The Meaning of Meaning*

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HOW does one react to a set of presentations such as we have had over the last two days? The subject of this symposium might well have led us into some strong disagreements in any of three or four areas, but on the whole there has been more agreement than disagreement. The points of disagreement are present, but they have been latent rather than manifest.

One could argue, for example, on what is really the business of missiology,[1] or how we define culture,[2] or on the point of time when large-scale cultural adoptions should be made,[3] and I am methodologically unhappy about the model of an axis-ladder, with Christians on different steps in their ascent[4] which, in spite of its possible utility, has too many problematical presuppositions. I dislike the statistical use of the notion of a global village.[5] I question the exegesis of Mark 5 in Dr. Hoekendijk's second presentation,[6] and I have reservations about how far we can use his schema of Christianization.[7] In any of these we could get into long (and perhaps profitable) arguments, but they would take us far afield from the subject before us. Therefore, I intend to let these points pass, by merely indicating my reservations, and in this presentation I shall direct my response to my colleagues in a symbiotic rather than a reactive form (see ch. 1).

In the opening presentation, I pointed out that the whole program of cross-cultural communication of the gospel was caught up in the basic *problem of meaning,* of how a supracultural gospel could be communicated and manifested in meaningful cultural forms. All the papers of my colleagues demonstrate the truth of this *fundamentality of the problem of meaning.* Therefore, rather than debating a few points of disagreement (profitable as that might be), I shall try to draw together in terms of my own discipline what I believe is a basic ingredient of all our presentations.

MEANING A FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM

Let me recapitulate briefly some of the issues raised by my colleagues which sprang from the problem of meaning, although they did not always articulate it as such. Let me take them one by one.

(1)*Dr. McGavran* took up the question of "the pure faith delivered to the saints," and tried to - identify its essential ingredients, laying down criteria for validating the message to be communicated to the nations. Taking two phrases of mine, "a pure faith" and "an essential gospel," and presuming That we participants were more or less of one mind in this, he pointed out that for many people there was "enormous confusion," and he devoted half of his first paper to defining the phrase "a pure faith." Thus he identified this basic issue as a 'problem of meaning.

Then he went on to deal with secularism, deism, and Arianism. Although I have some difficulty in pinning down just what he means by secularism,[8] and although I cannot accept the notion of "deist culture," nevertheless, he 'manifestly is struggling again with the whole problem of meaning —the meaning of the gospel and the false trails which lead into syncretism.

In the case of de Nobili and the Brahmins, and the test of whether this was syncretism *or possessio,* the answer he received from Rome provided a criterion-for meaning. It was not a direct "yes" or "no", but depended on whether the "sacred thread" or "tuft of hair" had Hindu significance, or whether it brought honor to Christ, not Christ as one person of the supposedly all-incorporating Hindu pantheon, but Christ, the only way to the Father. Here again we have the problem of meaning. And this time the focus is on the *form* (the thread and tuft of hair), rather than the message, but the implication is that the form itself may have a meaning for those who set it in a different frame of reference from the missionary. A similar point arose when McGavran discussed the Christian Christmas festival as a functional substitute for the festival of the winter solstice. The common issue between these two cases is whether the form is given a new and Christian meaning or retains its pagan significance. The meaning makes all the difference in the world - the difference between possessio and syncretism.

Again he speaks of "morphological fundamentalism" - attributing radical new meanings to old words, semantic shifting to adjust to some cultural or philosophical change, and passing it off as if no change had taken place we are once again involved in a problem of meaning which, among other things, bears on mission policy and: promotion. Likewise, in his discussion of the rejection of' "traditional Christianity (creed, cultus, organization and customs) for the sake of philosopher-theologians who want "a radically new form of Christianity," we have a striving for meaning on the part of the armchair missionary-theologians.

We have before us a wide range of cases of the problem of meaning wide enough for me to say that there may be peculiar problems of meaning at every level that of the missionary supporter and the policy maker, that of the observer and critic, in the street, that of the missionary himself as communicator or advocate, and that of the listening audience, either of practicing Christians or of potential converts. At every one of these levels we are confronted with some aspect of the problem of meaning.

(2) When *Dr. Beyerhaus* discussed the separation of mission churches and Afro-messianic movements, he pressed that this was at base a theological problem. His approach to the subject was itself surely an attempt to discover meaning. We placed ourselves in the position of the advocates of the African movements in order to pose the right questions to western missions. Then we made ourselves critics of the answers we received. It was, I think, an illuminating exercise, and did indeed point up the theological character of the problem - but it was a problem of meaning even so.

Dr. Beyerhaus pinpointed a number of significant things: the failure of converts to realize that the incarnation of Jesus Christ was an historic fact, the failure to appreciate New Testament eschatology, the failure to develop a relevant pneumatology, the failure to achieve a biblical view of the psychosomatic unity of man or to arrive at a true koinonia in the disrupted society. When we confront the penetrating nature of these shortcomings, we begin to ask how missionary

communication could possibly be so far off its basic goals; clearly somewhere there was tragic misunderstanding. And we are back again to the problem of meaning, as Beyerhaus cited Freytag: "The gospel heard is different from the gospel preached." The Spirit is equated with African *life force,* but this never becomes the personal Holy Spirit, and this, Beyerhaus rightly points out, is "a hermeneutical task."

In responding to this, I believe that the existence of African concepts like life force (cf. *mann* in Melanesia) gave the African a capacity for receiving the gospel. The gospel was potentially credible (Tippett 1972:133-139). The goal of mission is manifestly to get beyond the notion of life force to the Person of the Holy Spirit, and I agree this is a hermeneutical task, but it is bigger than hermeneutics. Here the problem of meaning has to get beyond conceptualization to an experience for which we have no words either in the language of the advocate or the receiver of the message. Perhaps Paul would have called it "the mystery." This, of course, is the work of the Holy Spirit himself, and it is at this point that conversion to Christ differs from all other kinds of conversion.

