

Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity

ALAN R. TIPPETT

Former Professor of Missionary Anthropology, Fuller Theological Seminary, CA, USA

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When Dr. Yamamori supplied us with the terms *of reference* for this symposium, he spoke of the adjustments required in the spread of Christianity from one human culture to another as it takes root, and raised the question: What are the limits of such adjustments?

We agreed that the first chapter of the series should prepare the stage for our exchange, taking up a position in such a way that the other writers could react either positively or negatively, either by developing the argument further or by turning it in another direction. In any case, the first presentation, it was felt, should pinpoint the missionary problem which underlies the whole series - namely, how to avoid syncretism and to achieve an indigenous Christianity. So often the search for the latter leaves us with the former instead. The purpose of this presentation, then, after delineating the scope of the series and defining the terms, will be to demonstrate the character of the alternatives - Christopaganism or indigeneity.

THE SCOPE OF THE SYMPOSIUM

In popular missiological literature the theme of our symposium has been discussed under a number of terms. From the negative aspect it is spoken of as *syncretism* or as *Christopaganism*. Writers on the old Spanish Catholic colonies in particular have used the latter term. In both the Old and New Testaments the people of God were warned about the mixture of pagan religion with their own.¹ For this reason it is inevitable that any missionary whose roots are in Scripture will be predisposed to resist anything in the churches he plants which could lead to syncretism.

Yet the basic principles of anthropology and communication theory, indeed also of what we call incarnational theology, tell us that the churches we plant (and by churches here I mean the Christian fellowship groups, however simple) in cultures other than our own must be relevantly part of those cultures. We are continually (and quite rightly) warned of the danger of planting foreign western Christianity on what we have for so long called "the mission field."

Thus, on the one hand, we try to preserve a pure faith and an essential gospel," and on the other, we seek to give it "an indigenous garment." For example. the moment we translate a portion of Scripture into a language which has hitherto built its vocabulary only for a pagan worldview and belief, we are confronted with the problem not only of translation, but of *reception*. Yet unless the written word of God can be incarnated in the linguistic flesh of the receptor people, the saving experience is not likely to be transmitted.

The basic problem, therefore, would seem to be how to communicate the essential *supracultural*² core of the gospel to new believers in other cultures without having it contaminated by the non-Christian forms with which it must be communicated and shared. This contamination may be manifested in any aspect of Christian ministry — apostolate, proclamation, fellowship, service or teaching, all of which in the last analysis are culturally conditioned.

It was partly the fear of this which hindered early missionary efforts in the fourth century. Ulfilas, for instance, had little support for his translation proposals as it was thought the pure gospel could not be transmitted in the impure tongue of the Goths.³

This raises a whole nest of problems and questions that are within the orbit of these presentations. Perhaps the first of them is: what exactly is the essential core of the gospel which has to be transmitted? As we look at the Scriptures within their Hebrew and Greek garments, just what is supracultural, and what is cultural? The history of the translation of the English Bible is a story of the struggle for cultural relevance in communication, a struggle for meaning, not only across cultures (Hebrew and Greek to English)⁴ but across generations of semantic change (Elizabethan, Victorian and Modern Man). Likewise, in every mission field over the last century, Scripture translation reminds us that the gospel, which is *above* culture, nevertheless has to be presented in a meaningful cultural form.

If the mission of God was achieved by the incarnation of his Son, culture-bound as a Jew, and a Jew of Galilee, and a speaker probably of Galilean Aramaic, and by occupation a carpenter in the tradition of his earthly father, and he in turn said, "As the Father bath sent me into the world so send I you into the world," thereby giving us a model for mission (Tippett 1970:64-65); I think we may assume that *we* are bound to work within the limitations of the cultural forms of the people to whom we are sent.

On the other hand, as we examine the churches of the 19th and 20th century mission fields, *we* frequently find one of two situations. First, they may be thoroughly western in form, teaching and values and quite unrelated to the cultural ethos, so that people live a borrowed, foreign kind of existence, or a dichotomous one which compartmentalizes the religious and secular. Or second, we may have the tragic manifestation of syncretistic worship, Christopagan, more animistic than Christian, because the thinking is animistic and the ritual magical. In all these manifestations, Christian missions have been sorely criticized by the anthropologists, and although this criticism has been grossly generalized, one cannot dispute that we have frequently deserved it.

Destructive or cynical criticism is both unkind and useless, but criticisms may be valuable if they lead us to take a hard look at our methods and correct our mistakes. No secular anthropologist has yet proved his ability to sit where we sit, and therefore has little right to speak. Given the biblical mandate of the Christian mission and the scientific principles and methodologies of anthropology and communication science (without which no man should go to Christian missions today), how do we plant Christian communities that are at the same time both truly indigenous and truly Christian? Or, as our frame of reference puts it, "What are the cultural limits to the adjustments" that have to be made with the passage of the supracultural message from one culture to another?

