

Cultural practices— barriers or bridges

by Donna Strom

Traces of divine order in culture may be used as a bridge to communicate the gospel

India stands at the dawn of a gospel awakening. Countless youth volunteer for Christian service, and Bible schools open yearly. Some 100 indigenous mission agencies field more than 3000 cross-cultural workers. Gospel radio, literature and recordings reach people in remote villages. Thousands of small churches and Christ groups spring up in Orissa, Rajasthan, Manipur, Arunachal and other states.

In October, 1984, the secular magazine *Onlooker* featured a six-page picture article about the conversion of hundreds of Karbi tribespeople in Assam. A radical magazine *Dalit Voice* urged 100 million low-caste people to "Quit Hinduism!" Bruce Nicholls, a leader in the Church of North India and World Evangelical Fellowship, recently said at our seminary, "I predict an increase of Indian Christians from the present 30 million to 50 million by the year 2000 through mass movements among tribals, low castes and the poor, and biological growth."

Still, many problems face evangelizers of unreached peoples, who comprise more than 90 percent of India's population.

Will widely-varying cultures be barriers or bridges to the gospel? Will mass movements to Christianity spoil or destroy culture, as some allege? Or will a caste-ridden Hinduized church emerge?

The goal of cross-cultural evangelism is not merely preaching the gospel. Christ's mandate of Matthew 28:19-20 is to make disciples, baptize them into churches, and teach them to obey all things of Scripture. Development of a biblical ethos and lifestyle clearly involves culture.

World view determines culture

Anthropologist Luzbetak calls culture "a design for living, a plan by which a society adapts to its physical, social and ideational environment." Physical includes food, shelter, clothing, and technological skills. Social includes family and community organization, political systems and laws. Ideational refers to knowledge, art, science, philosophy and religion.

While ethnographies list religion as one category of culture, I would add two biblical considerations. First, culture, like the human body, is one complex integrated whole. You may dissect a body and analyze its parts; but stub your toe and your whole body reacts. Similarly, though some anthropologists view religion as superstition or magic, they agree that religion affects all of culture.

Why? At the heart of every culture is its world view—peoples' perception of themselves in relation to life and the universe. This world view dominates and determines all else. The Apostle Paul said of our creator: "He existed prior to all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:17)," and "In him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)."

Second, God created mankind and his environment and called it "very good (Gen. 1:31)." Though sin distorted all things and left man spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), the image of God was never completely erased (Rom. 2:14-15). "Every culture has elements of divine order and satanic rebellion; each has potential for the revelation of God's truth and for its concealment or mutilation (Hesselgrave 1978:79)." The extent of mutilation in any culture increases in direct proportion to that society's igno-



Donna Strom, a missionary in India for 30 years, teaches at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Dehra Dun. She received an M.A. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is the author of *Wind Through the Bamboo: The Story of Transformed Mizos*.

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rance of or disobedience to God's Word. Conversely, the extent of divine order in a society increases in proportion to its application of God's laws.

In communicating the gospel to any culture we must seek vestiges of divine order and use them as bridges to understanding. Solomon said, "God has set eternity in their heart (Eccl. 3:11)." All people long for something or someone beyond themselves. Rather than despair over mutilation of God's laws, let us commend and use good or neutral elements, and where there is distortion, teach God's way.

God communicates through culture

At creation, God commanded man and woman to manage their cultural surroundings (Gen. 1:26-28). After the flood, God repeated and enlarged this mandate, adding the social dimension of reverence for human life (Gen. 9:1-7). The gospel mandate also implies management of culture with righteousness and justice.

Genesis 4 records the development of culture into specialized areas: Jabel's attention to physical needs, Jubal's focus on music and arts, Tubal-Cain's development of tools and technology. Though alienated from God, these descendants of Cain retained ability as recipients of God's common grace to develop useful cultures. A person spiritually dead in sin is still a marvelous creation.

In the millenia following Babel, languages and cultures diverged into thousands of variations; yet commonalities still outweigh differences. God chose to communicate through ancient Hebrew culture and later Graeco-Roman language, not because of their superiority, but in order to reveal his plan of salvation and his power to transform culture.

The Scriptures abound with illustrations of God and men adapting the same message to the needs and understanding of varying cultures: to Jewish kings and Babylonian kings, to religious Nicodemus and a sinful Samaritan, to idolators in Greece and monotheists in Jerusalem.

The Apostle Paul gives the key to the use of culture in I Corinthians 9:19-23, where he becomes "all things to all men" in order to win them. His sermon at the Areopagus in Athens provides an outstanding example of this principle. Today we must stop thinking negatively about cultural barriers, and find or build bridges.

This implies neither syncretistic contextualization nor neo-orthodox accommodation to the historical moment. It means proclamation of the unchanging supracultural truth of the inspired inerrant Word of God into the context of a particular culture—with prayer that the Holy Spirit will renew individuals, transform their culture and bring it back into God's kingdom.

