

**FORM, MEANING
AND REALITY
IN THE CONTEXTUALIZATION
OF THE GOSPEL**

Form and Meaning in the Contextualization of the Gospel

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TWO QUESTIONS FACE EVERY CROSSCULTURAL MISSIONARY. First, what shall we do with the existing cultural practices, particularly those related to the people's religion? How should we respond to veneration of ancestors, witchcraft, magical charms, idol worship, and human sacrifice? Second, how can we best express the gospel in the new culture? Can we use the people's words for God when these are deeply tied to their existing religious beliefs, or should we introduce foreign terms which they do not understand? Can we reinterpret their marriage and funeral customs to convey a Christian message, or will the message itself become captive of their old beliefs?

Central to the debates in missions that have surrounded these questions is the relationship of form and meaning.¹ To understand these debates, we will look briefly at a history of missionary responses in the past century, and then at the nature of symbols in human cultures.

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FORM AND MEANING IN MISSION HISTORY

The history of the modern mission movement coincided with the histories of Western colonialism and modern science. It is important, therefore, that we understand the relationship between meanings and forms within the context of colonialism and science, and the recent changes that have taken place within them.

Era of Positivism: Meaning and Form Equated

The first missionaries in the modern mission movement, such as Ziegenbalg, Plutschau, Carey, and Judson, went as guests to the lands in which they served. As guests they had a high appreciation of the cultures around them. They adopted local dress and lifestyles, translated the Scriptures into local languages, and used local worship forms in the churches. The techno-economic differences between the East and West were not great, and the missionaries found much to admire in the courts of India and Burma.

By the midnineteenth century, however, European colonial expansion had established a dominance of the West. With this grew a sense of cultural superiority that affected not only rulers and traders, but missionaries from the West as well.

The nineteenth century was also characterized by the emergence of positivism as the dominant epistemology underlying Western thought. In positivism, human knowledge—particularly scientific knowledge—was seen as true in an absolute sense.² By means of careful observation the human mind could perceive reality as it is. Scientific theories, properly proved, were, therefore, facts. The atomic theory of matter and evolution were not our human understandings of reality—they were part of reality itself. Form and meaning became one. Truth could be stated in formulas and logical propositions.

Such an epistemology required precise symbols and words to express truth. Consequently, a great deal of effort was made to develop mathematics and a scientific language that did not have the “fuzziness” and ambiguities of ordinary symbols.³ In these technical languages, meaning and form are closely tied. Precise meanings require precise words, or the meanings are lost.

The obvious (at least to those in the West) superiority of science led scientists and other Western people to reject other systems of belief as “prelogical,” “animistic,” “primitive,” and “superstitious.” In the confrontation of science and these systems, these systems had to go. It was assumed that in time they would be replaced by scientific thinking.

Colonialism, positivism, and the explosion of science had a profound effect on Western missions. Missionaries were products of their time, and it should not surprise us that they came increasingly to equate Christianity with Western civilization.

Many missionaries also thought in positivist terms. For them, forms and meanings were essentially one. They believed that the Scriptures had to be translated literally and the gospel expressed in precise words and symbols or the meanings would be lost. There was a widespread fear that the use of native symbol forms would introduce “pagan” meanings that would lead to syncretism. Consequently, the use of local symbol systems was widely rejected. Native architectural forms, melodies, drums, marriage and funeral rites, and art forms were suspect. Conversion involved not only following Christ, but also adopting Western cultural forms.

To avoid syncretism, Western forms were often introduced to convey Christian meanings. Western tunes, ritual forms, instruments, and words were used in the hope of preserving Christian meanings. The result was a foreign gospel which, in the eyes of the native peoples, answered Western questions and was tied to Western cultural ways.

There were attempts to counter this equation of Christianity with the West, the most notable of which was the call by Venn and Anderson for the “Three Selves.” Young churches in new lands should be self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. But this was more a call for an indigenous church than a contextualized gospel. The emphasis was on social relationships between sending and receiving churches, not on the cultural symbols in which the gospel was expressed. There was some discussion of adopting indigenous architectural styles and dress forms for the clergy. But in Bible translation, theological writings, and rituals, forms and meanings were still seen as essentially one.

Pragmatism: The Divorce of Form from Meaning

The twentieth century has seen a rapid decline in colonialism. Men and women in Western colonies, trained in modern schools, led nationalist movements that challenged Western rule. In a remarkably few decades colonial empires collapsed and “colonialism,” which once was uttered in pride, became a pejorative label.

