

A CHRISTIAN MINISTRY TO THE TRADITIONAL RELIGIONISTS
OF ASIA AND OCEANIA

INTRODUCTION

In a time of rapid urbanization, the revitalization of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, and the spread of secular materialism, it is easy to overlook the fact that there remain many millions of people in the religious margins of the great cultures in Asia and Oceania. These include tribes scattered across mountains, forests, islands and waste lands; marginal peoples such as untouchables, gypsies and migrant bands who live in symbiotic relationships with peasant and urban societies; and common folk who are nominal members of one or another of the world's great religions, but whose deep religious commitments are to the worship of local gods and goddesses, respect for spirits and ancestors, and use of magic, astrology and witchcraft.

There is a great diversity in the specific religious beliefs of these (for want of a better term) "traditional religionists." Yet they share certain characteristics that permit us to treat them together in planning the evangelization of Asia and Oceania. First, they focus on transempirical beings and forces of this world, and on the involvement of these in the crises of human life in an uncertain world. Consequently they usually seek demonstrations of power more than cognitive truth. Second, most of them are localized. Rarely do they claim universal validity. Third, most are nonliterate in character. Their beliefs are encoded in rituals, stories, dramas, proverbs, songs and dances, rather than in scriptures and the written word. Religion often centers more in the act than in the thought. Finally, they tend to have fairly simple religious institutions. There are generally no great temples and pilgrim centers, and no priestly elite trained in schools and committed to systems of orthodox belief.

These similarities should not blind us to some fundamental differences between the three types of peoples we have defined as traditional religionists. For example, religion among tribal peoples tends to be woven into the whole of their culture. Marginal peoples and commoners, on the other hand, are frequently nominal members of some great religion and their animistic beliefs serve narrower functions in their lives.

It must be noted here that although broad generalizations can be made about traditional religionists in Asia and Oceania, the region is so broad, and the peoples so diverse that exceptions can be pointed out to most of them.

How, then, are we to reach traditional religionists for Christ? In part a strategy must take into account the people, the messengers, the message and the means of communication.

I. THE PEOPLE

"Seeing the people, he was moved with compassion..." (Matt. 9:36). Ministry to traditional religionists calls us, like Christ, to see and to love them as people - as human beings created in the image of God, marred by sin but still loved by God who gave His Son to die for their salvation. We are sent to identify ourselves with them in an incarnational ministry, and to accept as full members of the body of Christ those who are saved. Our goal is to lead people to Christ, and to plant living churches that are a testimony to His love and salvation.

personal decisions are frequently made in terms of these groups. Sin in this context is seen as the lack of respect for the concerns of the larger family, the clan, the village or the tribe. It produces more a sense of shame than of guilt. Sin is also seen as the violation of one's relationship to the world. The punishment can be disease, drought and floods. By observing the taboos that regulate human relationships with nature, and by performing prescribed rituals, people can maintain harmony in the world, keep at bay the evil forces of the spirit world, and avoid the anger of the ancestors. The custom of visiting ancestor's graves, for example has occupied a central place in Japanese religious thought. Opinion is divided about whether or not this constitutes ancestor worship, or is simply a way of paying respect to one's ancestors. Western missionaries and most evangelical Christians reject the practice, but have not provided an alternative way of filling this void. The whole concept of one's relationship to ancestors needs to be thought through in order to reach traditional Japanese.

A further characteristic involves the way in which people communicate with each other and with the spirit world. To understand this we need to know the lines of communication (who talks to whom) and the media through which ideas and information are expressed such as oral history, riddles, proverbs, legends, orations, rituals and festivals. For the message of the Gospel to be communicated most effectively it must be expressed through channels appropriate to the culture.

By seeking to understand the world as the traditional religionist sees it, the missionary (any cross-cultural message bearer) may be able to find cultural bridges and indigenous imagery and symbols for communicating the Gospel in terms the people understand. For instance, the Nissi of Northeast India used the blood of a human sacrifice applied to a bamboo cross to seal the peace between warring tribes. The peace thus secured is meant to last forever. This analogy had been used with great effect to present the Gospel truth to the Nissi resulting in a breakthrough with this hitherto resistant people. By careful searching in other societies similar indigenous analogies may be found to help explain the Christian faith.