This is a *missiological* subject. It has a theological dimension, but is not confined to theology. It has a historical dimension, but is not confined to history. It has an anthropological dimension, but is not confined to anthropology. It has a strategic dimension, but is not confined to strategy. For this reason, we participants will approach the subject, each from one of these four dimensions, but the common bond between us is missiology. We stand now at a formative period in "the history of the expansion of Christianity," as Latourette spoke of it. An old era of mission has passed, and we are suffering the birth pangs of a new one. We look into Scripture and ask what are our basic underpinnings and our divine directions. We look into the past and ask what history has to say to us today. We examine the new insights and dimensions of anthropology and linguistics and try to analyze the transition we seek to achieve. We explore missionary strategies and relate methods to results: acceptance or rejection, growth or non-growth, understanding or misunderstanding, foreignness or indigeneity. Although we approach our basic problem from four quite different angles, nevertheless, we each trespass on the other's ground at some point or

other. We may well tangle with each other at times. But we begin from a common base — the task of bringing Christ cross-culturally to the nations.

I would hope that each of us would bring the perspectives of his particular discipline to bear on the general subject in a way which forces the others to take alignments with his information and opinion, not that we need necessarily be led into heated debate, but that we may relate to each other in a symbiotic rather than a reactive manner.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

In current popular missiology, apart from the writing of members of our panel, several standard works for the missionary deal with our subject. The first of these is a translation from Dutch: Bavinck's *Introduction to the Science ~ Mission* (1964), in which he devotes chapter 9 to this topic. The second is Luzbetak's *The Church and Cultures* (1963), in which chapter 13 has the same title as the book. From the linguistic point of view Nida (1959: 1960), Smalley (1955:58-71), Reyburn (1957:194), Kraft (1963a:109-126), and others have written on the ethnotheological problems in communication. A number of anthropological analyses of Christopaganism are in existence, perhaps the best of them Madsen's *Christopaganism* (1957), and there are biblical studies like Visser't Hooft's *No Other Name* (1963), which describe the identical problem which Paul met with in the first century church.⁵

All these writers have written independently of each other. Apparently there never has been any attempt to coordinate these various researches and to formulate a common terminology as a basis for discussion. In the same way, we who will exchange our ideas during these sessions, have come to the subject, not only from different perspectives and experiences, but with different preferences in terminology. Even the word *syncretism*, which has long been in use in all disciplines, may give us trouble.

Syncretism may be defined as the union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the united form is a new thing, neither one nor the other.⁶

With critical consideration, however, we observe that either of two kinds of mixtures may be defined as syncretism: on the one hand, a distortion of Christian theology by mixing it with pagan myth to form a new kind of teaching; on the other hand, the singing of, say, a western Calvinist theology in an unfamiliar chant to a drumbeat previously used only for pagan dances. Yet at this point I wish to make a distinction between them. In the former we are dealing with a basic concept, a matter of thought and belief. In the latter we are dealing with the cultural forms in which it is expressed. Until this differentiation is clearly recognized, we will never be able to draw a line between these quite different processes. This is implied in our opening question about the "limits of our adjustments."

It seems necessary, therefore, that we find a new term for the second of these. We thus retain syncretism or Christopaganism for confusions in the essential content, the metaphysical the theological, for the fusion of belief systems so that the supracultural gospel is contaminated, leaving us with a new kind of animism. The second, which covers the cultural adjustments that have to be made to achieve the indigeneity of the newly planted Christianity, we may consider briefly now.

Luzbetak's term for this is *accommodation*, which he defines

as the respectful, prudent, scientifically and theologically sound adjustment of the Church to the native culture in attitude, outward behavior and practical apostolic approach (1963:341).

Bavinck starts his discussion with the use of *accommodation* and *adaptation* as alternatives, and before long is involved in a lengthy discussion of various types of accommodation —external, aesthetic, social and juridical, intellectual, religious and ethical (following Thauren). He points out that accommodation is one thing to a missionary and quite another set of problems to the people of the recipient culture. He also differentiates between the Catholic and Reformation viewpoints. After eleven pages of discussion (169-179), he rejects the term *accommodation*, saying,

the Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new.

He prefers the term *possessio*, “to take possession.” For the next twelve pages (179-190) he discusses the practical problems of “possessing” a culture, or the entire life, so that a young church, living close to Christ and the Scriptures, may hope for fresh dynamics. He grants the need for expressing faith in forms of the old cultural heritage, but demands it be achieved without denying Christ (190).