When people in a messianic movement "bypass the crucified Lord" through "seeking a national hero," or confuse the "notion of civilization" with the "coming Kingdom of peace," we are dealing with problems of meaning at the acceptor's end of the process of evangelism. This raises the allied question of motivation - why people become Christian. When people, especially large groups of people, become Christian from wrong motives, or with wrong expectations, they automatically give a wrong meaning to the message and eventually are disillusioned. This is one of the causes of nativistic breakaways.

Dr. Beyerhaus has confronted this kind of syncretistic response to the gospel with a better alternative namely, a striving for possessio. His important discussion on the threefold concept of "selection", "rejection" and "reinterpretation" aims not only at eliminating the heathen elements, but at fulfilling "the adopted elements with genuine Christian meaning"; thus the preservation of cultural forms is not syncretistic, for "by structured catechetical instruction" they are "filled with the new reality of God's grace." Clearly also Beyerhaus' theological concern is a striving for meaning.

(3) *Dr. Hoekendijk* confined his first presentation to an historical survey of Indonesian data. But here we saw that at each historical period and in each pattern of Christian mission, the problems discussed could all be reduced to matters of meaning. In a few sentences let me nominate a few of his ideas which tie up with this dimension of meaning:

(a) People movements, to be fully meaningful, have to be seen in their sociopolitical contexts.
(b) The missionary is never a speaker only; his whole life is part of the kerygmatic event.
(c) What is said is not always what is heard.
(d) The question is raised of whether syncretism may not indicate the "undetected beginnings of an indigenous theology."
(e) Xavier saw one of his major problems as the task of translating "the mysteries of faith into language one does not understand."
(f) There are cases of pre-Christian mythology being used to bring Christology close to the heart of the people, like the Javanese messianic expectation of "the liberating Lord of Justice."

There is the use of traditional a*dat* for theological developments. Dr. Hoekendijk just mentioned these in passing, but a moment's consideration reveals that they all raise the question of meaning. The same applies in his second presentation, especially his discussion on terminology. However, in my response I want to go beyond the meaning of our own terms to the meaning of meaning itself. I feel free to do his because strategist, theologian, historian and anthropologist have all, in a sense, reduced the issue of syncretism to the problem of meaning.

MEANING - A PASSIVE QUALITY OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS

I now propose to analyse this problem of meaning a little more deeply and theoretically in an anthropological manner. The missionary, or evangelist, or communicator (I usually employ Barnett's term *advocate* because we are involve in an innovative or decision-making process that seeks a response of acceptance [Barnett 1953]), has the task of advocating the acceptance of the gospel. He is striving to communicate something which is supracultural, but which he only knows in a cultural form, to people whose cultural forms and worldview are different from his own. We have been confronted with the truth that frequently missionary effort ends up with syncretism, or a new form of animism or polytheism, and if the new Christian community is really Christian, its form of Christianity is often unrecognizable stern Christians who cannot see beyond their own worldview and cultural trimmings. In my first presentation, I tried to distinguish between the two: "syncretism and indigenous Christianity." The data presented by my colleagues also have indicated that we are indeed confronted with these two kinds of community as the result of missionary activity. The humiliating question then is: *how does so much sincere Christian missionary activity end up as syncretism rather than* as *indigenous Christianity?* (I am not talking about that kind of missionary which ends up with a small, enclosed, static, foreign congregation and a western Christian worldview. That is another problem altogether.)

There several ways in which we might approach our present problem. Hitherto, our papers, for instance, have analyzed from different angles - theologically, strategically, historically and culturally - but in each of these areas we come up with the same finding, namely, we have on our hands a problem of meaning. I now wish to probe the theoretical base of that problem a little more deeply and ask another question: *for the missionary advocate, what is the meaning of meaning?*

(1) *The Integration of Passive Qualities*

Cultural elements (including say, a Christian hymn or prayer, a rite, a translation of the Bible or even a cultural institution like a congregational group) according to the anthropologist Linton (1936:402-404), have four related qualities, two of them dynamic, n*amely function* and *use*, and two passive namely *form* and *meaning.* In this theoretical unit I am concerned with the passive qualities of the cultural elements of the cross-cultural Christian mission. What I want to say may be applied to cultural artifacts (like, say, a symbolically carved lectern, or a composed liturgy), or a craftwork design for an altar cloth, or an institution like a communion service, or the process of evangelism itself, or an organization (Like an operating indigenous church). To ascertain whether or not we are studying a syncretistic or truly Christian cultural element, be it that the level of artifact, a craft, an institution or an organization, we have to probe the passive level and

consider form and meaning.

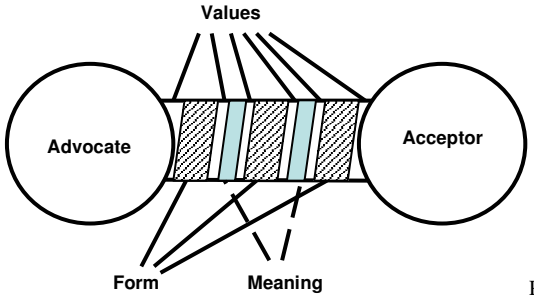
Now, on the strength of the variety of data in our present discussion, I wish to go a step beyond Linton's theory. The distinction between form and meaning is not always clear-cut. The form will also have a meaning. It may have a different meaning to advocate and acceptor, especially if they have different worldviews. The same form may have different meanings to the same audience in different situations. Linton's categories are only abstractions. In reality they cannot be segregated. The categorization is merely a mental exercise to help us identify the ingredients of the passive quality of cultural elements.

But I think there is good reason to add a third ingredient, which we may tentatively call the *value.* There is some determinative factor interwoven with both the form and meaning. It also influences the dynamic factors of function and use, but it is itself passive and subjective. It conditions the very orientation which strives for meaning or gives meaning. It covers the principles of an institution, the criteria of an experimental process and the belief behind an act of worship. It has to be distinguished from meaning because it is largely the cause of the meaning. Change the belief system and you will change the meaning of the form.