Positivism and its equation of form and meaning were also under heavy attack. Anthropologists had shown us that people in different cultures see the world in different ways, and that systems of knowledge had to be understood within their cultural contexts. Sociologists

and psychologists made us aware of the subjective dimension of human knowledge, including science. Philosophers of science called positivism into question. But the linguists, who separated meaning from form, made the greatest immediate impact on missions and the debates regarding contextualization.

Linguists studying the structure of human languages became aware of the profound ways in which these languages shape the way people see the world.⁴ They pointed to markedly different meanings that are associated with certain objects, such as trees, rocks, and even humans, in different cultures, and to similar meanings that are often associated with very different forms. Many linguists argued that no universal set of symbols underlies all human thought; not only do different languages have different words for the same thing, but also those words have different connotations in the cultural contexts within which they are found. Forms and meanings could no longer be treated as one.

The impact of these linguistic insights on Bible translation was far-reaching. Translators began to realize that literal translations not only lost but also distorted much of the meaning of particular passages. Some words—such as *mountain*, *lamb*, *snow*, or *plow*—cannot be translated in many languages because these concepts do not exist in them. Many other words—such as *God*, *sin*, *sacrifice*, and *ancestor*—have such different meanings in different cultures that they are almost unusable in Bible translations.

Out of these insights emerged an emphasis on dynamic equivalent translations.⁵ In these the translator sought to convey in another language the meanings found in a particular text even though this required a change in the forms found in the passage. For example, if Papua New Guinea highlanders had no sheep and sacrificed pigs in the same way the Israelites in the Old Testament offered sheep, then it might be best to translate “sheep” as “pigs” in the highlanders’ Bibles. At least, then they would understand the importance of sacrifice in the Old Testament. If the translator were to use the Hebrew or English word for sheep, or coin a new word, the non-Christians would have no understanding of these texts at all.

The concept of “contextualization” expanded this emphasis on translating meaning, not form, to all areas of mission activity. It said, wherever possible, local forms should be used to convey the gospel. In communication, it is good to employ drama, bardic narratives, traditional story-telling forms, native melodies, and dance if these are more meaningful to the people than preaching and translated Western hymns. Local marriage and funeral ceremonies, ancestor veneration rites, and important festivals should be modified to convey Christian

meanings. In theology, the thought patterns within the culture, which are familiar to the people, should be used to express biblical truths.

Behind this divorce of form and meaning lay an epistemological shift from positivism to instrumentalism. Instrumentalists argue that we cannot know whether human knowledge is ever true, because it is subjective. We only know whether it is useful or not. The result is relativism—all systems of explanation have their own internal integrity and we cannot say that one is better than another. The result is also pragmatism—we should assess ideas in terms of their usefulness in helping us solve problems.

In instrumentalism, form and meaning are divorced. Because knowledge is seen as subjective, what is important is preserving meanings in the mind, and meanings are not attached to external forms and realities. We can, therefore, use *any* forms so long as inner meanings are understood (some would say “discovered”).

This separation of meaning from form and its expression in dynamic equivalence translation and contextualization are important steps in our understanding of the mission process. We are freed from a rigid formalism that tied Christianity to Western ways and hindered the crosscultural communication of the gospel. Young Christians in other cultures were also freed to study and interpret the Scriptures in their own settings. But the divorce of meaning from form poses another set of dangers which we must examine.

A Too Simple View of Culture

First, the separation of form and meaning is based on a too simple view of culture. In this view, language is the basis of culture, and all other areas of culture can be understood by analogy to linguistics. But culture is more than language. It is made up of many symbol systems, such as rituals, gestures, life styles, and technology. In these, as we will see later, the relationships between form and meaning are often complex. Moreover, even in language the linkage between form and meaning is not always arbitrary.⁶

If we divorce meaning from form and reduce culture to purely mental processes—to ideas, feelings, and values, we reinforce the Neoplatonic dualism between mind and matter, ideas and behavior, that has plagued Western thought. Thought categories become arbitrary creations of the mind, and cultures become isolated islands of meaning between which there can be no real communication. People in other cultures will interpret what we say in terms of their own cultural categories, and there is no way to test whether their ideas correspond with ours or not.

