

Reaching Traditional Religions in Asia: Understandings and Misunderstandings

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Who and where are the traditional religionists in Asia, and how can the church bring them a living witness to the power of God in Jesus Christ? To give specific answers to these questions, we would need to study the particular cultural beliefs and practices of each of the many hundreds of such peoples throughout Asia, and to access the methods by which we can communicate the Gospel to them most effectively. This, in part is what the COWE study groups on this topic are attempting to do.

But to make sense of the bigger picture we need a larger frame that can help us to understand the basic characteristics that set traditional tribal religions apart from high, universalistic religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. We need also to look at the ways in which these characteristics affect the planting and growth of the church, and at how the ignorance of them has often led to misunderstandings or blindspots on the part of the missionaries to these peoples.

A REDEFINITION OF THE TERM "RELIGION"

Traditionally western scholars have defined "religion" as beliefs and rituals associated with the "supernatural." By contrast "science" sought to explain the natural or empirically observed universe.

This definition has come under fire as an inadequate definition for much of what we generally think of as religion, and as reflecting in itself the basic presuppositions of the western world view. With regard to the first of these charges, one might note, for example, that in some forms of Hinduism and Buddhism as well as possibly some tribal religions there is no supernatural realm; no gods, spirits, or magic; no heaven, hell or life after this life. In other words they are as materialistic as Marxism. On the other hand it is clear that for many of the west science and Marxism are indeed their "religions".

The second charge is more serious, and more difficult to correct. Clearly any language carries within it the implicit assumptions of its world view, and this makes it more difficult for the people of one culture and language to understand those of another culture and language. In the Medieval European world view, ghosts, goblins, magic and alchemy were very much a part of everyday life. It is only after the incorporation of Greek thought into theology, beginning with Thomas Aquinas,

that the sharp division of the cosmos into two distinct realms took place. To the natural realm were relegated humans, animals, plants and the material world. To the supernatural realm, though increasingly to be somewhere "beyond" and transcendent, was assigned God, angels and demons (see figure 1).¹ Today many, if not most missionaries² influenced by western thought make this basic distinction, and think of religion as that having to do with the supernatural. But, as we shall see, this approach to the subject is ethnocentric at a fundamental level. It assumes that all people make this same distinction. But this assumption precludes a real understanding of traditional religions. In which, for the most part, there is no separation of animals, humans, ancestors, spirits and gods into separate realms. It also blinds the missionary to many of the religious needs and answers of the people, and to what happens when they become Christians. Although we can never fully free ourselves from the biases of our languages, we can seek to make explicit just what those biases are, and to redefine our key concepts from a more cross-cultural perspective.

In recent years anthropologists have begun to redefine the key concepts that define what are thought to be the major cultural subsystems. These include the economic, social, political, legal, religious and aesthetic areas of life.

Economics is no longer defined in terms of specific institutions such as market-places and banks, but in terms of a function. It is the "use of resources." By this definition it is clear that all human institutions and activities have an economic dimension to them. The family must acquire and use resources in order to survive. These resources include not only food, houses and cash, but also the time, strength and wisdom of its members. The same is true of a church or government. Most if not all human relationships and institutions have economic dimensions to them. To be sure, different cultures have different definitions as to what are to be considered "resources" and how they can be exchanged, but all have economic functions. We think of a market-place or bank as economic institutions because their primary focus is the handling and trade of resources.

Similarly, "social" is defined as the nature and use of relationships, "political" as the nature and use of power, and "legal" as the nature and use of authority or legitimacy. But if we redefine religion along these lines, we see that it has to do with the nature and use of "explanation systems". Religion gives meaning and direction to life by explaining to people what the world and life are all about.

But religion is not the only explanation system a people has. They have systems of beliefs and practices that tell them how to build houses, to cure diseases and to plan for the future. What we need then is a framework or taxonomy that helps us to understand the unique characteristics of religious explanation systems, and the relationship of religion to other systems of explanation.

A TYPOLOGY OF EXPLANATION SYSTEMS

Any typology uses certain characteristics to lump some things together, and to differentiate them from other things that are grouped together into other categories. Here we will use two sets of characteristics to create two dimensions for the analysis of explanation systems. Each of these dimensions is not seen as sets of opposing or mutually exclusive categories, but as a continuum that ranges from one polar (ideal) type to the other. Combined the two dimensions provide us with a beginning typology of explanation systems.