A final characteristic is holism. All things are related to each other within a single integrated system. Customs and cultural practices do not occur in isolation, divorced from one another. Consequently missionaries should avoid unilaterally abolishing customs that may be offensive to them. We believe that indigenous converts are the ones who should change parts of their culture as they are led to do so by the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the light of Biblical teaching.

b. Theological implications: The world views of traditional religionists have several important theological implications for the missionary to consider. First, since the people perceive themselves as part of the natural world instead of divorced and alienated from it, a theology of creation is frequently meaningful to them as a starting point for presenting the Gospel. God should be presented as the creator, and humans as his special creation.

Second, a theology of history should be taught in which God is shown communicating and working with a people in real time and space. Many traditional religionists live in a world with many cultural similarities to that of the ancient Hebrews, and for this reason the Old Testament stories are especially meaningful to them.

Third, since traditional religionists live in a world dominated by powerful spiritual forces and beings it is important that the Gospel be communicated as a

probably every inhabited island. Despite this great change on the surface, there are many Pacific Islanders who continue to hold to traditional beliefs and practices that find expression especially during times of personal crises.

Therefore an understanding of traditional beliefs and practices is intended not only to help in communicating to isolated peoples, but also to help in dealing with the deeper level of world view for those whose cultures have changed dramatically.

3. Receptivity. Another important factor influencing the communication of the Gospel to traditional religionists is their receptivity to change -- specifically change in religious allegiances. Clearly not all groups practising traditional religions are receptive to Christianity and we must avoid generalizations. Nevertheless a far higher percentage of such peoples have responded and are responding to the Gospel than adherents of the world religions. For instance, even though the Karen are a tiny minority in Thailand, there are more Christians among the Karen in that country than among ethnic Thai.

For those groups which are receptive to change, the following characteristics are usually present.

a. Cultural dislocation. Under conditions of cultural contact that have induced severe socio-cultural change in a group, it is not uncommon for members of the society to lose confidence in their culture. Their traditional religious systems of explanation begin to fail them, and cannot help them deal with such things as new diseases, rapid social changes, urbanization and exploitation by powerful oppressors. As the people begin to question their traditional assumptions and allegiances, they often become open to the message of the Gospel as a more meaningful system of belief. An example of this is the Kampuchean refugees living in Thai camps, who are becoming Christians in great numbers.

Urban life is for many particularly harrowing. Used to the security afforded by close-knit village or tribal societies, they are unable to cope with the dissonant realities of urban life in terms of inherited world views. The Christian Gospel offers them the support of a loving community, access to God in prayer, divine protection and guidance, an accepted pattern of belief and behavior, and resources for coping with unfamiliar and stressful situations of crises.

b. Personal advantage. Receptivity may be due to the people's belief that they may advance materially or socially by becoming Christians. This is true particularly in situations where the missionary is a member of a society that offers educational and material advancement.

c. Marginality. Marginal groups and individuals are often more receptive to Christianity. This is especially true if they see the adoption of Christianity as a means for preserving their identity, or improving their status in society, as, for example, the Harijans of India.

B. Conversion.

Conversion among traditional religionists is influenced by several socio-cultural forces.

1. People movements. Traditional religionists often turn to Christ as a group, rather than as isolated individuals. They come together with their tribe, village, clan or family. The more isolated and internally cohesive the more likely they will respond to the Gospel as a collective body. People movements should be

C. Establishment of the church

The New Testament portrays the church as a worshipping, witnessing and serving community. This model is dynamic and flexible, thus giving room for the church in every age and place to express its life in the cultural forms of particular peoples. Every society has systems by which the control, direction and purpose of community life are maintained. Church planting among traditional religionists therefore needs to be patterned after such organizational and leadership forms, cultural patterns of worship and communication that closely reflect the culture of the people. The young church and missionaries should work together in organizational structures that are based on clear biblical principles.

1. Priesthood of all believers. As soon as there are believers, they should be incorporated into the body of Christ, and organized into local congregations.

Since the New Testament identifies the church as a living organism, care should be taken to teach all Christians to use their gifts within the body of Christ. The use of indigenous media such as drama, stories, songs and poetry, should be encouraged. The Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture suggests that the emerging church among a newly evangelized people should be dynamic equivalent to the New Testament church, but its forms of worship should be developed by the church in harmony with its culture.