Furthermore, if we separate meaning and form we are in danger of reducing Christianity to a set of beliefs to which people must mentally subscribe. There need be no change in behavior, no change in culture, no change in life. Cultural forms and systems become essentially value free. But humans are sinners, and capable of creating social systems and symbols that are oppressive and evil. Not all cultural practices can be used to communicate the message of the gospel.

An Asocial Perspective of Symbols

In the second place, a total separation of meaning and form tends to be asocial. It does not take seriously enough the fact that symbols are created and controlled by social groups and whole societies. As individuals and minority groups we may create our own symbols and words to express our faith in our own circles. When we try to reinterpret symbols used by the dominant society, however, we are in danger of being misunderstood and ultimately of being captured by its definitions of reality.

One of the greatest powers a society has is to impose its views of reality upon people. It does so by enculturating its young and acculturating those who join it. Ultimately, this definition of reality begins by controlling the definitions of key words. When we call people to become Christians, we call them to accept a new definition of reality, and, therefore, new definitions of key concepts. The result is a struggle to control the meanings of important words.

In primal societies with local tribal religions, the coming of a universalist religion, particularly when it is backed by political dominance, generally leads to quick victories. Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism soon impose their definitions of reality on tribal peoples. In old civilizations, however, the struggle to control the meanings of words is often difficult. For example, in South India the Christians use *devudu* for God, but Christians constitute only some 5 percent of the people in most regions. The Hindus who dominate the culture and make up over 75 percent of the people also use the word, but with Hindu connotations. In such a setting it is difficult for the Christian community to maintain a biblical understanding of God. In the long run the church is in danger of accepting the Hindu world-view of the dominant society around it.

The belief that we as individuals can freely redefine old and create new symbols reflects our Western individualism. In much of the world, however, it is the group and its leaders who define the key cultural symbols, and enforce the dominant beliefs.

The radical separation of form and meaning is asocial in another sense. It overlooks the extensive debate regarding "natural symbols." Mary Douglas and others hold that there are universal human symbols found in most societies arising out of our common human experiences. For example, she argues that the human body as an organic system is an analogy all people use in understanding reality.⁷ Similarly, with few exceptions, going up spatially is seen as moving in the direction of the gods and the sacred. Temples and shrines are commonly placed on the tops of hills. Steps lead up into churches and mosques. Likewise, the birth process is widely used as an analogy for other transitions in human life, such as initiation ceremonies, admission into closed societies, and even death. Sexual union is widely used as an analogy for joinings of many types, including union with God.

An Ahistorical View of Symbols

Third, to separate meaning and form is to ignore history. Words and other symbols have histories of previously established linkages between form and meaning. Without such historical continuity, it would be impossible for people to pass on their culture from one generation to the next or to preserve the gospel over time.

We are not free to arbitrarily link meanings and forms. To do so is to destroy the people's history and culture. Moreover, it is to forget that people who become Christians gain a second history—the history of Christianity. Among their new spiritual ancestors are Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Paul, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, and many others.

A Modern Bias

The separation of meaning from form reflects a modern, individualistic view of human experience. As Mary Douglas points out, people in tribal and peasant societies do not view symbols in that way.⁸ For them, form and meaning are intricately related in important symbols, particularly religious symbols. To say a word of curse is indeed to curse. To perform the rain dance is not a way of asking the gods to send rain; it is to create rain. The rituals are thought to cause things to happen. Symbols, in fact, are seen as performative.

A problem arises when modern missionaries use traditional ritual forms and give them new meanings, or change established practices in churches in non-Western societies, or introduce dynamic equivalent translations that are easily changed. In the eyes of many non-Western

Christians, they are denying the sacred nature of the gospel, for sacredness rests, in part, in tight linkages between form and meaning.

Relativism and Pragmatism

The greatest danger in separating meaning from form is the relativism and pragmatism this introduces. Relativism undermines our concern for the truth of the gospel. Pragmatism turns our attention from the cosmic history of creation-fall-redemption to solving the immediate problems of our everyday life.

Critical Realism: Form and Meaning Re-Wedded

Faced with the corrosive effects of pragmatism and relativism, there is a growing movement in the sciences to find an epistemological foundation that affirms truth but does so with humility, not arrogance; that affirms objectivity but allows for the subjective dimension in human knowledge.⁹

On the international scene there are attempts to move beyond an anticolonialism which is still tied to the old colonial agendas in order to find new ways of building global relationships between nations whose independence and autonomy is not in question. In missions, too, there is a growing concern that cultural relativism and pragmatism have undermined the Christian message. Missions must search for new epistemological foundations that enable missionaries to proclaim the gospel boldly and without compromise, but in love and humility.