The Organic - Mechanical Continuum. Scholars have widely noted that humans often use analogies from everyday experience to provide them with pictures of the nature and operations of the larger world. Two basic analogies are particularly widespread: 1) to see things as living beings in relationship to each other, and 2) to see things as parts of a great machine.

In the first or "organic" model the parts are thought to be alive in some sense of the term, to undergo processes similar to human life, and to relate to each other in ways that are analogous to interpersonal relationships. For example, in seeking to describe human civilizations, Spengler and Toynbee speak of them as living things. Civilizations are born, they mature, and they die. Similarly, traditional religionists see many diseases as caused by evil spirits that are alive, that may be angered, and that can be placated through supplication or the offering of a gift or sacrifice. Christians see their relationship to God in organic terms. God is a person, and humans relate to Him in ways analogous to human relationships.

Organic explanations see things in terms of life and relationships. They picture what is being described as living beings with feelings, thoughts and wills of their own. Like humans they initiate action and respond to the actions of others. They can also get sick when the life processes are out of balance, or invaded from without. And they are social beings. They love, marry, begot offspring, quarrel, war, sleep, eat, persuade and coerce one another.

In the second or "mechanical" model the parts are thought to be inanimate parts of a greater mechanistic system. They are controlled by impersonal forces that act upon them and by the insensate laws of nature. For example, western sciences see the world as made up of lifeless matter that interacts on the basis of forces. Gravity pulls a rock down to the earth not because the earth and rock wish to get together. Neither earth nor rock have any thought in the matter. Even living beings are often seen as caught up in a world ultimately made up of impersonal forces. Just as a man has no choice about what will happen to him when he falls out of a tree, so he is often thought to have no control over the forces in early childhood that make him today what he is.

Mechanical models are essentially deterministic. Living beings within a mechanistic system are subject to its impersonal forces. On the other hand, if they know how these forces operate, they can manipulate or control the forces for their own advantage.

As we shall see, one of the greatest cultural gaps between western peoples and traditional religionists is to be found along this dimension. The former have bought deeply into a mechanical model of this universe. To them the basis of the world (and often even of life itself) is lifeless matter controlled by impersonal forces. On the other hand, traditional religionists for the most part, see the world as alive. Not only humans, but also animals, plants and even rocks, sand and water are thought to have personalities, wills and life-forces. It is a relational, not a deterministic world.

The Immanent-Transcendent Continuum. The second dimension we will use to construct a typology of explanation systems is that of immediacy of experience. Some experiences come directly through our senses. We can "see" and "feel" certain things. These we will call the empirical world.

All people are aware of the empirical world, and develop systems of explanation to describe and relate to it. On the one hand they develop ideas about the material world around them - and about how to build a house, plant a crop or sail a canoe. On the other hand, they have theories about people, animals, plants and other forms of visible life (such as rocks if these are thought to have life) and about the relationships that should and do exist between these various beings. These explanation systems that account for the empirical world in empirical terms we will call "science." Those sciences that use a mechanistic analogy we will refer to as "natural sciences" and those that use an organic analogy we will call "social sciences."

According to these definitions, all people have some form of science. When a Naga tribesman shoots a deer he sees this as a natural event. The deer is killed by his arrow. Similarly a Karen wife explains the cooking of a meal in terms of the fire she has built under the pot. Both of these explanations are based upon empirical observations and deductions. Western science is, in this sense, not unique. It may be more systematic in the exploration of the empirical world, but all peoples have sciences that they use to explain many of the ordinary immediate experiences of their lives.

Most cultures have explanation systems that include transempirical beings and forces such as spirits, ghosts, mana, and fate. These cannot be seen or felt directly, but they are often thought to be the causes behind empirical events.

Transempirical explanation systems can be divided into two types. Some refer to other worlds - to heavens, underworlds and hells; and to beings or forces in these worlds. For example, the Christian talks of heaven as a place distinct from this world and not subject to its natural laws. Similarly, many traditional religionists have a concept of a high god, residing in some distant, other world, and of an underworld below the ground. Some have many such worlds.