Sometimes the value system is articulated in a precise form, as for example, in a code of law, or a policy statement or a creed. Sometimes it is implied in the cultural idiom of the language, for example when we say that some action is "not playing the game," or is "hitting below the belt." This quality of value in the cross-cultural institution of evangelism surfaces into visibility as the gospel message, which may be considered in terms of "unarticulated belief," or as a concrete form in "the revealed but written word of God." Two of my colleagues have argued, correctly I believe, that one reason why we run into syncretism is by departing from, or manipulating, the message. We can say this when we focus on the value aspect, which conditions the meaning.

Whether we are communicating a gospel for acceptance in the program of outreach into the world Un. 17:18), or in the interpretation of Scripture for growth in grace in the program of the inner life of the fellowship group (I Pet. 5:1-11), we need to examine "the passive qualities of value, meaning and form," as *an integrated system,* to ascertain whether the program be syncretistic or really Christian. I think this theory, which is itself derived from a data base of concrete missionary and anthropological research, should help us at least to ask the right questions of the syncretist.

The theory may be conceptualized in a diagram which suggests the integrated qualities of evangelistic and educative thrust by means of a rope-like linkage communicating the gospel cross-culturally from advocate to acceptor.



Passive Qualities of a Cultural Element

Let me demonstrate the basics of this theory from the researches of Melville Herskovits, an anthropologist who studied religion at both ends of the slave trade. He worked in Dahomey and Nigeria, on the one hand, and in Cuba, Haiti and Brazil, on the other. In spite of the Iberian overlay and supposed Christianization in the New World, and in spite of the fact that people called themselves Catholic and Christian, the form, value and meaning of many cultural features were Yoruba and Dahomean. Herskovits listed about sixty Catholic saints in the New World, which when investigated could be identified as Dahomean and Nigerian deities some 30 of which he identified by name. Although the worshipers professed to be Catholics and were led by priests who used normal Catholic procedures, nevertheless, the deities were African and the ceremonialism (forms) ideology (value) were Dahomean and Yoruba the meaning was mainly African. One could classify the syncretism of form, value and meaning. The general religious frame of reference being handed down from one generation to another is African, and enquiry of a Catholic saint will bring descriptions of African deities for a response. These syncretizations have developed independently in each locality Brazil, Cuba and Haiti.

If we look at the two ends of the process, we see that although Catholic missionaries advocated their own form of the faith, the acceptors themselves really determined the meaning to ascribe to the forms. Thus enquiries of Christians devotees of the Christian St. George in Rio, for example were given the description of the African Ogurt, and St. Anthony and St. Peter in Haiti are identified with Legba, the Dahomean trickster. Thus it is the acceptor of the new religion who ascribes the new meaning. This is also seen in the symbolism of Dahomean and Yoruba mythology and worship of the elements. It all holds together as an integrated system. and survives from one generation to another. It may be that the slave lost his freedom in political and social life, but his religion survived as the "governor" of his society (Wallace 1966:4) and that religion was African (Herskovits 1937:635-643) the religion of the acceptor, not the advocate.

(2) *The Advocate and Acceptor Ends of the Process*

Let us take a deeper look at that way of studying our problem. We may use the same diagram if we include the "advocate" and "acceptor" as the two ends of the process. Both the advocate and acceptor impinge themselves on the process, firstly because they influence the passive qualities, and secondly, because they may have quite different worldviews. We bring out the cross-cultural element by depicting the two ends of the process. Thus either the advocate or the acceptor may be responsible for the ultimate syncretism, the former by transmitting his own worldview with the message, or the latter by misinterpreting the message in terms of his pre-Christian worldview.

I was once present in a gathering when a young Meso-American Indian from a syncretistic

Catholic background was making his public profession of faith before an evangelical congregation. When he handed over his "fetish", as the custom was in that place, I was surprised to find that his fetish was a cross, and I assumed it was a formal expression of conversion from Catholicism to evangelicalism. I later made some enquiries and discovered that it was not regarded as a Christian cross at all, for there always had been a pre-Christian cross in the symbolism of that tribe. This fetish tied him with the ancient traditions before the Spanish entered the New World. There was no Christian symbolism about it. Certainly it was not a physical reminder of the great event of salvation history - the death of our Lord. For this young man, and for his co-religionists in general, it was a magical object with its own inherent power and the shrine of a spirit. After a real confrontation with Christ, the young man felt he had to make a disclaimer of the fetish, as part of his public confession of faith.

The problem here goes back to an earlier generation when the Spanish first "converted" these New World Indians, and the latter accepted the symbol of the cross as a recognized and approved motif in their supposed Catholic Christian faith. The point I am raising here is that for those early Catholic missionaries, the cross had a precise meaning, with a whole set of associated ideas. For the Meso-American "convert", it had a completely different set of mental associations derived from the pagan pre-Christian religion. Each religion used the physical form of the cross, but the matrices of belief constructs within which the cross was used were entirely different. To the observer these people were *manifestly* Catholic using a Catholic cross, but in point of fact, the *intent* belief (which was transmitted to succeeding generations) came from the Indian complex, not the Spanish one. Here is a good example of the point made by Barnett (1953:338), that innovations or newly accepted ideas derive their meaning *from the acceptor,* not the advocate.

In the case I have just described, we had a religious symbol which was common to two different religious systems, but even where there is no common formal element, the form of Christianity adopted may be conditioned or interpreted by entirely secular factors from the pre-Christian cultural system of the acceptors of the new faith. The gospel advocate should be familiar, not only with the religion of the people to whom he goes, but with their whole worldview. There is no such thing as bringing men to Christ in a cultural vacuum. The missionary who imposes his western Christianity on his converts (focus on the advocate end) and fails to educate himself on the religion and worldview of the people to whom he goes (focus on the acceptor end), is bound to plant a syncretistic church because his lack of perception of cross-cultural, social and psychological needs which the gospel has to speak to will be misunderstood. That is once again the problem of meaning, and one good reason why every missionary should have anthropological training and understand the worldview of the people to whom he takes the gospel.