In all these fields there are many who are moving toward what Barbour calls a "critical realist epistemology."¹⁰ In this epistemology, knowledge is in human minds, so there is a subjective dimension to it. But this knowledge corresponds to the realities of the external world, so that it has an objective, truthful dimension to it. This correspondence between inner and outer worlds is not that of a photograph, but that of a map, blueprint, or model. In other words, the correspondence is complex and varied. At some points a map must correspond exactly with reality, or the map is useless. At other points, a map reveals hidden realities. For example, a political map colors one country green and another yellow. This does not mean that these countries are physically these colors. Rather, it means that one territory belongs to one country, and the other to another. Finally, on a map some points are arbitrary. A country may be colored blue or green or yellow without destroying the truthfulness of the

map. The only requirement is that the whole country be colored the same color.

In critical realism we as Christians affirm the absolutes of God, the universe he created, and history. The last includes the events of history and God's involvement in them. On the other hand, we recognize that *our understanding* of those absolutes is *partial*. This does not mean those understandings are totally subjective and relative, but that they should be growing. We see "through a glass, darkly," but we do see. We see enough to live in a real world, and, through divine revelation, we see the path to salvation and fellowship with God.

In critical realism, however, form and meaning are related in complex ways, depending upon the nature of the symbol. In some, the linkage is arbitrary, and forms can readily be changed in order to preserve a given meaning. In others, the two are equated. To change the form is to change the meaning. In most, however, the relationship is more complex.

Given this epistemological foundation, the missionary is not against contextualization, as was the case in positivism. In positivism missionaries equated form and meaning and assumed that the introduction of the former automatically led to an understanding of the latter. The missionary, however, also rejects an uncritical contextualization in which forms are changed readily in order to preserve subjective meanings. Rather, we pursue a critical contextualization realizing that meaning and form are related in complex ways, and that the gospel has both objective and subjective dimensions to it. This, however, requires that we examine more carefully the varied nature of the symbols we use to communicate the gospel in other cultures.

Form and Meaning in Symbols

If we cannot equate meanings and forms nor totally separate them, where does this leave us with regard to contextualization? Here, recent insights in semiotics are helpful. The fact is that in any culture the relationship between meanings and forms varies according to the nature of the symbol. In some the relationship is arbitrary, so forms can readily be changed in order to preserve meanings. In other symbols the relationship is more complex, ranging from loose to tight linkages. To change the forms in these inevitably changes the meanings in some way. In still other symbols, meaning and form are essentially one. To change the form is to change the meaning. In contextualization, therefore, we need to

examine the nature of symbols in the Scriptures and church, and the nature of symbols in the society into which these are being contextualized. Here symbolic anthropology provides us with useful insights.¹¹

Meaning and Form Arbitrarily Linked

It is easiest for those of us from the West to begin by looking at symbols in which the link between form and meaning is arbitrary and loose. A simple example is giving names to our children. Young parents in the West spend hours looking for the "right name," but in the end the choice is theirs. A creative few make up new names, but most are limited by social convention (certain names are girls' names, and others are boys' names), and by history (names that have been used in that culture in the past).

Similarly, the link between form and meaning in ordinary words used in everyday discursive speech is essentially arbitrary. In English, we look at a tree and say "tree." We could have said "chetu," or "preta," or even "dog." There is no essential sound pattern in the word *tree* that links it to the objects we call trees. Once we have agreed in our community to call this object a tree, however, the linkage becomes one of social and historical, not private, definition. It is then passed down from generation to generation. In other words, the link is no longer arbitrary. I may try to change it, but my efforts are meaningless if I cannot get the community to accept the changes.

This social nature of symbols explains why subgroups in a society seek to control or change the definitions of words. For example, the black community in the United States made a conscious effort to change the meaning of "black." Now, women are pressing for inclusive language. In both cases there has been considerable resistance by whites and males. *The ability to control the definitions of words that the people use is one of the greatest powers dominant groups in a society have, for in controlling definitions, they control the way the people see reality.*

Discursive language is the basis of most of our verbal communication. We use it to talk about the ordinary, everyday things of life—things we can see and experience directly. We change it easily as new words are coined to represent new realities we observe or create (Coriolis, calculator, satellite) and concepts we need (paradigm, world-view).