The linguists with their incarnational theology prefer the term *transformation*, maintaining the constancy of the supracultural and the variability of the cultural forms with each society. They see God “starting with people where they are,” and guiding man in the process of culture change “the People of God in partnership with God,” using “culture to serve as a vehicle for Divine-human interaction” (Kraft 1973c:395). Kraft comes to grips with Bavinck and argues that *possessio* suggests the capture of a culture by force from without, rather than a possession from within. As an observer I see in Bavinck and Kraft the Calvinist and Arminian views of the sovereignty of God.⁷

I would hope that we can avoid devoting too much of our time to semantic discussion at the expense of practical confrontation with the missiological problems themselves. Whether *we* speak of adaptation, accommodation, possessio or transformation, we are using the term over against that of syncretism or Christopaganism — and to this extent I think the issue is clear, It is this basic dichotomy we seek to illuminate in order to draw a line somewhere between the supracultural and cultural, the gospel and the form.

As our discussion continues and *we* look at concrete situations, two questions will continually arise: Is the gospel influencing the cultural form or is the cultural form influencing the gospel? As we strive to employ a factual missiological data base for our arguments, we shall not only operate within the values and criteria of our respective disciplines, but we shall draw our data from different geographical regions and cultural systems, incorporating our different areas of experience: India, Indonesia, Europe and Oceania. Because we have no representative from Latin America, I shall commence in this chapter with a case study of syncretism from that continental region.

SYNCRETISM OR CHRISTOPAGANISM

Perhaps it would be appropriate in an introductory study like this to analyze a specific case of syncretism and to delineate some of its anthropological ingredients. I seek a locality where Christianity has been established long enough for the existing structures to have crystallized in a form stable enough for objective analysis. That is, I am not seeking so much a case of new religious formulation in which syncretism is currently emerging, but rather a stabilized and functioning religious form in which the process of syncretization is more or less complete and has resulted in a currently operating pattern of faith and practice.

My data base is the case study of a real character, one Juan, a small peasant village official, who

considered himself a Christian and left his autobiographical record (Pozas 1962), from which I borrow at length. Even where length has necessitated abbreviation, I have retained Juan's own terminology, to reduce the possibility of my being a misinterpretive middleman. Many years ago Spaniards invaded his homeland and forced their well-known form of Christianity on his forebears. But Spanish Christianity suffered a considerable degree of modification in the process of transmission, and at the time when the autobiography was written, Juan considered himself a normal Christian, and as a village leader his life was pretty well what the "Christian" villagers expected it to be. In point of fact it was so thoroughly Christopagan as to be hardly Christian at all.

On a basis of Juan's autobiographical statements, I shall enumerate a few anthropological concepts which throw light on the character of this syncretism, and raise some questions about their origin, for they certainly have both theological and missiological (strategic) significance. Time will confine me to four ideas, and these I can only pinpoint: (1) the capacity of cohesive cultural complexes for survival, (2) the orientation of mythical thinking and belief, (3) the demand for a therapeutic system, (4) the notion of the living dead. In discussing the character of this specific case of Latin American Christopaganism from each of these points of view, I want to point out that none of these is confined to Latin America or to the present day. These experiences must have been shared by those incorporated into Christianity in the movements of the first century and the middle ages. I have often wondered whether historians should not re-examine these great movements with a new interpretive analytical tool based on the known dynamics of present day movements both *into* and *out of* the church.

(1) *The Capacity of Cohesive Cultural Complexes for Survival*

A cohesive cultural complex is here a notion embodied in a cultural form with its regular behavior pattern — a practice which continues and a set of ideas which survives with the practice. Thus in a descriptive passage Juan tells us:

Three hours later the sky grew bright and the sun came up behind the mountains. My mother put some coals into the clay incense burner and went out to greet the first rays of the sun. She dropped some pieces of copal into the burner, knelt down to kiss the ground, and begged the sun to protect us and give us health (p. 47).

This is sheer nature worship, both in its faith and practice — an offering to the sun at the moment of appearance of morning light. The sun is greeted. The earth is kissed. The act of prayer for human protection is directed to the sun whose warmth and light give healing and health. This man considers himself a Christian. Yet he worships the creation, not the Creator.

The point I wish to make in this particular instance is that this is *not* a corruption of his Christianity but a survival of a discrete cultural unit, an animistic cohesive cluster of both faith and practice which co-exists with his so-called Christianity, and represents a compartment of this pagan life he never surrendered to Christ. He sees no contradiction in it. It has persisted for several centuries. It has resisted disintegration. It has rejected absorption. And Christian education has failed to communicate a doctrine of God the Creator which would have corrected it. So the first point I want to make about Christopaganism is that it is not always a fusion or intermingling of Christian and pagan ideas. It is often an agglomerate with cohesive animistic units embedded in it. A number of these units may co-exist, in spite of the fact that they represent flat contradictions to one another. They are cohesive and they change or survive cohesively as units like a phonetic pattern in linguistic change (Sapir 1949:186-187)² It should not be impossible to deal with them.

(2) *The Orientation of Mythical Thinking and Belief*

No part of the religion of a people shows up its basic animism more quickly than its mythology — in other words, its faith formulation. We return again to Juan.