WORLDVIEW AND CULTURAL COHESION

Somewhere in this discussion on the problem of meaning we must bear down on the matter of worldview and cultural cohesion, in particular its significance for the communicator of the gospel, when the advocate and acceptor do not share the same worldview.

(1) The Worldview: Dynamic Cultural Themes in Equilibrium

The worldview of a people in one respect may seem an extremely complex pattern, but we

should remember that its multitudinous features are not of equal value (a trap for researchers who work out scales of variables for measurement). Usually we find a limited number of strong themes which determine a worldview. In anthropology we call these the *dynamic themes of culture* (Opler 1946:198-206). They stand out as the marks of normalcy in any given society. They indicate the group feelings of the people. They show how a society meets its felt needs. They reinforce the moral values. They maintain social equilibrium. If greatly disturbed, both individuals and society begin to manifest psychological stress. What is most important to us today is that they condition the nature of *acceptable* cultural change - including religious change. If we consider evangelization in terms of 'directed change" that has to be advocated and accepted, we will understand how important it is for the cross-cultural advocate to appreciate the dynamic themes of the culture pattern and organization of the society to which he takes the gospel.

Normally themes manifest themselves through certain key persons, operating within key institutions, recognizing and using key customs and key artifacts which have symbolic values. Thus it would surely be wise for the evangelist or advocate to recognize these significant persons and things. Malinowski was struggling with this when he said:

> When moving with savages through any natural milieu — sailing on the sea, walking on a beach or through the jungle, or glancing across the starlit sky — I was often impressed by their tendency to isolate a few objects important to them, and to treat the rest as mere background.

and again:

> Out of an undifferentiated background, the practical Weltanschauung of primitive man isolates a category of persons. …. (1927:331,332).

The worldview of the community where the advocate hopes to win men for Christ must be understood — the key institutions, and people and values. These are the "givens" of missionary work. These are the frame of reference within which the gospel has to be made credible and acceptable, and the advocate must adapt himself to it. Although the advocate may not he himself *of that world,* nevertheless, he must minister *in that world* (in. 17:18). He strives to win that world for Christ. To be sure, this will bring changes, but all societies have their regular mechanism for change, and this should not mean the disintegration of the society or even its leadership patterns.

In my study of Fijian history for over thirty years, I have been constantly reminded how the really great indigenous leaders of the early Fijian Church (men like Epenisa Cakobau,[10] Ilaitia Varani,[11] Ra Esekaia,[12] and Josua Mateinaniu[13]), all men of tremendous Christian experience and initiative, were previously great leaders in their paganism - chiefs, warriors, heralds, priests, craftsmen, and all of them cannibals. One of the great things about the Fijian mission was that, confronted with the tremendous task of eliminating cannibalism, widow-strangling, patricide, infanticide and human sacrifice (all tied up conceptually and ceremonially with the value system), the missionaries and their indigenous evangelists (who were the spearhead of the thrust) were able to win these people without dismembering the society. They won the social organization and the leadership; they preserved a great deal of the custom and utilized it in the

church, and they captured the natural capacity of the Fijian language for the expansion and the development of a Fijian Christian theology. The society itself continued and experienced a new birth. I do not wonder, then, that compared with some other parts of the Pacific which I have visited and know well, Fiji has been remarkably spared of nativistic movements. Those which have occurred have been due to local stress situations of a different character, more aimed at the colonial government than at the church and based on local factionalism.

(2) *The Meaning of Demoralization*

On the other hand, as Herskovits pointed out, there is a relationship between the meaning of a body of custom and the integration of the culture, and too much of a disturbance leads to *demoralization* (1951:633).

This demoralization may be collective or individual. Collective demoralization leads to a situation propitious for the emergence of a charismatic leader. It is amazing how in the study of cargo cults, one finds that the charismatic *figure,* who captures the stress situation and creates the movement, turns out to be an ex-policeman, an ex-schoolmaster or an ex-catechist, who could not get beyond the first rung of the ladder of the foreign structure to which he had attached himself, because the foreign officials under whom he worked did not recognize his capacity for leadership through their use of western criteria and educational requirements for advance. Here is a beautiful (or tragic) example of the incompatibility of worldviews - again a problem of meaning. It opens up a whole. area of missionary dynamics in which we are abysmally ignorant and which calls for research.

The same applies on the level of the individual whose worldview is shattered by acculturation, and who gropes in vain for satisfactions from outside his own world. Here is demoralization on the personal level, and here again the "solution" is syncretistic.

Dr. Harold Turner has given us an account of a young West African who had truly searched the world for religious satisfaction and had ended up as a corresponding member of religious organizations in England, America and India. To all of them he had contributed funds through tile post, either to gain merit thereby, or to protect himself from possible physical ailments. His bookshelf showed him to be an avid reader of both Protestant and Catholic literature in addition to that of Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, Theosophy, Yoga, magical arts and healing manuals. One volume on the Psalms indicated how to use Psa. 119:169-176, for example, as a charm to accompany the dropping of onion juice into the right ear for curing a boil. His sacred paraphernalia lay on a little shrine and included crucifixes, a plaster figure of St. Anthony, a bottle of water, some candles; a Bible arid a box of contraceptives lay nearby. This form of multiple syncretism. does not just demonstrate tragically how far astray a man can go in his search for peace, but it also asks us the question how he had gone so far without being found by an advocate of the gospel, who could have spoken to his seeking soul (Turner 1960:189-194).

Individuals of this experimental or searching type quite often end up in leadership roles in nativistic movements. Anthony Wallace has shown that these movements begin with the experience of some individual, who first faces stress situations and then becomes innovative (1956:264-281). Along the same lines, the psychologist, Sherif, demonstrated that an individual,

confronted with an unstable situation and finding a solution, might well create thereby, consciously or unconsciously, a new norm for a group facing a similar stress situation (1936: CII. 6). Sherif's research has been brought into anthropology by Barnett 1953:116-117) and is applicable to people movements to Christ as well as to nativistic movements away from him (Tippett 1971:210-220). This is another dimension of the problem of meaning in missiology crying out for deeper research. Until we know more about the dynamics of these movements, we will still fall short in our handling of them.