The believers should be taught biblical principles on responsible stewardship so that they need not be dependent on outside support. However, biblical principles of mutual dependence and accountability should not be overlooked.

2. Leadership in the church. From the start, leadership from among the people should be encouraged and developed. Much prayer should be focused on the need for people singled out by God who are aware of God's call on their lives, and thus convinced of the authority they have in their calling and in their message. Only people with this kind of motivation are prepared to challenge the authority of the local mediums, and are able to captivate the hearts of the group, and demonstrate authentic leadership. They should be encouraged to maintain personal face-to-face relationships with their people.

Without the call of God and a genuine confidence in their message, leaders will soon find themselves becoming mere functionaries of a new system of religion. They will resort to manipulative methods to increase their flocks, structure the church, and maintain membership.

Local leaders should be trained for the purpose of maintaining theological integrity and the effective functioning of the church. This training can be carried out at three different levels and can be provided in church, schools and extension centers.

a. Basic biblical training. As soon as people are brought to faith, care must be taken to nurture them. They should be given instruction in such areas as assurance of salvation, the Lordship of Jesus, the importance of prayer and the Word of God, worshipping in a group, the nature of the church and their responsibilities as Christians. The natural leaders should be trained from the beginning to serve as leaders among the believers. Either a national leader who has had advanced Bible training or the missionary will need to give pastoral guidance to the initial group of lay leaders, giving them additional teachings as required.

Message bearers ministering within their own cultures have to be aware of the tendency to withdraw from the non-Christian members of their communities. This tendency is present also when they minister to other cultures. Such withdrawal is a serious handicap in the fulfillment of their mission.

Acceptance of the realities of the prevailing culture and their importance to the lives of the people is essential. For example, harmony is the essential element in Japanese society and leaders are expected to promote this within the group. Christian ministers are defenders of the truth and permit no compromise, but people of an uncompromising spirit are condemned as selfish. If truth disturbs the harmony of the group, traditional Japanese are likely to compromise the truth.

The message bearer must be a learner seeking a comprehensive understanding of value systems, behavioral patterns and motivational forces of the people to whom he is sent. Premature judgements and derogatory attitudes are extremely harmful yet are easily formed. He must recognize that traditional religionists (among others) have an awareness of and an interaction with the spirit world that is a vital part of their existence. He must reformulate his own perceptions concerning the spirit world.

The message bearer operating in a cross-cultural situation should recognize that essentially he remains an "outsider" even though he may achieve a high degree of understanding and rapport with the people to whom he is sent.

Therefore he should seek appropriate identification with them to win their ungrudging acceptance of his presence in their midst. The following are two important criteria for identification. Proficiency in the heart language of the people is crucial for an understanding of and involvement in their real concerns. Acceptance into the community largely depends on knowledge of socially approved behavior patterns and their consistent practice. This requires the acquiring of correct etiquette and social skills, thus avoiding giving unwitting offense in sensitive areas. For example, among traditional Japanese, real human relationships are more important than the abstract truth. Japanese have developed wisdom to keep harmony with others by politeness and systems of etiquette. Paying proper respect to elders and authority figures is essential in Japanese culture and throughout much of Asia and Oceania.

Appreciation of local skills, art forms, products, etc. must be demonstrated by their utilization.

B. Recommendations.

We strongly recommend that in the discipling process of the sending church and the theological and missionary training institutions the following be implemented:

1. The message-bearer should be helped to see himself in the context of his own culture and history. This broader understanding of his own values and biases enables him to accept more readily the values and biases of others. He also will be better equipped by this to understand their perceptions of him.

2. Skills in dialogue should be taught. These skills will prove invaluable in his endeavors to gain insight into their culture. The growth of meaningful relationships will follow the understanding and mutual appreciation produced by the meeting of minds and hearts. His ability to communicate the truths of the Gospel will be enhanced. Meaningful interchange will provide reliable checks on

Though important, conversion and personal spiritual growth do not constitute the whole of the mission task. The Church, as the People of God, is called to be God's continuing witness in the earth. Its leadership must be equipped to instruct the church in sound biblical understanding so that it will fulfill its mission from generation to generation.