He tells us that the Savior watches over people on the road. He died on a cross to save the wayfarer from the Jews, whom he equates with devils, and who were supposedly cannibalistic. Originally the sun was as cold as the moon, but it grew warmer when the Holy Child was born. He was the son of a virgin among the Jews. who sent her away because they knew the Child would bring light. St. Joseph took her to Bethlehem where the Child was born. The sun grew warmer and the day brighter. The demons ran away and hid in the mountain ravines. Their activity is confined to night because the Savior watches over the day, for the sun is the eye of God, After three days the Holy Child started work as a carpenter. He made a door from a log. The log was too short so he stretched it out like a rope to the required length. Fearing him the people determined to kill him and the family fled from village to village across the mountains. In one village he planted a cornfield. The people were bitten by a swarm of flies. The Savior said, “Don’t eat them, eat me instead!” He visited the afterworld and then they nailed him to a cross so the people would remember that demons would be punished and would stop eating people (pp. 94-96, summarized).

Let us backtrack briefly over this completely confused but supposedly Christian account of the life of our Lord. It covers the journey to Bethlehem, the nativity, the flight into Egypt, the carpenter of Nazareth, the vicarious death on the cross. There is a suggestion of the sacramental partaking of the body of Christ, and his descent into hell.

Within this structure are woven a number of animistic features — the role of the sun and moon, the cannibal demons, their residence in the mountains, traditions of the origin of the cornfield and the swarm of flies.

There is no coherent relation between the details of the story, but there are clear equations: the biting flies, demons and Jews; the light and warmth of the sun with the light of Christ; the conflict of light and darkness, and of Christ and demons; the vicarious character of being bitten by flies and of being nailed to the cross.

We could not ask for a better (or more appalling) example of syncretism than this, or anything which cries out more pathetically to the strategy of mission. The educational follow-up of conversion was so defective as to permit this fusion of the gospel narrative with ancient traditions of the origin of the cornfield (their main subsistence staff of life), and some ancient epidemic of biting diptera. The fear of cannibalistic demons, equated with the role of the Jews as the enemies of our Lord in his last days on earth, is obviously an example of the problem of meaning in cross-cultural gospel communication. Juan reminds us that the meaning ascribed to the message by the receptor may be quite different from that ascribed by the advocate (Barnett 1953:339).¹⁰

Moreover, an anthropological principle is involved here. Behind this strange belief structure inherited by Juan from his Christian forebears lies a mythical orientation, a preference for the narrative or pictorial faith formulation. it should have provided no problem to the pastors of the first converts. The simple biblical narrative would have delighted these converts and would have served as a perfect functional substitute to their mythology. One can only assume that the Spanish teachers of the early converts failed to do this, with the result that the converts who cherished the narrative form, tried to weave together the old and the new, grasping at the points which were open for equation. This is a basic principle of innovation. People will accept readily

new ideas which reinforce or coalesce with existing ideas, and in many cases the meaning ascribed to the new is derived from the old in the same way that (in a completely different context) many Greek words in the New Testament have Hebrew, rather than Greek, meanings. Once again this facet of syncretism reminds us of the fundamental importance of the teaching program in the follow-up of conversion. The great commission, after all, said both: "Make disciples" and "teach them."

(3) *The Demand for a Therapeutic System*

Another area of cultural analysis which exposes any inherent syncretism is the whole field of belief regarding sickness and healing. When I find myself within an animist community for a few days, I usually try to ascertain their basic theories of sickness.

After the burial of his father, Juan was sick of *komel* (a sickness caused by fear) and called an *ilol* to diagnose it. He demanded candles, copal resin, *aguardiente*, a rooster and flowers, and returned the next day for a healing ritual. Juan explains the theory of sickness (greatly abbreviated) thus:

Each person has a *chulel* (a representative animal in the mountains) which shares his fortunes — health, sickness, fatness, hunger and so on. Some hostile chulels prey on those of ordinary people, so that the latter sicken. If a demon ties up a chulel, the person whose chulel it is sickens. The *ilol* had to sacrifice a rooster to untie the chulel and set him free. The flowers had to be picked before sunrise and put on a small altar, the rooster hung up by its feet, the candles lit, the resin put on hot coals in the incense-burner, and a prayer had to be offered to the demon concerned to appease his feelings against the victim. The *aguardiente* drink would be spilled on the ground and the following prayer offered:

Holy Earth, Holy Heaven; Lord God, God the Son., take charge of me and represent me; see my work, see my struggles, see my sufferings. I place the tribute in your hands. In return for my incense and my candles, spirit of the Moon, virgin mother of Heaven, virgin mother of Earth, in the name of your first Son, your first glory, see your child oppressed in his spirit, in his chulel.

During this prayer the *ilol* killed the rooster by twisting his neck and Juan records, "Suddenly I felt free!" He knew that, his chulel having been seriously mistreated, he himself was not yet well, but that he would recover now (pp. 88-91).

