strong correlation between the Christopagan in Christian mission and the religion-man attitude of the missionary, and as a corollary, little correlation between Christopaganism and the apostolic-man attitude.

On the other hand, I am not suggesting the apostolic-man has no lessons to learn. Here again, my experience as an anthropologist is that he is rather in danger of the unjustifiable destruction of cultural ingredients and of planting a foreign church.

The common misunderstanding in both these errors relates to the problem of meaning. In one the meaning is not Christian. In the other it is not culturally relevant. And in my opinion, one is as sad a distortion of faith as the other. The greatest methodological issue faced by the Christian mission in our day is *how to carry out the Great Commission in a multi-cultural world, with a gospel that is both truly Christian in content and culturally significant in form.* [hope that when we interact with each other in the final presentations of this colloquium we can come to grips with that problem.

Notes

1. The dynamics of the cross-cultural conversion experience was presented by the writer to the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation in 1967, and discussed. The paper was circulated in a multigraphed form as a "Research in Progress Paper." Subsequently a smaller additional paper developed the topic further. The reader may also refer to the 1973 edition of *Verdict Theology in Missionary Theory*, pp. 122-127, and for further discussion on the concept of power encounter, see *Solomon Islands Christianity* (1967b:100-110).

2. The conference at Jerusalem, stimulated by certain Pharisees who had become Christian and insisted on the forms laid down by the Law of Moses being applied to Gentile Converts (Acts 15:1), determined that the Gentiles should be Christians in their own way, being merely warned of the dangers of idolatry, religious prostitution and heathen sacrifices (vv. 19-20), which might well lead to syncretism. This was a significant step, NOT only because it gave a Greek Christian the right to remain a Greek, but also because it recognized the element of risk, the risk to faith, as it were.

3. Hauhaism and its offshoots have been discussed at greater length in *People Movements of Southern Polynesia*, in a study of the obstructive factors which cut across the Maori people movements into Christianity (Tippett 1971:59-73, 181, and fns. 93-106, pp. 246-248). The notion of the people movement and nativistic movement as a positive/negative polarity is discussed in the same book, pp. 214-216. For further factual information on Hauhaism, see Babbage's book on the subject and for the John Frum Movement, see the writings of the French

anthropologist, Jean Guiart.

4. The Hare Krishna have headquarters in forty major cities of the U.S.A. In the 1960's Soka Gakkai was claiming growth of 35,000 a year, and another Japanese sect was winning 2,000 converts a month, only 5% of them Japanese.

5. Bavinek says, "The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but it takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new" (1964:178-179).

6. He draws his imagery from the social configurations of military life, architecture, agriculture and athletics, to name a few of the more important. To Lake athletics, for example, ONE might refer to V.C. Pfitzner's *Paul and the Agon Motif* (1967), a major scholarly work. It also receives good coverage in Howson's *Metaphors of St. Paul* (1872:65-91). It also has a place in many works on biblical customs, e.g., Chapter 31, in F.H. Wright's *Manners & Customs of Bible Lands* (1953). The same may be done for the other configurations mentioned. But the point made here is that although Paul was not ignorant of the world scene in which the Christian encounter was taking place, and was living in the world and not an isolationist, and was talking to farmers, athletes and townsmen in real life situations; he was, nevertheless, quite intolerant of syncretism in their Christian faith.

7. In differentiating the world religions from the world of revelation, Jean Danielou says, "The worst misunderstanding of Christianity or of Judaism is to make them religions among other religions — the very error of syncretism" (1964:17-18).

8. This is the attitude, for instance, of the members of the Navaho peyote-eating cult when they seek a corporate religious experience "in the Peyote Spirit, rather than in Christ, for Christ is but the culture hero of the white man."

9. The first lines cited come from "Birds of Passage," and the second from "Thou Mother with Thy Equal Brood." These are typical of Whitman's pantheism, of which many other passages might have been cited, for example;

My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths,
Enclosing worship ancient and modern and all between ancient and modern,
Believing I shall come again upon the earth after 5000 years,
Waiting responses from oracles, honoring the gods, saluting the sun,
Making a fetish of the first rock or stump, powwowing with sticks in the circle of obis,
Dancing yet through the streets in a phallic procession, rapt and austere in the woods a gymnosophist,
Drinking mead from the skull-cup, to Shastas and Vedas admirant, minding the Koran,
Walking the teokallis, spotted with gore from the stone and knife, beating the serpent-skin drum,
Accepting the Gospels, accepting him that was crucified, knowing assuredly that he is divine,...:
(Poem 43 in "Song of Myself")

Apparently it does not occur to Whitman that many of these religious patterns are incompatible. His pantheism can be no more than an abstraction. Such syncretism is impossible if one accepts the Gospels as John indicates ("Leaves of Grass," 319, 176, 60).

10. Another form of the same fallacy [have met in the Solomon Islands and in the United States, where people calling themselves Jehovah's Witnesses exploit the same persuasive device. They cite Scripture, one passage after another, each time getting a nod of approval from the listener, in spite of the fact that they are quite unrelated and all extracted from their context, Thus the bare fact that Scripture was *cited* elicits a belief in a non-scriptural position.

11. He says of the missionary, "He would not be true to his vocation if he ever agreed to act on the principle that Christianity is as 'any other form of cult.' As a matter of fact, his brief is to regard . . . Christianity as entirely different, the only true religion to be implanted. . . ." (1965:xv — originally published 1938).

12. Possibly no Christian book has been more influential in the spread of Christian values than *Pilgrim's Progress*, which was translated into scores of languages during the last century. It had its cross-cultural appeal, not only in the notion of the pilgrimage, but also in its literary form and the use of the "name with a meaning," a common device in preliterate societies.

13. In the same way the original collection of Christian Fijian hymns, created by John Hunt and R.B. Lyth, were composed as Fijian lyrics, even with Fijian euphonistic particles. It was a later (and more Victorian) generation which made them rhyme and organized the parts to fit sheet music. The *Te Deum* was used in Fijian whenever some sinner "bowed the knee" before God, the whole congregation bursting spontaneously into the praise. For an evaluation of Hunt's mastery of Fijian hymnody, see Nettleton's *John Hunt* (n/d:84).

14. The scriptural notion of sacrifice is itself a good example of faith-reformulation and formal transformation. The forebears of Israel, who came over the desert, practised human sacrifice, until the Lord brought Abraham to Mt. Moriah, in an experience of crisis or encounter, leading eventually to his provision of a lamb as a functional substitute. Thereafter, Israel passed through the phase of animal sacrifice as developed in the Law of Moses. This continued throughout the Old Testament times and is terminated in the beginning of the Christian era, with our Lord's encounter with the forces of human sin on the cross at Calvary. This is spoken of as "a better sacrifice" because, among other things, it is an eternal one. So the faith-formulation grows or is reformulated, passing from Semite, to Hebrew, to Christian faith, and the form of the salvation motif is transformed by a new faith content.

Incidentally, converts to Christianity, coming out of a society which practices human sacrifices, need an early translation of the Letter to the Hebrews to help them In that journey of faith.

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