In contemporary missions, discursive symbols present a number of theoretical problems, but we readily translate the Scriptures into local languages using the words and sounds of the local society.

We realize there will always be some slippage, particularly in the connotations associated with different words. This means we must work hard to make certain that the meaning of a passage is preserved as accurately as possible in the new language. In order to do this, we readily change the forms. "Tree" becomes *chetu* in Telugu, and "woman" becomes *stree*. We no longer argue, as did the church leaders in the Middle Ages, that people should not translate Scripture because this distorts its meaning and destroys its truthfulness and trustworthiness.

Similarly, as missionaries we are to identify with the lifestyles of the people we serve as far as our consciences and psychological capabilities allow. We should dress as the people dress, eat their foods, and live in their kinds of houses, for in so doing we build trust and communicate to the people our love and acceptance of them.

Meanings and Forms Loosely Linked

In many symbols the links between form and meaning are arbitrary. In others, however, the links vary along a continuum ranging from loose ties based on similarities and analogies, to more direct ties based on direct connections, and to symbols in which form and meaning are one.

Among "loosely connected" symbols, form and meaning are often linked to each other on the basis of similarities and analogies. Humans live on the same earth and many of their experiences are the same. They see the sun, moon, and stars. They see animals and plants. It should not surprise us then that certain "natural symbols" have wide cultural distributions, such as the association of light with life, up with sacred, darkness with evil, and so on.¹² Humans also have similar bodies. Normally they have one head, two arms, and two feet. They are born, eat, reproduce, and die. These common experiences serve as the basis of widespread biological symbols. Finally, all humans create culture. All eat food and drink water. Most use fire, shelters, and simple technologies. These, too, provide humans with ready symbols and analogies for thinking about their lives.

Universal Symbols

In the 1930s, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf sought to show that different cultures classify natural phenomena in different ways, and that, in essence, their classifications are essentially arbitrary.¹³ Each society creates categories according to its own internal perceptions of reality.

Recent studies have shown, however, that the categories cultures create to describe the external material world are not totally arbitrary. Brent Berlin and Paul Kay demonstrated that there is a clear progression in basic color categories, both within and between cultures, as the number of these categories increases from four to eight.¹⁴ In other words, color categories are not totally cultural creations. They also reflect the order in nature and the biological processes of perception. Sahlins notes "the unexpected findings challenge such basic doctrines as the arbitrary nature of the sign or, even more fundamental, the *sui generis* character of culture."¹⁵

Hunn has shown that there is widespread cultural agreement with regard to the basic categories for birds and other animals.¹⁶ Miller has done the same with the plant world.¹⁷ In other words, many symbols dealing with the natural world do reflect basic differences found in nature itself.

It is not enough, however, to simply show that all cultures agree that black and white are different, and that "cows" are not a kind of "bird" and differ from "horses." Most symbols have secondary connotations. Are any of these widespread or universal?

Natural Symbols

The human body itself provides many basic symbols that have multiple uses. Douglas argues that "the organic system provides an analogy of the social system which, other things being equal, is used in the same way and understood in the same way all over the world."¹⁸ For example, the head, arms, breasts, legs, and life itself provide metaphors that people in most cultures use to think about their worlds. Blood is generally associated with red and life, and excreta with defilement and impurity.

Eliade, in his extensive survey of religions, notes the common triad of land-fertility-female that is found in most agricultural societies.¹⁹ Similarly, male is commonly associated with battle and violence. Sexual union is commonly used as an analogy of union with God, death, or end and/or exit; birth is an analogy for beginnings, fertility, and newness, and the birth channel, as gates and thresholds.

Hallpike makes a strong case that long hair is a symbol of being in some way outside society, and that cutting of hair symbolizes reentering society or living under a particular disciplinary regime in society.²⁰

Nature provides us with other natural symbols. There is an almost universal association of "up" with "sacred." Temples and shrines, as we have noted, are generally built so that people have

to climb steps or hills to reach them. "Down" and worlds under the ground are usually seen as dangerous or evil. Eliade analyzes the meanings of sky (symbol of transcendence), water (symbol of both death and rebirth), sacred space, mountains, and cosmic trees or poles (*axis mundi*) reaching to heaven in religions around the world.²¹

A case can be made that children in most cultures learn adult roles by imitating them. Thus a girl may play "mother" by behaving as she observes real mothers behave.