The therapy, belief structure and psychology are all thoroughly shamanistic. The only trace of Christian borrowing are the references to the Virgin and the Son, and this was probably a case of protective borrowing. The divinatory diagnosis, the sympathy of patient and forest creature, the shamanistic process of curing, the psychological moment of release, the libation of liquor — all these are animistic survivals from the pre-Christian society. In no way whatever has Christianity changed or "possessed" this therapeutic configuration or its philosophical base.

Whatever Christianity brought to Juan's people, it completely bypassed this aspect of life. It raises one of the basic questions of missionary failure. If religion is to fulfill the role that has been ascribed to it in a communal society as "integrator" (Radin 1937:15, Malinowski 1948:53), "governor" (Wallace 1966:4), the "universal feature" (Lowie 1952:xiv-xvi), the "sanctioner of the mores" or "the part of the mores which rules" (Sumner & Keller 1927), etc., it must both recognize and provide ways of dealing with the basic *felt needs* of the society. The animist has a confidence in the shaman and regards him as a benefactor and an essential person. When a new religion neglects its therapeutic ministry in a communal community, that society will inevitably retain its shamanic configuration. Either religion and healing will become compartmentalized and religion will lose its function as integrator of society, or the configuration of animistic diagnosis and healing with its philosophical underpinnings will be incorporated into the new religion. This is another way in which Christianity has often become syncretistic - by failing to

meet the basic felt needs of the society. These long-standing needs often arise from the environment or physical condition of the converts and continue after conversion, and Christianity is effective only as it meets the needs of its adherent. Neglect of these physical environmental and cultural needs forces the newly converted community to seek solutions elsewhere. When these solutions have pagan overtones, the Christianity becomes syncretistic.

(4) *The Notion of the Living Dead*

“Everything is the same as when I was little,” says Juan. “When I die and my spirit comes back here, it will find the same paths I walked when I was alive, and it will recognize my house” (p. 7).

Then there is the ritual of the *Day of the Dead*, when special bowls are taken from a chest for offerings of food to the souls of the dead, which Juan describes in the following way:

One of my brothers went to the village to ring the bell. . . to call] the souls. I went to the graveyard with my father, to clear the weeds from our family graves and to mark a little path in the direction of our house so the souls wouldn’t get lost when they went for their offerings. . . “My parents died here in this house,” my father said, “and my father’s parents also. The souls of your mother’s parents will go over to the other house, because they lived and died there.”

Here we are confronting the animistic concept of the living dead, which is the basis of ancestor worship. The conceptual structure is based on kinship and inheritance, and the dead are still recognized as part of the life of those who continue to live in the traditional place of abode and work the lands of the lineage. The dead still must eat the produce of the land and receive the services of the present occupants of their lands.

“In every house there is a table set with food for souls,” says Juan, and goes on to add that theirs “was spread with pine needles and wild orchids.” These are protective taboos against the mysterious power (cf. *nana*) associated with the things of the dead. The souls were offered tamales with beans and a gourd of cornmeal beverage. Juan’s mother prepared the meal and set it out on the table. They thought of the souls as those who left an inheritance and the mother called

Come and eat!

Come and taste the flavor of the food!

Come and enjoy the fragrance of what you eat!

They burned candles in all the houses that night. Juan is certain the souls do come and partake of the food left for them.

The conversation this night concerns the sun and moon and ties in to the ancient pre-Christian worldview and origin myths (pp. 48-51).

When Juan’s father died, the symbolism of the burial was based on the notion of his departure on a journey across a lake infested with frogs. He takes food with him — chicken, tortillas and salt. Every time he rests, the living dead share some of his food. He also has clothes and money to buy fruit on the journey, and when the ceremony is over the mourners wash in proper animistic fashion (pp. 87-88).

What does Christianity, the new religion, say with respect to death and the life after death? Was the Christian eschatology credible to Juan’s forebears when they became Christian? Are the dead still living and continually concerned with the cohesion and perpetuity of the tribe which they founded? How does Christianity preserve the entity of the lineage, the strength and stability of the family, the continuity and security of tribal lands - all part of what Sir Henry Maine called

the *concept of perpetuity*? In communal society it is the faith formulation of the living dead and the cycle of associated ritual practices which preserve this.

If Christianity does not provide *vital eschatology* (by “vital” I mean a living one, that is actually believed and is the base of actual religious performance), it runs the risk of perpetuating the animistic notion of the living dead — which leads, of course, to Christopaganism or co-existence with polytheism.¹¹

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I have pinpointed four anthropological notions *which* show how syncretism may impose itself on Christian missionary effort. They are not exhaustive nor confined to Latin America. On the surface Spanish Christianity defeated animism and imposed its western Christian structure on the defeated, leaving the animists no option of rejecting it. In the main the animists found Spanish Christianity incredible. This forced acceptance was not a meaningful one, and, therefore, they preserved their old values and faith formulation at the heart, The continued morning worship of the sun, the shamanistic ritual of healing and the theory of sickness on which it stood, and the ritual of the day of the dead all demonstrate that the conqueror was, in point of fact, the conquered.