(3) *Subliminal Striving for Meaning*

I have argued that the worldview of a people provides a conceptual structure which holds a society together as a cohesive unit. To throw this conceptual structure into disequilibrium is to rob life of meaning. But always there is a "subliminal striving for meaning," as Barnett describes it (1953:ll7ff.), and this is why people are often innovative in times of stress. However, they will not accept new advocated ideas unless these can be integrated into their universe of experience. They are drawn into what Barnett calls "the matrix of the known."[14] Only thus can the new ideas have significance, and therefore unless the would-be acceptor can ascribe meaning to an innovation, he will not accept it. It is the would-be acceptor "striving to complete the gestalt" *(ibid.:* 434-435).[15]

The need for fitting a sensation (which for us in mission includes the step of faith) into a framework of known experience, may well distort the data presented by the advocate, and thus the individual to whom the advocate is witnessing may color it by his own interpretation, because he is ignorant of the worldview of the advocate. This is a human characteristic. Westerners do it as much as the Maya Indian of my first presentation. Let me for a moment reverse the advocate/acceptor roles. Barnett records a case of an American Indian myth, spoken of as "The War of the Ghosts," which was relayed to a number of white Americans, and passed on among the latter over a period of some months. Each white American rephrased it slightly, mainly at tile points of the mythology and the concept of the supernatural in the original Indian story, but even perfectly innocuous elements were changed – for example, canoes became boats - and point by point the story was unconsciously modified to suit the western frame of reference. In the end, it was absolutely unrecognizable.

In his study of tile Shakers, Barnett again demonstrates the process of striving for meaning - the meaningless is given meaning, the unstructured is given structure (Barnett 1953:120). Barnett says a thing has meaning only when "understood in terms of its mental associates." This meaning may be fantastic by another standard, yet it may be ascribed by the acceptor because it provides a rationale for acceptance *(ibid.* :335). This explains why a message preached in all sincerity by the Christian advocate with one worldview to an acceptor with another world view, can be completely distorted by the acceptor and end up as a syncretistic or heretical theology *(ibid.:* 338). [16] Many of the misinterpretations of Juan, the Maya Indian I described in my first presentation, were due to this factor. Many of the contemporary New Guinea cargo cults have emerged because the now disillusioned converts originally misinterpreted and distorted the Christian gospel message, confusing Christianity with western civilization, and the acquisition of wealth and status with white power. The older missionaries often took conversion at its face value. Today, because of the insights and tools we have acquired through a more developed

study of man, and because of the responsibility which increases with the growth of knowledge, it behooves us to pay better attention to post-baptismal instruction.

Now, before I pass on from this discussion of the significance of worldview for the problem of meaning, let me pinpoint again three things I have been trying to say: (a) What Dr. Hoekendijk called "the kerygmatic event" must take place within the framework of tile worldview of the people to whom we go with the gospel. This is why we have to study a people's cultural world and operate in their language. (b) It is not our task to destroy their worldview, but to bring Christ into it. If we destroy it, they will suffer from *cultural voids* (Tippett 1963:60-70), from *normlessness* (Yinger 1964:158-173), from *anomie* (Durkheim 1951:258; Giddens 1972:15, 173-174), which history shows may well lead to depopulation because the zest has *gone out of life* (Rivers 1922:84-113). (c) When people accept the gospel they make it fit their worldview and interpret it — as the acceptor and not tile advocate ~5 the innovator— and "the gospel" in any society means just what the acceptor (not the advocate) makes it mean. This is why the program of Christian nurture and education must be continuous. Conversion is not a goal, but rather a doorway into the fellowship of believers.

APPROXIMATE AND DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

Once a missionary realizes that to witness cross-culturally he must step outside his own world into a completely different one, to come into encounter with people who have a different worldview and to engage with them within that frame of reference, and in a language of which they are the experts and he is the learner, he realizes the burden of the stewardship the Lord has entrusted to him. The question now comes to him with force can I communicate the gospel to these people meaningfully? Cart I divest the gospel with which I am familiar of the cultural trimmings I know I have given it, so that the written word may be incarnated in their cultural forms and the living Word in their hearts? This is the risk of the Christian mission. There is little comfort in knowing that if I fail there may be a syncretistic church there tomorrow.

With some fear and trembling then, I turn to the problem of meaning at the level of actual communication in the field situation.

(1) *Getting Beyond Approximate Equivalence*

Although Bronislaw Malinowski could not have done his research in the Trobriands without the help of the missionaries, and especially their linguistic work on which he built, nevertheless, he pointed out a shortcoming of their translation and preaching which often led to misunderstanding. He called it the problem of *approximate equivalence.* He argued that "All the words which describe the native social order, all the expressions referring to native beliefs, to specific customs, ceremonies and magical rites are absent from the English" (1927:299-300). He argued that these words were peculiar to them and acquired their meanings from the life and tradition of the people, that the language was rooted in reality and was meaningful only within what he called its *"context of situation."*

If Malinowski is correct and the gospel has to be preached in the language of the hearers, can it ever be preached then without a pagan meaning being ascribed to it?

I must confess that I know nothing so futile as a missionary trying to communicate the gospel to people in a language they do not know. I had a most disillusioning experience of this in a Navaho hogan, and it convinced me that the missionary must use the language of the people. But how does one discuss, say, the Fatherhood of God with a matrilineal people where the father role differs from the biblical one? Where does one find words for such concepts as prayer and worship, and the moral qualities and the terms for God himself and the Holy Spirit? One has to find these words within the language and vocabulary of the pagan religious life itself: which is another reason which commits the missionary to a sincere effort to understand that pagan religions so that he can lead people from pagan prayer to Christian prayer, or from a pagan idea of God to a Christian one.

Yet I am satisfied that it can be done with time and patience. However, it is not merely a matter of finding an accurate word for each concept. Neither is it entirely a matter of translation. These are never more than approximate equivalents. One has to understand the context of the situation and feel something of its nature and atmosphere. Approximate equivalence of vocabulary is not good enough. This is only the way to misunderstanding and to syncretism.