Cultural Symbols

Another category of symbols in which meaning and form are indirectly linked has to do with human cultures and technology. Lévi-Strauss argues that most cultures equate the cooking of food with being human (not animal) and civilized.²² Mauss shows that gift exchanges are widely used in establishing human relationships.²³ Transvestites in many cultures wear the clothes of the opposite sex as a sign of their lifestyle.

On another level, Marshall McLuhan shows how the products of technology, such as books, cars, and radios, serve as symbols that shape the society.²⁴ In other words, the forms these media take have their own messages apart from the formal messages they convey. For example, the introduction of the clock radically altered life in Europe.

Meanings and Forms Tightly Linked

In some symbols, meaning and form are linked more closely than those we have considered so far. The closeness of these ties makes such symbols, and those we will consider next, more stable. They often provide the skeleton on which the rest of a culture is hung. As Peter Berger points out, "[t]he cultural imperative of stability and the inherent character of culture as unstable together posit the fundamental problem of man's world building activity."²⁵ In the past, many of these symbols were religious. Now that religious symbols have lost their character as overarching, stable symbols in many modern societies, we must find integration elsewhere.

Expressive Symbols

In symbols expressing emotions, the experience itself is a central part of the message. A child's cry, an adult's laughter, an injured person's groans, an angry person's gestures—all of these may be culturally shaped or masked, but the basic patterns are widely

distributed. To eat together is to relate. To bow or prostrate one's self before another is widely understood to mean subservience.

Dance and music are another case. Here the rhythms, melodies, and styles are themselves much of the message. For example, the loudness and beat of heavy metal rock music conveys a feeling of rebellion that is reinforced by words. Firth has noted a very wide association between percussion sounds, such as firecrackers, drum beats, and gun shots with the summoning of and dealing with spirits.²⁶

The taking of drugs offers yet another case. Here the means produces the message—the ecstatic experience, the higher vision of reality. Similarly, meditation and self-torture are closely tied to the experiences they are expected to generate.

Ritual Symbols

The ties between meaning and form in rituals and sacred symbols vary a great deal from society to society. Douglas notes that one of the characteristics of modernity is the divorce of form and meaning.²⁷ Thus, a modern Christian says, "I go to church in order to worship." In other words, going to church is not itself part of worship, but brings one to a place where worship (often perceived as an inner personal experience) occurs. On the other hand, in most traditional societies meaning and form in rituals and sacred symbols are essentially one. A Christian in these societies would say, "In going to church I am worshipping." The very acts of washing, dressing in special clothes, and going to the church are themselves part of worship—a testimony to the world of one's faith.

The same debate continues in the church regarding the Lord's Supper. Catholics and other high-church Christians see the bread and the wine as more than loose symbols of the body and blood of Christ. After the consecration it in fact "becomes the body and blood of Christ" in some mysterious way that ordinary language and thought cannot express. The forms, particularly after consecration, do in fact become the message, the means by which grace is administered to the repentant sinner.

In traditional societies many ritual symbols are of this nature. For example, among the Shilluk the kings are believed to descend from Nyikang, a leader of the Shilluk in the heroic age. The investiture of a new king is a lengthy ritual in which, among other things, the king-elect sits on the royal stool which is the locus of divine and kingly power. The stool does not just represent this power—it is believed to contain it.²⁸ Along the same line, idols are often seen not

only as reminders of the gods or even as abodes in which the gods live, but as the gods themselves.

The same close equation of form and meaning is found in contagious and imitative magic intended for evil. In the former, the form must be from the person against whom the magic is performed—a lock of hair, a finger nail, a piece of clothing, or a footprint. In the latter, the form must replicate the person in some basic way. A doll is molded and given the name of the person. Then what is done to the doll is believed to occur to the person. The same tie is seen in other forms of magic. In magical chants every sound must be correct, or the chant is ineffective. In amulets, the shape itself has magical power.

The location of sacred sites is often essential to their meaning. The tombs of saints or kings mark the site of the body. The sacred tree or pole is the *axis mundi* where earth breaks through into heaven. The same is true of sacred land. Palestine is not just any land for Jews and Muslims. To offer them free land in another part of the world would not meet their demands.

Forms Equated with Meanings

There are a few symbols in which form and meaning cannot be separated. To change one is to change the other.