Examination of case histories like that of Juan also shows how anthropological or ethnohistorical Investigations raise important questions for missionary strategy, and demand theological evaluation of missionary effort. So I feed these illustrations “into the hopper” in the expectation that we will want to discuss some of the points I raise.

To this point I have been taking a hard look at the negative aspect of our subject: namely, what must be avoided in cross-cultural missionary *activity*. But there is another side to which I must refer briefly.

THE ALTERNATIVE: INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANITY

It would be a tragedy to see cross-cultural church-planting as merely a negative thing. After all, the gospel is positive not negative, an experience to be entered into and shared. Somehow the supracultural core of truth, in both the written and the living Word of God has to be incarnated in the culturally-bound churches or fellowships. We seek an assurance of salvation, when worshippers may say as individuals that they *know* him whom they have believed and are persuaded of his ability to keep what they have committed unto him against that day, and as communities they share the experience. We need in each cultural unit a written word of God in the vernacular language, for public and private use (reading, hearing or memorizing). The gospel has to come through in indigenous rhythm and speak its message to the heart. For the man from the forest, the worship must have the capacity to vibrate with the beat of the drum. The arts and crafts of the group must be employed to absorb the energy, skills and dedication of the artists and craftsmen of the group, that their manual and mental’ competencies may be expressive of spirituality, and help the group to worship the Lord in what, to their eyes and ears, *may* be described as “the beauty of holiness,” even though discordant or grotesque to the westerner. We need a meaningful faith which holds together the daily life within the cultural structures, however strange may seem their modes of tilling the soil and plowing the deep. The universal human problems — finding one’s way in the darkness, comforting the bereaved, encouraging the discouraged, preserving the family, solving the personal disagreements — will all have their peculiar formations in any culture different from our own. No religion can be indigenous unless it comes to grips with these universal problems in their culture-bound forms. When the laughing

and crying, the feasting and mourning, the instructing and singing are truly culturally patterned, then we are looking at indigenous Christianity — here the gospel is at work in an experience of incarnation. And this is a far cry from syncretism.

Communication is a two-way process. God may be omniscient, but I am not. He may speak to me, but I must hear and understand. The limitations in the process are with me. He *is* supracultural but I am culture-bound. Therefore, there must be an incarnation. The space about me is alive with vibrations and impulses of which I am completely ignorant. I touch a button on my TV and in a few moments these vibrations are transformed into sounds and pictures. They are immediately meaningful because the sounds are in my own language and the pictures are of things I recognize. The problem of communication is one of meaning. That is why if the gospel is to be meaningful in any given culture, it must be expressed and experienced in the forms of that culture. Syncretism is frequently due to what Barnett calls “the subliminal striving for meaning” (1953:117),¹²

the meaning the convert ascribes to the new religion being an expansion only of his old frame of reference. The expansion may be one of two kinds. Either he will innovate with new (foreign) religious forms while retaining the old conceptual framework, or with the Christian gospel using meaningful cultural forms for expressing it. The former I have called syncretism, and the latter *I* am calling indigenous Christianity.

Now, lest you imagine that I have been unfair to Latin America in my exposure of its Christopaganism, let me give you an example of indigenous Christianity which I witnessed myself in the same part of the world. Juan lived in Mexico. This account comes from Guatemala, but the people in *it* are from another sub-group of the same great Maya tribe as Juan. I merely transcribe here a passage from my own field notes:

Somewhere about mid-day, after an hour of very dusty driving we arrived at the market town for the area, and after cleaning up we went down to the church. It was a long and commodious building with a narrow frontage on a cobblestone Street, which led onto the plaza, where a huge Catholic structure dominated the skyline. The street *was* alive with people with every kind of merchandise, with tables, carts and music, for the fiesta *was in* full swing. The evangelical church boasted an upper room and a back yard. The local women's group had prepared food in the yard and stood behind their pots and containers. Each visitor took a plate and passed along the line for a serving of tamales, tortillas and baked sweet bread. One concoction was said to be a culinary peculiarity to that locality alone — which made it a social talking-point. There was meat in the tamales and this *was* wrapped in banana leaves. All the members of *the* congregation were involved and we all ate together as a community.

After the meal we observed the Sunday school in session. I went to the adult men's class in the upper room, which was crammed to the door. I sat with the others on the floor and nobody seemed to notice I was a foreigner. The class *was* mostly illiterate, but the peasant teacher used the blackboard and demonstrated pictorially the story of Cornelius from Acts. The class participation was good, and sometimes the leader was asked to read a point from the Bible. The singing was hearty. The prayers were multi-individual — everyone talking to the Lord at once regardless of his neighbor.