If we distribute the transempirical-otherworldly explanation systems along the organic-mechanistic dimension we have already defined, we move from what we in the west refer to as "religion" to "fate" (see

figure 2). By religion in the ordinary sense of the word we mean other-worldly spiritual beings - God, angels, demons and Satan. To be sure these may affect human and earthly affairs, but their primary abode is in another world. Human interactions with these beings are perceived to be relational in character. People speak to God and give him offerings. Angels are guardians of human individuals. On the mechanical end of the scale, we find explanation systems that appeal to impersonal laws that transcend the forces of this universe. Such, for example, is the Hindu concept of karma, the law that good will be rewarded and evil punished. This holds true not only for humans but also for the gods. In other words, it is the ultimate reality within which the heavens and earth operate. Similar concepts are fate (in the ultimate sense), and kismet. To some Christians, God is righteous because he obeys the laws of righteousness. In other words, these laws are greater than God himself, and he must act in accordance with them.

Many westerners have a two-tier world: this world which can be described by the senses and explained in empirical terms, and the supernatural world which must be perceived by faith and explained in spiritual terms. There is interaction and even movement between the two, but no other systems of explanation that lie inbetween.

But for many people, particularly traditional religionists, there is another realm that needs explanation, namely the transempirical but this worldly phenomena (see figure 2). For example, what about ghosts, and spirits that possess people, and the forces of magic or planets? These are thought to belong not to another world, but to this world, but they lie beyond the immediate experiences of the senses.

Organic models in this middle level are worlds of spirit beings. Commonly these include the spirits of ancestors, witches, demons, tree spirits, nymphs, goblins, gnomes, fairies, elves and leprechauns. They may include gods, but these gods are different than the high gods for they inhabit this universe. Some live on earth and rule certain territories. There are gods of the mountains, of rivers and of plains. They are not cosmic gods nor do they have power outside their geographic realms on earth. Such were the gods of the high referred to in the Old Testament (cf. Num. 33:52, Deut. 33:29). Others of these deities inhabit the skies such as the sun-god and the moon-god. But even these belong to this universe and may be seen. It is on this level that one hears of spirit possession, of ancestor veneration, of totemism, and of divination.

Mechanical explanations in the middle level include magic and astrology. The former is based on the belief that there are powerful transempirical forces at work in this world. Just as a scientist knows how to control empirical forces to achieve his desired goals, the magician controls these supernatural forces of this world by means of chants, charms and magical rituals to carry out his purposes. Similarly the astrologists manipulates the forces of the planets to achieve a desired result.

A Taxonomy of Explanation Systems: If we combine the two dimensions we can form a general system to classify explanation systems. It is obvious that ordinary English does not provide us with enough terms to deal with the various types we have defined. For example, we would normally refer to organic explanation systems on both the upper and middle level as "religion", yet given the western dichotomy of things into natural and supernatural, the middle level ceases to exist. There is little serious thought given to spirits or demons inhabiting this world, to ancestors who continue to live in their homes or to the souls of animals. Concern for this level of explanation died generally in the 17th and 18th centuries in the west. But it is precisely at this level that most traditional tribal beliefs and rituals are to be found. It is not surprising, then, that there has been considerable difficulty in finding words to define traditional tribal religions. The term commonly used for middle level explanations has been "animism", but this term was widely used with reference to an early stage in theories of religious evolution, and still carries with it the connotations of being primitive and illogical. But traditional religions are anything but illogical. Each of them, when understood within their own cultural frameworks, provides a reasoned attempt to understand the universe. Some have referred to beliefs and practices on this level as "low religion," in contrast to "high" religions in the upper level. Still others talk of primal and universal religions.

Given their western world view, it is no wonder, either, that western missionaries often misunderstood tribal religions and used methods that have hindered the growth of the church. Their response has frequently been to deny the existence of the middle realm - to declare that spirits, ghosts and demons do not indeed live in the village, and that witches cannot make people sick. The result, as Newbigin has pointed out (19 :) is that Christian missions have been one of the great secularizing forces in history.