B. A Holistic Gospel.

Traditional religionists rarely divide their world into sacred and secular domains. Rather, their religion underlies and pervades all of life. Consequently, the Gospel must be shown to be relevant to all levels of human problems both by teaching and by a living demonstration (see table 1). At the highest level, the message of salvation, reconciliation with God, and human destiny should be made plain. At the middle level, a theology of healing, guidance, protection and divine power is needed to deal with fears of spirits and forces, and with the uncertainties of human life. Finally, the relevance of the Gospel for everyday human experience must be shown.

A theology of social relationships - of family, clan, community and tribe; of ancestors; and of the unity of all humankind - should be developed, as well as a theology of history and of nature. Programs of medicine, education, relief, and development have sometimes failed to contribute significantly to the building of the Church because of the secular form in which they were introduced. Missions to traditional religionists must avoid a false dichotomy that separates the sacred from the secular. A holistic Gospel that speaks to people in all their needs must be proclaimed.

Where traditional religionists are nominal members of some universalistic religion, particular attention should be given not only to conversion from the high religion on the level of ultimate concerns, but also to dealing with human needs in a world of spirits and forces. Neglect of this domain often leaves a church with a veneer of Christianity over a substratum of traditional beliefs. Special care should be given not only to evangelizing new peoples, but also to bringing to completion the conversion of all areas of their lives.

C. Individualistic and Corporate Theologies.

Many traditional religionists belong to societies in which there is a high degree of corporate identity. In such societies, a theology that speaks only to persons as individuals is often not understood. A theology is needed that deals with the corporate nature of humankind. For example, sin is often seen as a violation against the group, leading to a sense of shame, rather than as a violation of self or a moral law resulting in a sense of guilt. The scriptures provide us with many analogies and examples of how God deals with people corporately. In many ways traditionalists understand the significance of koinonia better than do Western individualists. This understanding should be used to strengthen the church.

trade or national languages have been introduced as the medium of communication between tribal groups. While this may be useful in some situations, it is doubtful whether a second language is adequate for local evangelistic proclamation. Whenever possible the local vernacular and heart language of the people should be used.

4. Translation of Scripture. Scripture translation should be done from the beginning. This will need the assistance of specialists. In the early stages of Bible translation, consideration should be given to preparing selected portions from both the Old and New Testaments. Those portions selected should assist the new converted community in developing the framework of a new Christian world view and lifestyle.

5. Preparing people for decision. The process that leads to conversion should be carefully guided. People must have an adequate understanding of Gospel truth before making a decision. Frequent questioning of people is needed. The use of a model, such as the "Engel Scale" will be helpful in measuring changes of attitude and readiness for decision.

B. Contextualization.

To be fully understood and to be persuasive, the Gospel must be expressed within the cultural and historical contexts of the people. Every culture has been abundantly blessed with "forms" and "meanings" for communication. We affirm the "dynamic equivalence model" as one which can be useful in holding in tension the unchanging aspects of the church's message and mission, and its sometimes changing forms.

We recognize the danger of syncretism in the use of forms that may be associated with non-Christian religious meanings. Nevertheless, we believe the church must take that risk. We affirm that the Holy Spirit is present in His church and that He can provide the proper corrective when the church is in danger of falling into syncretistic practices.

One area of contextualization to which the church in each culture should give serious thought is that of preaching and witness. When appropriate, the church should make use of the people's own history and myths, their well known leaders of the past and present, their present social situations, and other matters relevant to their lives in order to illustrate and interpret the Gospel to them, and to call for discipleship within their cultural context.

Church music and hymnology, dance and drama should be produced in forms indigenous to the culture. Often words can be provided for well known tunes and used within the church. Similarly, when appropriate, dance and drama can be used to convey the message of the Gospel.

Church art, symbols and architecture should be indigenized to reduce the foreignness of Christianity. For example, three tiered roofs have been used in Bali to symbolize the trinity. Symbols such as grain and fruit may be used in agricultural societies, and fish and nets in seafaring societies.

Particular care should be given to developing indigenous rituals. Traditional rituals should neither be rejected nor accepted uncritically. Rather, after careful analysis of the biblical meanings of such events as births, marriages and deaths, the traditional rites and symbols should be critically