Subsequently the groups went into church for the united worship service. The building was already full. I counted a sample of ten seats and figured there were about a thousand people present. Normally the congregation was about 300, but this was fiesta week and the country groups were in town. Special Christian services serve as a functional substitute for the old festival, the best values of which are preserved, the gathering at the market center, the joyful celebration, the fellowship that is wider than the town itself. The seating of the congregation reflected sex and age-grade groupings rather than regions. The presence of extended-families

was apparent. Annually they change their officiating elders during fiesta week, as was done in their old pre-Christian priesthood.

The opening of the service was dramatic — guitars, bass, small organ and rattles. The singing was lively and in the vernacular. They borrowed Western artifacts but used them in their own way. They amplified the music and preaching in the street outside so that it mingled with the jingles of the market as a witness. The ceiling was decorated with streamers of all colors and the walls with epiphytes, which must have required a lot of congregational preparation and participation. There was a table of vernacular literature at the door for any who could read.

The service was led by one of the elders, appointed by his colleagues for the day. He does not preach, but calls on one of the congregation. This reflected the local pattern of social organization. That day he happened to call on an old man, who not having the preaching skills of the young preachers, preferred to give his testimony. He had been the first convert in the locality, and narrated how the evangelical religion came to the district and how the church grew there. (After this there follows a description of how the pattern of leadership reflected the social structure.)

The meeting was now open for testimony and folk from the small rural groups shared their experiences. This made me aware of a widespread Christian movement in the area, and a people excited about what the Lord was doing in their midst. For the duration of the fiesta a different kind of church meeting was planned for each evening — praise and testimony one night, a baptismal service on another, appointment of officials and so on. Their turning away from the secular festival had left no cultural void here: their own program was a real functional substitute.

To me the most exciting episode of the worship service was the introduction of five men, who had determined to become evangelicals. They were already receiving Christian instruction, and would be baptized before the fiesta finished. I saw each of these men in turn hand over his personal fetish. To this week it had been a fearful and powerful thing. Now, before the congregation of people who had known him all his life, he “cast it from him” as a mere thing, a “not-god” as the prophet Isaiah might have said. One of these I noticed was an old Mesoamerican female figurine, an ancient fertility fetish — face, head and breasts —whose creator lived long before the Spanish had come.

The description goes on for four more pages, but I must leave it and make the point I wish to emphasize. Not at any point was there a foreigner in charge. Everything was done by the people in their own way. This differed from the ways I was myself familiar with, but I saw no one there who seemed to be bored or out of touch. The whole thing was obviously exciting and meaningful, intensely cultural and indigenous. It was as far removed from the faith formulations of Juan as it could possibly have been.

In my next chapter 1 shall probe more deeply into the dynamics of this kind of indigenous Christianity which I have set up as over against Christopaganism. Before you read that chapter you will have heard from each of my colleagues, who is quite free, of course, either to build on what I have suggested or to draw our discussions out into some other dimension he might wish to discuss.

Notes

1. This is one of the basic themes of the whole Bible. The People of God are to be the people of One God, who will not tolerate any polytheism or syncretism. In the revelation through Moses we have it in the first law of the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2-6) and again in the *last long* message of Moses to Israel, when he tells them to “go in and

possess the land,” he warns them to have no traffic with the idols or fertility cults of Canaan (Deut. 4:14-19; 5:6-9; 6:12-15; 13:29-30; etc.). For the prophets also, “I am the Lord thy God, there is none else, there is no God beside me” (Isa. 45:5, 22 &c.), and for failing to observe this warning there is judgment (1ev. 7:17-31).

In the New Testament church again the People of God are tempted, but as there is lobe only one God, so there is to he only one way of access to him (John 14:6, Acts 4:12). Yet in the Corinthian church, *for* example, the congregation has to be told they cannot take both the cup of the Lord and the cup of devils (I Cor. 10:21) (See Tippett 1973:25-33). This is not the only warning against syncretism Paul gave to that congregation (see also Visser’t Hooft, 1963:50-52).

2. The term *supracultural* in this sense comes from the linguistic ethnotheologians. The earlier form, supercultural (Smalley 1955:58-71), has been abandoned because of possible ambiguity. The recent writings of Charles H. Kraft (1973a:i18-1²O) have distinguished between the cultural and supracultural.

“God,” says Kraft, “is supracultural. He stands outside of culture, and is not bound by culture unless he chooses to he hound by it. Man, however, is immersed in culture and unable to escape his culture-boundness.”