The classification system can help us in the analysis of particular cultures. For example, with it we can trace some of the changes that have taken place in the western world view in the last five centuries. It can also help us to understand the nature and relationships between various types of explanation. For example, while beings and relationships in the organic explanation systems are often thought to be morally good or bad, those in the mechanical systems are amoral. Electricity itself is neither good nor bad. It is the way electricity is used by personal beings that is good or bad. Similarly, magic and astrology are generally thought to be neutral, but they may be used for good or evil purposes.

Explanations of What? Humans seek explanation systems not only to describe and explain their world, but also to provide them with answers to the questions they face. In a broad sense, the difference between the three levels to which we have referred lies in the questions they seek to answer.

Explanation systems in the lowest level deal with the immediate questions of how people can relate to one another, and how they can control the natural world around them. In this sense, all peoples have

ideas about how to raise children, how to build a good marriage and to organize a government, and some ideas about how to gather or raise and to build shelters.

What then are the questions asked at the middle level? Here are the questions of the uncertainty of the future, the crises of present life and unknowns of the past. Despite knowledge that seeds once planted will grow and bear fruit, that travel down this river on a boat will bring one to the neighboring village, the future is not totally predictable. Accidents, misfortunes, the intervention of other persons and other unknowns can frustrate human planning. How can one prevent accidents or guarantee success in the future? How can one make sure that a marriage will be fruitful and happy, and endure. How can one avoid getting on a plane that will crash? In the west these questions are left unanswered. They are "accidents", "luck", or "unforeseeable events", hence unexplainable. But many peoples are not content to leave so important a set of questions unanswered, and the answers they give are often in terms of ancestors, demons, witches and local gods, or in terms of magic and astrology.

Similarly, the crises and fortunes of the present life must be handled: sudden disease and plagues, extended droughts, earthquakes, failures in business and the empirically unexplainable loss of health. What do you do when the doctors have done all they can and your child grows sicker, or when you are gambling and the stakes are high? Again many seek answers in the middle level.

And there are questions one must answer about the past: why did my son die in the prime of his life, or who stole the gold hidden in the house? Here again transempirical explanations often provide an answer when empirical ones fail.

Because the western world no longer provides explanations for questions on the middle level (in fact it has become an "invisible" area in western thought), it is no surprise that many western Christians have no real and vital place for them in their Christian world view. What is a Christian theology of ancestors, of animals, of local spirits and spirit possession, and of "principalities, powers and rulers of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12)? What do we say when a new tribal convert wants to know how does the Christian God speak to his child to tell him where and when to hunt, whether he should marry his daughter to this or that young man, or where he can find the money he lost? But questions of the middle level are some of the most pressing in the ordinary life of most people. To be sure, one must think of life beyond death, but right now there are crises to be dealt with, decisions to be made and all the problems of the immediate world.

In many parts of the world western sciences such as allopathic medicine have replaced the traditional sciences and their medical systems, and Christianity has provided for the people an answer to the ultimate questions. But when the church has provided no answer to questions of the middle level the people have retained their magic and spirit worship. What else can they do? To deny the validity of these answers with

providing a Christian alternative is to ask the people to give up meaning in these areas of their lives. But when Christians such as the charismatic do have a theology of healing and guidance, of ancestors and spirits, they have often been successful in planting truly indigenous Christian churches in societies with traditional religions. On the other hand, given the theological "vacuum" at the middle level in western societies, it is not surprising that young people, many of them from Christian backgrounds, turn to the occult and spiritism to find their answers.

TRADITION RELIGIONISTS AND MISSION STRATEGIES

It should be clear by now that planning strategies to reach the traditional religionists of Asia involves more than locating and counting them; more than recruiting missionaries and sending them; more than translating the scriptures and witnessing to the people. It involves learning to see the world as they see it, and finding Biblical answers to the questions they ask. The irony is that in many ways traditional religionists understand the Biblical world view much better than do those of us trained in western sciences and theology. They are at home with the dreams and visions of the Old Testament and the spirit possessions of the New. They understand when Elijah and Jesus do not deny the existence of Baal or the demons, but demonstrate the greater power of God in power confrontations.³ When the Gospel is expressed in these terms, they are often ready to believe.

