

# **Engaging Cultures**

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The resurgence of witchcraft in the African churches, of spiritism in Latin American churches, of casteism in Indian churches, of materialism in North American churches--how do we explain these after decades, even centuries, of evangelism and church services?

Culture is not simply the sum of the various beliefs and practices of a group of people, which can be replaced piece by piece. These culture traits are parts of larger belief systems, which, in turn, are embedded in coherent, largely implicit worldviews. It is these systems and worldviews that determine the meaning of new beliefs for the people. Consequently, when people turn to Christ, either the Gospel will be reinterpreted in terms of their cultural systems, or it will challenge and transform these systems.

An example of this is the experience of Simon (Acts 8:9-24) the magician. Seeing the miracles of Philip, he believed and as was baptized (v. 13). Having been a leader, it was natural for him to want to join in the ministry of the church (v. 19), even though he had not yet been disciplined by the church leaders. When he wanted to buy what he thought was more powerful magic, Peter rebuked him severely for interpreting what he had seen in the categories of his old magical worldview. The Gospel indeed brought power, but the nature and use of that power was radically different from that found in the surrounding culture. Simon repented, but he had learned a hard lesson--the Gospel cannot be reinterpreted in other worldviews. It brings with it its own worldview that supersedes all others.

Jacob Loewen reports a similar experience among new tribal converts in Panama. When he asked the men what they liked most about becoming Christians, one said that Christianity gave them new power words to harm their enemies. All they had to do was go to prayer meeting

and sit directly in front of the person they wanted to curse so that when they turned to kneel that person would be directly in front of them. Then, the man said, they would say these new power words--*re-demp-tion, sal-va-tion, just-i-fi-ca-tion*--and the person would get sick or suffer misfortune.

Clearly God saves those who turn to him with their imperfect understandings of the Gospel. But when converts retain these old beliefs throughout their lives, they falsify the Gospel, and make it captive to their culture. Conversion must be the beginning of a life-long process of spiritual growth, and that demands that Christians continually engage their entire culture through a process of critical contextualization. This requires an evaluation of their old beliefs and practices, but it must go beyond this. It requires an evaluation of the old systems of belief and worldviews in which the surface cultural practices are embedded. Too often we are content to challenge a belief here and a practice there, and to replace them with Christian ways, and fail to deal with the larger integrating belief systems of the old culture that reshape their meaning. Consequently, over time, Biblical concepts and teachings are distorted, though their verbal and ritual forms remain the same. When the Gospel is put into the categories and thought forms of human cultures, we end up with syncretism and a spurious Gospel. When people test their cultures in the light of the categories and worldview of the Scriptures, we have growth and cultural transformation.

Engaging our the whole of our culture is not only the task of new Christian in nonChristian contexts. The danger of becoming captive to culture as great or greater among us who live in the west where Christianity is the dominant religion. We are in danger of reinterpreting the Gospel in our own cultural categories--of equating it with western civilization, material prosperity, and individualism. We forget that the distinction made in Scripture is

between the 'world' (*archaeon*) and the Kingdom of God; between living in the 'flesh' (*psarks*) and living in the Spirit. But to live in the Kingdom and in the Spirit calls for us to engage our entire cultures in the light of the Scriptures.