3. Ulfilas (c311-388) worked as a pastor and leader among the Visi-Goths, and for 33 years as Bishop of the Trans-Danubian Goths. His great achievement was the translation of the Bible for which purpose he had to create a written form of the language. According to Mueller (1893:32) this was “the foundation of the Christian civilization of the Goths, the foundation stone of German literature.” Christianity had spread among the Goths through Christian prisoners captured from Cappadocia (Fisher 1945:92; Kidd 1922, 2:364-365). Ulfilas was familiar with Latin, Greek and Gothic, and served as a go-between. “He was completely one with the Goths,” says the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Cross 1957), “both in language and sympathy. “ Many historians have been so concerned with his Arianism that they have failed to appreciate Ulfilas’s methods and skill as a cross-cultural communicator. For further sources on Ulfilas see Ayer’s *Source Book for Ancient Church History* (1952). (See also Wand, 1954:181-152.)

4. Work in this area is proceeding under the name of *ethnolinguistics*. in which the missionary is involved in biblical translation and interpretation as Kraft points out, riot in two, hut three or four cultural frameworks. He says: The Bible records God’s revelation as it was perceived in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek language and culture. Our own perception of this revelation, however, is pervasively affected by our Euro-American culture. We translate and interpret the revelation into appropriate linguistic and cultural forms of still another culture (1973b:233).

He goes on to relate this to planting churches which are conceptually indigenous (p. 234).

5. Visser’t Hooft’s *No Other Name* (1963) has a whole chapter on the struggle of the New Testament church with syncretism. He deals with Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, Samaria, Lystra, Athens, Colossae and Pergamos.

6. I believe the etymological derivation of the word takes us back to political events in early Crete where two parties coalesced (*sunkretizo*) thus giving birth to a noun meaning the union of opposites (two Cretan parties united against a third, forming a new unit, *sunkretismos*); hence” syncretism” as defined above.

7. These phrases are cited from the typescript draft of a manuscript now awaiting publication, from a chapter entitled “Transformational Culture Change,” but Kraft has written elsewhere of conceptual transformation in language in missionary situations (1973b:237-247).

8. Latourette calls the period from 500 A.D. onwards “The Thousand Years of Uncertainty.” I doubt if he really explores the cultural dynamics of the period. True, lie allows for the “inward vitality” of expanding faiths, and he comes hack to the “hidden springs of conduct” of the conquering faith with a self-protective sentence or two that this may

carry us far beyond the domain to which the historian is supposed to be a restricted. At the most he can only recognize the possible existence of

realms into which the canons of his craft forbid him to venture (1966:14).

This fine historical study which ethnohistorians could have given further depth is incomplete. Men like Wallace and Barnett, who have pondered the dynamics of the innovative process and stress situations in historical reconstructions have improved our tools. My contention is that we should turn the information we have on the dynamics of contemporary religious movements and the diffusion of Christianity onto the documents of the middle ages, which so often have been interpreted in the light of the heresies or the politics of Graeco-Roman Christendom, I disagree that these “hidden springs of conduct” are “beyond the domain of the historian” and think that our missiological insights on modern people movements should be brought to bear on the experiences of Boniface and Patrick.

9. The linguist Edward Sapir who laid many of the foundations of ethnolinguistics demonstrated the cohesion of phonetic clusters. A single consonant —p, t or k — will resist change until the whole step-t-k changes as one thing. He shows how the English series

p t k b d g f th h

correspond point for point with the Sanskrit

b d g db hd gh p t k

The analogy serves to illustrate how cultural clusters survive in Christopaganism. The whole complex of faith and

practice is a discrete unit, and has to be confronted as such in Christian education, with a Christian doctrine of creation and a worship pattern which expresses it for the convert.

10. Barnett points out that when the advocate (novelty introducer - evangelist in our case) or an observer conceptualizes acceptance (conversion) in terms of his own thought processes instead of those of the acceptor (or rejecter), it can only lead to “confusion and artificiality” — the observer’s fallacy (1953:339). On my recent trip to New Guinea I found many cases of native converts who had accepted Christianity because they thought that thereby they would acquire the prosperity and power of the white man whose religion it was. Now they are passing through a stage of disillusionment, as also are the missionaries who had assumed they understood the gospel.

11. Some attempt has been made recently by the African theologian, John S. Mbiti, to relate traditional and Christian eschatology (1969:159-184), but theologians have not yet had much exchange on the subject, which certainly bears on the issue of syncretism and indigenous Christianity.

12. Barnett says that this subliminal striving for meaning is “a central need of the ego system,” and is drawn from an individual’s “unconscious struggle to understand his universe in terms of what he already knows.” As he configures it he ascribes meaning only on a basis of “the frames of reference available to him, namely, those provided by his past experiences” (1953:117-US). This is why the follow-up of conversion requires a careful period of Christian instruction. Without this the convert ascribes meanings predetermined by his pagan preconceptions of what religion is.

GM Editorial Note: Excerpt pages 13-34 from the out of print book, *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity*, Tetsunao Yamamori – editor was reprinted with permission. This book can be downloaded in its entirety in our Reviews & Previews section.