The capacity to place oneself in another religious worldview has to operate in two directions: first backward into Judeo-Graeco-Roman contexts from which the divine message comes, and then forward by looking into the context of the pagan society to which the biblical message is to be transmitted. I have struggled with this two-dimensional cross-cultural adjustment in an attempt to short-circuit my own ethnocentric perception of the gospel, and worked out my own methods on the mission field.

I decided never to translate an English sermon into Fijian. I put myself in the Fijian context and spoke extempore until, after many years, I believe I began to think in Fijian. For three years, I served as the official keeper of the Fijian Synod daily journal and discovered that when it had to be translated back into English it assumed a vernacular character my normal English never had. I have at home a number of old missionary reports of Fijian testimonies, and I believe I can tell in a moment whether the writers were recording them themselves or translating Fijian documents. When I learned to forget translation and interact in Fijian, I got much better responses.

Sometimes I wanted to communicate a biblical idea, say, a Pauline concept or phrase. In this case I would try to go direct from the Scripture to Fijian. I might have to take the congregation for a “guided tour” round Corinth or Ephesus, but not until I felt that the cultural situation was clear would I dare use the key phrase. Then, afterwards as we ate our meal together and ‘they talked over the sermon (a humiliating custom they have), I would know if I had got through with the biblical meaning. I know no other way of cross-cultural communication of biblical truths but by narrative reconstruction of the cultural contextual situation in which the key word, or phrase, was first spoken. In any case, the Fijians love to hear how other people live, and have different values from them, and why. Then often, when they had the situation clear, they would tell me how to say it in a single phrase of their own that was not in the dictionary. I have thus accumulated some four or five hundred Fijian situational phrases not in the dictionary because they are idiomatic and not literal.

Let us remember then that the theological terminology of Scripture is already a vocabulary of

divine ideas in cultural garments. We should not need to be reminded of this since the day of Adolf Deissmann. [17] Every theological word we have came originally from a cultural context - redemption, adoption, reconciliation, sanctification, atonement, and so on ad infinitum. And the glory of God is that his purpose for mankind in the "notion of redemption' for example, was capable of enshrinement in a concept from pagan Rome, which happened to have an institution of slavery figuring prominently in its worldview. The essentiality of incarnation is as true for the written word as it was for the living Word. When God spoke to human beings, he used no universal Esperanto, but he spoke in their own language.

(2) *Dynamic Equivalence*

The battle for dynamic equivalence is won or lost in the initial program of translation or preaching. The first two missionaries in Fiji quarreled about this subject. One wanted a perfect literal translation of Scripture. He was a skilled linguist, quickly mastered the grammar and built a good vocabulary, but at best his work was a case of approximate equivalence. He saw words without their contexts, even though his translations were literally accurate. His companion studied the Scripture passage he wanted to communicate and wrote a paraphrase of it as he would tell the story, as if to a Sunday School class. He wrote it out and gave copies of it to the first preachers he trained to read. They studied it, asked questions about it and went forth into the pagan villages and "dialogued" the Scripture narrative, as if they were communicating something that had happened on the forest path along which they had come. This second man never gave the Fijians a translated book of the Bible, but the first villages to accept the gospel in Melanesian Fiji were those where his paraphrases were discussed. And these people got the heart -'of the gospel.

Many years have gone since then. Fiji has a strong indigenous ministry now. Something of this free expression of the gospel remains. I found it thrilling to listen to Fijian preaching, though sometimes the exegesis brought me up with a jolt. I recall a preacher who had done missionary service in North Australia in a totemic aboriginal community which still practised the cultic rituals in which the religious symbolism, tribal loyalties and totemic dances as they marked their bodies with the totemic their notion of spiritual unity with the totem were stressed. He had witnessed their elaborate preparations for one of their symbols. After a long and graphic description of this, he led into a discussion of Paul's bearing in his body the marks of the Lord Jesus - a rather daring analogy. His name, strangely enough, was Paul. He carried his hearers along with him. in a description of a worldview so different from their own. Then I asked myself - was his interpretation of the stigmata so very far from the original? Where did Paul get that figure of speech anyway —from a pagan brand on the body of a slave, or a Roman soldier pledging his loyalty to his captain, or an offender taking refuge in a pagan temple to escape his just penalty by becoming a slave of the deity of that temple? Whichever meaning Paul had in his mind, the term came from a pagan cultural context, but he used it as a symbolic expression of loyalty and identification with his Lord.

I heard another Fijian preach on treasure in earthen vessels. He did not know Greek, but the Fijian word for vessel has a multitude of meanings in different contexts — a pot, a ship, an envelope or an object possessed by a spirit. The sermon was a normal one for a Fijian audience though a biblical scholar might have found the exegesis strange. In any case the congregation

was with him and, I believe, strengthened in the faith.

A third Fijian sermon I might mention discussed the atonement. First, the preacher reminded the congregation of the nature of a Fijian ritual of atonement and enumerated the various offences which could be rectified by such an offering. From this he proceeded in the true style of the typology of the Epistle to the Hebrews to demonstrate how the atonement of Christ was a superior, universal and eternal work of grace, more perfect in every degree than the Fijian type.

Each of these presentations came from a non-western and non-biblical worldview. Each preacher, in a way, took the risk of syncretism. Yet those sermons were all essentially Christian, characterized not by approximate, but by dynamic equivalence. They were all preached to the glory of God, and the goal in each case was to bring the congregation to a deeper experience of Christ. They were all well-received, and even I, a stranger, felt I was at worship. They all utilized concepts and feelings which would have been difficult to translate back into English. They were indigenous sermons, but they were thoroughly Christian. There wasn't a touch of syncretism in any of them. Tile problem of meaning had been solved.