Channels of communication

In his book *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, David Hesselgrave identifies seven channels through which a message is given and received.

① The most obvious channel is language. Language learning involves thought processes, hidden meanings, nuances of tone and expression, figures of speech, idioms, humor, and literature. A Bangladeshi language teacher recently told our daughter, "To understand us, you must learn our poetry and folk tales." These reveal world view, the people's innermost feelings and significant values.

② We send messages through the perspective of our own world view, but the hearer perceives them through his. To reach another culture we must take off the tinted spectacles of our particular ethos and put on those of the hearer. We cannot expect non-Christians to put on ours.

When missionaries to animistic Mizos of northeast India first spoke of a savior from sin, it meant nothing. Mizos had no holy God; and "wrong" meant breaking taboos or offending spirits. But when missionaries told of the deliverer from the power of evil spirits, Mizos quickly responded. Teachings on sin and holiness followed. Understanding another culture need not imply approval or acceptance, but is essential for communication; or else we merely speak past people.

③ Thought patterns influence the way we send messages and arrive at conclusions. Western thinking is usually conceptual, logical and lineal. Eastern processes may be more mystical, subjective and circular. Animistic peoples are likely to think in terms of concrete relationships, rather than abstractions.

In communicating with tribal peoples, therefore, we must illustrate abstract terms with concrete stories, parables, figures of speech, analogies or proverbs, as in the Scriptures. Neglect of the Old Testament denies tribal symbolism meaningful to them: ritual, robes, art, archi-

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Finding cultural bridges does not imply syncretistic contextualization

ecture, dance, allegory. Christ also taught primarily through story, symbol, parable and illustration.

But in many churches today, the only symbolism is communion and baptism. Evangelicals shied away from symbolism when lack of teaching resulted in meaningless form. We could profit from Kathleen Nicholls' excellent book, *Asian Arts and Christian Hope*, on the use of biblical symbols to make abstract concepts concrete.

4) The ways we act may communicate far more than our spoken words. Body language can only be learned by observation, sensitivity and imitation. Facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, posture, clothing, use of color, greetings, distancing, touching, privacy, relation of sexes—even how one walks or holds the head are all important parts of a culture.

Rarely are we aware of our own body language, learned from birth and considered normal. In the multicultural seminary in Dehra Dun, India, more misunderstandings arise in these areas than in any other. One is offended by a laugh, another by a frown; one by a pointed finger, another by a squatting posture. It's a great laboratory for cross-cultural training!

Each culture also has norms regarding time of day for visits or meetings, their length, mode of seating, kinds of buildings and furnishings, spatial relationships, and formal or informal interaction.

Time magazine recently pictured a Japanese lady teaching wealthy New York merchants Japanese business manners. If they make such effort to increase trade, should we not do more for the gospel?

5) Social structures may also open or obstruct channels of communication. Most Asian societies emphasize groups—joint families, clans, villages, tribes, and castes—rather than individuals. Christians must study and respect these relationships. Who has status in the family or group? Greet and converse with that person first. Approach the village leader for permission and cooperation. Who are opinion-formers? Youth and women often influence decision-makers, who are usually older men. Who should be trained as leaders of a Christian group? Those respected by the community.

Mass movements to Christ occur among kinship groups or homogeneous units. Some Christians advise delay in baptizing a first convert, lest he be alienated from family and hindered in witness. Our first Meitei

Study and respect the social structures of the culture

stu , after years of persecution, won his mother and six siblings to Christ, then neighbors and nearby villagers. More converts studied the Bible, and today 2,000 Meitei Christians witness among their Hinduized tribe.

Social groups can aid church organization. In north-east India presbyteries organize according to tribes or languages, facilitating church growth. However, Christians in other areas of India object to class or caste divisions, and many are wrestling with this problem. Whatever the solutions, we cannot ignore social structures.

6) In any culture we must explore the most effective media for communicating religious truth. In the Lushai Hills early this century the Scriptures were first taught through song and story, then schools, literacy classes and conversation in bachelor quarters.

With a non-literate group we cannot use literature, Bible studies or correspondence courses. We must develop song, drama, choral speaking, memorization, puppets, slides, films, cassettes, records, dialogue, question-answer, mime, tableau or other media common to that culture. Radio and television soften ground and sow seed, but human leaders plant churches and apply the Scriptures to daily life.

7) Christian communicators also need to consider people's motivations, which vary with cultures and felt needs. How are people persuaded to make decisions? Are decisions individual or by family, village or clan? Is decision a point or process? Must motives always be spiritual? If so, how and by whom are they judged?

Some Christians object to mass or group conversion, assuming it rules out individual new birth. Not necessarily. Joshua said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord"; and the whole tribe of Israel responded, "We will serve the Lord (Joshua 24:15, 21)." Throughout the Scriptures mass movements occurred: Old Testament tribes and peoples, 3,000 at Pentecost, 2,000 later, Cornelius and his household, "large numbers," and "multitudes." In any case, women and children in many societies have no choice. Donald McGavran calls large movements "multi-individual mutually-interdependent decision."