Historical Symbols

Specific historical facts are tied to specific times and places. To alter these is to introduce error. For example, God came to earth in the form of a man, living in Palestine some two thousand years ago. He lived, died, and rose again, and by these actions he both completed and communicated to us his salvation. He was named Jesus and we as Christians are called to name that name (2 Tim. 2:19; 1 Jn. 4:2).

It is helpful here to note the distinction between art and history. The religious artist is seeking to communicate a deeper spiritual message, not a historically accurate picture of events. Thus, a noted Korean artist painted a series of pictures on the life of Christ in which Christ is depicted as a Korean teacher with a black hat (in traditional Korea all teachers wore such hats). The houses and clothes are Korean in style. If the artist were to claim this as historical fact, his drawings would be false. But he has tried to depict the deeper truth that Christ identified himself with humanity, all humanity, in his life and death.

Performative Symbols

Some symbols, generally religious or legal, not only communicate. They perform a change. For example, when a judge says to a defendant, "I find you guilty," he is not just communicating information. By his pronouncement he transforms a person innocent before the law into a criminal. In other words, he changes that person's status in the society. The person becomes another kind of person. Similarly, when a king issued an edict, it in fact became law.

Similarly, for Christians, when a minister says, "I pronounce you husband and wife," he or she changes the bride and groom into a married couple in the eyes of the state and society. In Catholic and other high churches with sacramental views of marriage, the pronouncement goes further. It not only changes the couple's social status and calls on God to bear witness to this, but also changes the divine order of things recorded in heaven. In both these cases of law and ritual the form the symbols take is essential to their meaning.

Boundary Symbols

A case might be made that in boundary symbols form and meaning are essentially one. Fences and rocks marking fields, lines marking lanes in roads or volleyball courts, and temple walls not only show where boundaries are; they create those boundaries.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEXTUALIZATION

What implications does all this have for contextualization?

First, it is clear that contextualization is more complicated than we have thought. On the one hand, we need to avoid the anticontextual approach that characterized many earlier missionaries with positivist epistemologies. They often sought to avoid syncretism by introducing new symbols. The result was often nominalism. The gospel remained foreign. It did not take root at the core of people's lives. They were right, however, in their deep commitment to the truth and its preservation.

On the other hand, we need to avoid the reductionism of an uncritical contextual approach characteristic of instrumentalism and its divorce of form and meaning. In our eagerness to make the gospel understood by the people, we readily use and reshape the symbols of the culture. We are in danger, however, of reducing meaning to subjective understanding, whether of senders or receptors. With no objective dimension to it, we are left with pragmatism and relativism.

The only measures we have of successful communication are people's positive responses. There is no way to test whether the receptor's understanding of the message corresponds in any way with that of the senders.

What we need is a more comprehensive model that takes into account the variety of symbols. We need to examine carefully the nature of the symbols in the gospel—in Scripture, rituals, and Christian life—in order to determine the extent to which they can be changed to fit another culture.²⁹ We need also to examine the nature of the symbols in the new culture we want to use to convey the biblical message. Some of these can be used because their meaning corresponds in some essential ways with symbols in the gospel. Others cannot be used because they are too closely tied to non-Christian meanings. For example, the use of aqua blue in Indian dramas signifies the Hindu god Krishna. It would be almost impossible to use that color on the face of an actor in a Christian drama without drawing in Hindu mythology.

This view of symbols is rooted in a critical realist epistemology that focuses on the search for truth and affirms that it can be known, but that recognizes both the subjective and objective nature of human knowledge. Meaning is located in people and shapes them. It is also located in an objective world which enables people to test the correspondence between their understandings. Communication is measured, therefore, not in what the sender sends, nor what the receptor receives, but in the correspondence between what the sender sends and the receptor receives.

Second, we must examine how the nature of the missionary task affects contextualization. The Bible translator seeks to make the Scripture known in a new language. His or her responsibility is to remain true to the original text. Consequently, he or she must "provide the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, so that it too may be employed effectively by receptor-language expositors in their task of transposition."³⁰ Preachers, on the other hand, seek to apply the biblical message in the local context. Their task, therefore, is to draw as much as possible upon the local culture's experiences and idioms in order to make the implications of the message clear.

Third, we need to guard lest the people misunderstand the nature of the symbols we use in communicating the gospel. We need to make clear in teaching and preaching what is history and what is poetry or allegory or culturally determined styles. In particular, we must guard lest Scripture passages be taken to be magical formulae to acquire supernatural power or to harm a rival. In this process of "critical

contextualization" we need church leaders and missionaries working together to contextualize the gospel in a new cultural setting.³¹ They need a thorough knowledge of the symbols of Scripture and church history, and of the receptor culture and its symbol systems.