In those parts of the world where good indigenous churches have emerged, this is quite normal and has a long-standing history. But mostly the reporting of it to the West has been confined to missionary deputation tale-telling. It has never been seriously studied in the theory of mission as a subject for phenomenological research. One of the new features of post-colonial missiology is the recognition of this dimension of indigeneity and the development of the research area of *ethnotheology* (Kraft 1973a:109-126), and under this head a sub-area of *dynamic equivalence* (Kraft 1973b:226-249; 1973c:39 Cf.). We may expect to hear more of this in the next decade or so. It arises from a feeling of our need to solve the problem of meaning in preaching and translation.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the last of my contributions to this symposium, I ask myself what our encounter here at Milligan College has to say to Christian mission as we enter the last quarter century of this millennium.

Although there are many ways in which we are already speaking of "a new era of mission," we all know that the day of *colonial missions* is dead, and that *post—colonial mission* has to operate within an entirely different set of "givens". We seem to have overcome the pessimism of the sixties and the notion that "the day of missions is dead." It is still an active business, as Stephen Neill has pointed out (1970:1),[18] and we have no directive from the Lord that the Greek Commission is defunct. Already new contours are taking shape, both for *missiology* as the field of research and theory, and for *mission* as the applied activity of that theory in the world. The *idea of mission* (Warneck's phrase), is nothing new, but both the opportunities and tile techniques for it have changed out of all recognition. And perhaps it is at this point where I suppose that, as tile anthropologist of this symposium, I would be expected to speak.

The problem of syncretism is not a new one. The New Testament church confronted it, as the growing church in every age through history has also done so. However, although it is the same

problem, we have certain advantages in our day for dealing with it and, therefore, an even greater responsibility. We recall how William Carey (1792) in his day argued that the researches of tile navigators and explorers, the new charts and techniques of navigation, the knowledge of languages spoken by newly discovered people who knew nothing of the gospel, all gave a new dimension to the meaning of the Great Commission for the church of his day — and thus began a new era of mission.

In our day many new ways and means of research have opened up to us. We have new disciplines on which we could be drawing for tile training of missionaries. We have historical research over a long period of history, which is full of lessons to be learned. And surely of him who has received much, much is expected.

Therefore, at the level of the individual missionaries, we must recognize that there is no longer any excuse for the home church sending out missionaries without adequate training, and in the light of our discussion on syncretism, that availability of knowledge and techniques certainly includes anthropology —social anthropology, applied anthropology, cultural dynamics, cross-cultural communication and "primitive" religion, as a minimum — and perhaps also a refresher course to up-date them on each furlough.

At the level of academia, there is a desperate need for more intensive missiological research on both syncretism and indigenous Christianity, in the assembly and classification of data, in theory and in application. The contemporary people movements to Christ, and cargo cults away from him, demonstrate the dynamism of our times. For every case of a well-handled people movement one could counter with a badly-handled one. And how to handle a cargo cult is something in which both the field missionaries and home boards are equally out of their depth. In many ways, the animistic world is "turning over" today on a scale quite unprecedented in history, and when I speak of the animist world, I am not confining myself to forest tribes, but include the great religions of Asia and the streets of the great American cities. We live in a syncretistic world, and we know next to nothing about its phenomenological character and how to deal with it. A cultural gulf lies between us and the people to whom we have been sent.

The research of the kind I am asking for must *come from inside the missionary movement itself.* Most of the exciting research has been done by anthropologists, frequently agnostic scholars, who think these things can be studied objectively; or from comparative religionists, mostly armchair scholars who have never confronted the phenomena in the flesh. These human sciences will take us so far, but will not lead us to the "new man in Christ," which requires an apostolic man not a religion man, a *Christian,* not a secular anthropologist. In the study of religious phenomenology of this kind, there are two ways of *getting into the act* one is by accepting it and readjusting one's theology to fit his new position, and the other is to come into actual encounter with it on the level of faith. Missiology today needs nothing more urgently than an adequate articulated methodology for confronting the dynamic resurgence of contemporary animism with the Christian alternative.

In this post-colonial era of mission, every cross-cultural missionary, therefore, needs a degree in anthropology sufficiently advanced to permit his doing field research; and upon retirement from the field after, say, 15 or 20 years, the home church should open the door for a select few of

these men to be set aside for advanced research – men who, having worked for years outside their own language and culture, can continue their involvement in the dynamics of these cross-cultural phenomenological problems. Every mission field of the world is plagued with some form of syncretism, and every field should have some full-time experienced missionary-anthropologist studying the dynamics of their situation and making it available to the field missionaries. Someday, the Lord of the Vineyard will ask our boards and sending churches why they sent men into the vineyard without teaching them how first to care for vines and harvest the grapes, arid why they opened fields at all for mission, which they were not prepared to research.

From these experienced missionary researchers, a limited number should serve as coordinators of the total research and the development of a body of *missiological theory* based on the field data. Our missiological theory is not yet adequate for the missionary task I anticipate our being confronted with in the next twenty-five years. On my recent visit to New Guinea, I was thrilled by certain evidences of indigenous Christianity, and yet appalled by the tragic loss of converts through cargo cults. Our missionary gospel is a glorious one, but our methodology is far short of what the Lord of the Vineyard surely expects of his stewards.

Notes

1. I do not know what Dr. McGavran means by saying that missiology refers only to the adjustments on "new ground," that "adjustments which well-established churches make are no business of missiology," and that "when the *church* makes the adjustments, the process is no concern of missiology." Perhaps I do not read him correctly (ch. 2). 1 believe the continual adjustments required of the church arc part of its mission — for only thus can it hope to bridge the generation gap within its own constituency; I cover this in *Verdict Theology* (1973:10-16), under the phrase "the inward dimension of mission." This paragraph of McGavran's mystifies me in the light of what he has written under the head of "biological growth."

2. In Dr. McGavran's first chapter we meet "secular culture," "modern culture," "each culture of the world," "our culture," "your culture," "a culture religion," "deistic culture," "gnostic culture" and "any culture." Sometimes it seems to be a culture pattern, sometimes a philosophy or religion, sometimes part of the pattern (without religion). It is sometimes anthropologically used and sometimes aesthetically.

3. Unless I misunderstand Dr. Beyerhaus (ch. 6), 1 think he underrates the importance of 'making the large scale adaptations" in the first generation. Functional substitutions made 20 or 30 years later have been notably unsuccessful.