Waskom Pickett in his research on conversion in India classified motives into four groups: spiritual, secular, social and natal. Following up converts, he concluded that the original motive was not as vital to the quality of

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Christian life as the teaching after conversion—a very important point.

Communicating to "folk" religionists

Popular, or "folk," Hinduism retains much primitive animism. Millions who follow *bhakti marga* (way of devotion) and *karma marga* (way of works) come closer to animism than to philosophical Hinduism. Add to these the 40 million tribal peoples, whose animistic beliefs include polytheism, totemism, fetishism, ancestor worship and variations.

To reach these more responsive "folk" religionists, cross-cultural workers seek to understand the animistic world view, which makes little distinction between sacred and secular. The supernatural comes close to men and nature, pervading every aspect of life. The present is oriented more to the past than to the future. The dead must be pacified with food and other comforts, lest their spirits cause harm.

Other powers inhabit animals, trees, rocks, rivers and caves, and must be manipulated by magic, taboos, charms and fetishes. Fear of unseen spirits who cause all trouble, sickness, natural calamity and death dominates animistic people. Therefore they may be more receptive to Christ, who delivers from oppression.

The Christian worker must first overcome his own fears through absolute faith in God's sovereign power and protection, knowing that "greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4)."

Second, the Christian must recognize the deep-seated fears of unbelievers and be sympathetic. Though there may be no valid reason for fear, remember that fear itself is very real. Third, the Christian must demonstrate his faith in God's power to deliver from satanic fears. We dare not confront Satan in our own strength, but like Michael, the archangel, we say, "The Lord rebuke you (Jude 9)." Christ and the Holy Spirit are interceding for us (Rom. 8:26, 34), and God rules the universe (Ps. 66:7).

All people want healing. Though Christians can neither prevent nor heal all sickness and trouble, they can show peace and trust in a loving God, who does all things well. Countless times through prayer and medicine our all-powerful God heals. Even release from fear aids healing. But we must point out the greater need of

spiritual healing. Sickness and trouble will strike again, and death will surely come. We must be ready to meet God.

Presenting the gospel to animistic peoples

In presenting the gospel to animistic peoples, we must define terms, select understandable truths, and adapt the message to world view. We must define in particular, the one God who created the world and is Lord over it. He is omnipresent, yet separate from us. Sin is not offending spirits or breaking taboos, but alienation from a holy God. Evil emanates from Satan and can be overcome only by faith in Christ's defeat over him. God does not demand rituals and sacrifices to spirits, but commands us to love and serve God and men.

In initial explanation, select familiar concepts. The true God delivers from the power of evil spirits. Christ made one sacrifice for all time; there is no need for countless appeasements. God is loving and good, not like malevolent gods ever trying to cause harm. All are one in Christ—there are no castes. He touched lepers, ate with sinners, and called laborers to himself.

True, we must "teach all things," but not all at once. Christ taught his disciples for three years, though they already knew of Jehovah, sin, sacrifice, and other biblical concepts unknown in many cultures today. Start where the unbeliever is, and teach precept upon precept (Isa. 28:10).

Then adapt the message to the specific culture. All societies retain some vestige of their original knowledge of God, though perverted by centuries of unbelief. Most religions acknowledge the existence of a supreme being, but have no contact with him.

In 1867, Lars Skrefsrud, a Norwegian missionary, found that the Santal tribe of Bihar and Bengal had a name meaning "genuine god" (*Thakur Jiu*), their original creator and sovereign. According to tradition, their miseries began when they turned away from him to lesser gods. Skrefsrud used this name, *Thakur Jiu*, for the one calling Santals to return through Christ. Thousands were converted, and today Santals comprise witnessing groups in northern Bangladesh.

One of our students found in his Meitei religion similarities to biblical creation, the flood, Jacob and Esau, and the end of the world—all "bridges" for witness. In

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Irian Jaya, warring cannibal tribes made peace by exchanging babies—by which missionaries illustrated God's giving his son. Biblical analogies may be found in every culture.

Proclamation of the gospel is incomplete without persuasion to accept it. The Apostle Peter told crowds in Jerusalem to "repent, be baptized and return to God," and Paul said, "Knowing the fear of God, we persuade men (II Cor. 5:11)." Paul persuaded publicly and privately through speech and letter. Preaching and teaching must define expected response. This may not be appropriated in the first message, but is essential at some point. Until people turn from idols and fetishes to Christ, they are still unsaved. While recognizing the sovereign work of God's Holy Spirit in conversion, we persuade men and women, boys and girls to repent and turn to him.

Let each Christian participate in God's grand design to bring the glory and splendor of every culture into his kingdom.

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