A strategy to reach traditional religionists in Asia must also come to grips with the fact that they often have an organic view of their society. Just as their world is alive, so their tribe, clan or family has a life of its own. Important decisions are corporate matters and must be made by the heads of the group. It should not surprise us when people turn to Christ, that they do so as families and groups. We need to develop theologically sound strategies for leading such people to personal faith and growth in Christ without introducing the extreme forms of individualism that have alienated and dehumanized so many in the western societies.

The corporate nature of most tribal societies is a real asset in planting churches. First, it serves as an effective means of communicating the Gospel. When some members of the tribe hear the Good News they readily share it with others, and when several families become Christian, their neighbors and relatives soon hear about it. Networks of kinship, friendship and gossip soon make public what everyone is doing. Second, it provides the converts with some understanding of the church as a living body. Concepts such as mutual responsibility, special gifts and functions and the importance of the life of the whole body are not new to them. And these can be used to build the church. Finally, the conversion of corporate groups provides the church with indigenous leaders who can often be trained to take the spiritual responsibility for their congregations. The danger is to assume that outside leadership is needed for too long a time. We need to let them have the greatest privilege we allow ourselves, namely to make mistakes and learn from them. And we need to trust that the same Holy Spirit is at work in them as he is in us.

Reaching traditional religionists in Asia calls for new effort, new strategies and new understanding. But the effort is more than worth it. Many of the strongest and most rapidly growing churches in Asia have emerged in tribal societies.

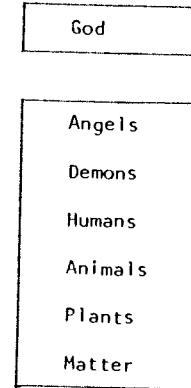
Footnotes

1. It is not the purpose of this paper to go into the basic heresy of this shift in worldview. The biblical teaching is clearly that the fundamental division is between God as creator and the universe as his creation. By putting God together with angels and demons into one category, the "supernatural", we have made him the highest of the spirits, rather than God alone. In it God is distant from natural events, but not fully "other" from some parts of his creation. It is not difficult to show that this is the every-day world view of most western Christians.
2. The term is used here to refer to any Christian who is seeking to witness to people of another culture. Koreans ministering in the U.S.A. are as much missionaries in this sense as Americans in serving in Korea.

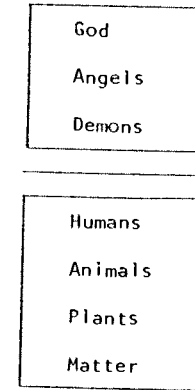
Figure 1

THE SHIFT TO A THOMIST WORLD VIEW

MEDIEVAL WORLD VIEW



THOMIST WORLD VIEW



SUPERNATURAL REALM

- Religion
- Faith
- Miracles, visions
- Other-worldly

NATURAL WORLD

- Science
- Sight, Experience
- Natural Order
- This-worldly

FIGURE 2

ORGANIC ANALOGY

Based on concepts of living entities relating to other living entities. Stresses life, personality, relationships homeostasis, functions, choice, etc.

MECHANICAL ANALOGY

Based on concepts of objects controlled by forces, Stresses impersonal, mechanistic, causal and deterministic nature of events.

TRANSEMPIRICAL

- beyond immediate sense experience. Knowledge of this is based on inference or on trans-empirical experience.

HIGH RELIGION

- cosmic gods and spirits
- prayer, sacrifice

FATE, KISMET, EVOLUTION, BRAHMAN, ETC.

- impersonal cosmic forces
- chance or fate

OTHER WORLDLY

- see entities and events occurring in some realm other than this world and universe.

FOLK or LOW RELIGION

- local gods and goddesses
- ancestors and ghosts
- spirits, fairies, gnomes, elves, trolls,
- demons and evil spirits and possession
- saints

MAGIC AND ASTROLOGY

- mana
- astrological forces
- charms, amulets, magical rites,
- evil eye,

THIS WORLDLY

- sees entities and events as occurring in this world or universe.

EMPIRICAL

- directly observable by senses. Knowledge based on experimentation and observation.

SOCIAL SCIENCE

- interaction of living entities such as humans, animals and plants.

NATURAL SCIENCE

- interaction of natural objects based on natural forces