We are dealing with conversion from paganism. The very first fellowship of believers should be structurally and operationally recognizable as indigenous from the beginning; otherwise we are building in a cultural void for the indigenes and a "mission to church" problem for the missionary enterprise. I think that whatever indigenous features are to be adopted should be identified and possessed for Christ from the time of the initial people movement and its catechetical consummation.

4. Hoekendijk's first presentation (ch. 3) leaves us with non-western and western Christians alike "on different steps on the axis ladder" — reflecting an admittedly necessary humility on our part. However, the tendency to use some kind of scale like this to measure syncretism in a *scientific* manner is often used by researchers. It may be useful for measuring behavior, but when it comes to such things as faith or revelation it fails. Religious experience is so complex that we can never hope to identify the variables for experimental use. let alone eliminate them.

5. The reduction of the world to a global village to make a statistical point (Hoekendijk ch. 7) involves the writer in a false analogy. I do not dispute Hoekendijk's point, hut I do challenge the model he uses to make it. It would have been better stated in simple *percentages.* The analogy assumes an even distribution of the condition (e.g., illiteracy)

throughout the statistical universe --- which is not so, some places being quite illiterate and others not at all so.

6. The exegesis of Mark 5 (Hoekendijk ch. 7) might well have become a point of debate among us because it implies the authority of a commentator to declare a biblical narrative to be a current heathen folk tale. This bears on our attitude to the nature of Scripture and its interpretation.

7. Hoekendijk's schema of Christianization (ch. 7) reflects medieval European history and is useful as a frame of reference for a particular ~et of circumstances in history, but it is not necessarily a universal pattern, neither does It mean that there is no other quite different frame of reference for analyzing the Christianization of Europe. It may well be that medieval church history will some day have to be written in terms of the dynamics of modern cross-cultural people movements.

8. Scientific humanistic self-sufficiency and the religio-philosophical incredibility of the idea of God can hardly be part of the same "system" as modern culture which "gives birth to a conviction that life is meaningless." Self-sufficiency and anomie are essentially different attitudes.

9. A worldview which is philosophically deist cannot, in my understanding, be equated with a culture. There is no 'deistic culture." Such-and-such a culture may be orientated towards deism — but this is a very different thing. However, I agree with McGavran that when biblical faith is adulterated with the philosophy of deism (as he describes it), we shall have syncretism on our hands (ch. 1).

10. Ratu Epenisa Cakobau of Bau, known also as Cikinovu (Centipede) was probably the most famous cannibal chief of history and had reportedly devoured over a thousand human victims before his conversion to Wesleyanism in 1854, whereafter, his life was completely changed to piety and Christian leadership.

11. Ilaijia Varani (France) earned the name by destroying a French ship and massacring the crew. He was Cakobau's henchman and leader of the forces which upheld Bau. He had a remarkable conversion and lived to be a Christian negotiator and peacemaker of no mean order, eventually losing his life on a peace mission.

12. Ra Esekaia was the first-born son and heir of the Chief of Bua. He gave up his title when he became Christian as he knew he did not have the loyalty of the warriors and other heathen. However, he protected the small Christian party during the persecution period in Bua. It is hard to see how the Christians could have survived without his leadership.

13. Josua Mateinaniu was a petty chief of Fulaga and a dancing master of renown, who was taken to Tonga to teach Fijian war dances to the Tongans, and was converted there. He returned to Fiji with the first mission party and served as their herald. Thereafter, he was the spearhead of the Christian advance, preceding the missionaries in Rewa, Somosomo, Bua and other places.

14, Or. Hoekendijk's objection to my use of the word "pagan" is a good example of our failure to communicate because of the "boxing" at the receptor end of the process. He does not (or maybe will not) give my *word* anything but *his meaning* and thus distorts the communication. (By the way, I only use this as an example. We all do it.) This is one of the main problems we have in communicating the gospel. All through Dr. Hoekendijk's second paper his semantic problems are due to his "failure to understand" [his own phrase) and this is clearly because of his "matrix of the known." In his subliminal striving for meaning, he gives "pagan" (as also "possessio", etc.) a meaning from his own frame of reference. To people who have trouble over the meaning of the word "pagan", I would recommend their reading Maurier's *Theology of Paganism* (English translation 1968, especially pp. 22-24). The same problem arose in Dr. Hoekendijk's response, to which I had no opportunity to reply, with respect to his use of the word "hope" as he set his *hope* over against our *security.* He says he *does net know* how we "could be so secure." Here he is in a particular theological "box" which seems to prevent hi~ understanding my particular theology of the Christian hope in terms of assurance — "the full assurance of hope" *(endciknusthai spouden: pros ten plerophorian tes elpidos).*

15. The gestaltists have developed the concept of "closure" to explain the psychological striving or straining

towards the completion of an incomplete configuration. The tension is not relaxed until the missing part is realized and the gestalt thus closed.

16. Kirk & Talbot (1966), in an article "The Distortion of Information," described three different fundamental types of distortion, which they designated as *stretch, fog* and *mirage.* The analogies offer a useful frame of reference which might have been used for an analysis of the different forms of syncretism.

17. The older belief that New Testament Greek was peculiar was disposed of by Deissrnann, who demonstrated its contemporary use in the secular world of New Testament times: for example, it was thought that Peter invented the term "Chief Shepherd." Deissmann reported a burial tablet describing the deceased by this term, and indicating the existence of a kind of shepherd guild of which one was chief *(Light from the Ancient East* 1927).

18. Neill's opening paragraph in *Call to Missions* (1970) reads: "The missionary work of the Christian Church is a fact of the modern world. We may like the fact or we may dislike it. That makes no difference; whether we will or no, it is just there. Not only so; it is a large and ever expanding fact."

GM Editorial Note: This article is from Chapter 9 of the out of print book, *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity,* Tetsunao Yamamori – editor and was reprinted with permission. This book can be downloaded in its entirety in our Reviews & Previews section.