We need to be aware, too, that national leaders and missionaries are influenced by their own cultures in the way they see symbols. Leaders in traditional societies often do not separate meaning and form in religious symbols while missionaries from modern societies do. The result is misunderstanding. Modern missionaries readily change Christian symbols in order to make them more meaningful. National leaders see such changes in the traditional symbols of the church as destroying the gospel itself.

Finally, it is important that we see contextualization as a long process, not an instant achievement. For first generation converts their old religious symbols are too closely tied to pagan religious beliefs to be used in expressing Christianity. For instance, it was the early African converts as much as the missionaries who rejected the use of drums used in spirit worship rites. On the other hand, the traditional ties between form and meaning in native symbols are weakened among second- and third-generation Christians in the culture. It is possible, therefore, for them to reexamine the old forms and use them in new ways in the church with less of a danger of syncretism. Thus, the early church rejected Greek sculpture which was generally religious, but the later church turned it into art and put it into museums.

Contextualization is, indeed, no simple task. It is important, therefore, that we seek to understand it more fully. Moreover, contextualization is not a once-for-all task. It is an ongoing process by which Christians seek to live as God's people in communities in a fallen world. It is important, therefore, that we institute procedures whereby the church as a community of believers seeks to understand God's Word to it and through it to the world in which it lives.

NOTES

¹ For some key discussions on the subject, see Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); and Eugene Nida and William Reyburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1981).

² For a more extended discussion of various epistemological positions and the current epistemological shifts taking place in the sciences and theology, see Paul G. Hiebert, "Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology," *TSF Bulletin* 8

(March-April 1985), 5-10; and "The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift," *TSF Bulletin* 8 (May-June 1985), 6-11.

³ See R. Carnap, *Meaning and Necessity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

⁴ Much of the discussion has centered around the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. See Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1949), and Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1956).

⁵ Nida, *Message*, and Kraft, *Christianity and Culture*.

⁶ The broad study of symbol systems, including language, has led to the theoretical field known as semiotics.

⁷ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, see especially chapters 3 and 6.

⁹ In anthropology this is reflected in the rejection of cultural relativism that has dominated anthropological thought since the late 1970s. For an analysis of this, see G. W. Stocking, Jr., "Afterword: A View from the Center," *Ethnos* 47 (1982): 172-86; and Clifford Geertz, "Distinguished Lecture: Anti Anti-Relativism," *American Anthropologist* 86 (June 1984): 263-78. In the philosophy of science, this is reflected in books by Larry Laudan, *Progress and Its Problems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977); and Jarred Leplin, ed., *Scientific Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

¹⁰ See Eugene Nida and William Reyburn, *op. cit.*, for an excellent discussion of how an awareness of literary genre and level of symbols is essential in Bible translation.

¹¹ See Janet Dolgin, David Kemnitzer, and David Schneider, eds., *Symbolic Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); and Clifford Geertz, ed., *Myth, Symbol and Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971).

¹² See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); and Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973).

¹³ See Sapir, *Selected Writings*, and Whorf, *Language*.

¹⁴ The original analysis appeared in Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Color Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). There has been a great deal of discussion of their findings in journal literature since, but essentially their thesis has withstood critical analysis.

¹⁵ Marshall Sahlins, "Colors and Cultures," *Symbolic Anthropology*, Janet Dolgin et al., eds. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 166.

¹⁶ Eugene Hunn, "Utilitarian Factor in Folk Biological Classification," *American Anthropologist* 84 (December 1982): 830-47.

¹⁷ Jay Miller, "Matters of the (thoughtful) Heart: Focality or Overlap," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38 (Fall 1982): 274-87.

¹⁸ Douglas, *Purity*, 12.

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1959).

²⁰ C. R. Hallpike, "Social Hair," *Man* 4 (1969): 256-64.

²¹ Eliade, *The Sacred*.

²² Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift* (London: Cohen and West, 1954).

²⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

²⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 6.

²⁶ Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973).

²⁷ Douglas, *Purity*, chapter 3.

²⁸ E. E. Evans-Prichard, *Essays in Social Anthropology* (London: Faber, 1962), 66-86.

²⁹ Eugene Nida and William Reyburn pioneered a reevaluation of the relationship between form and meaning in *Meaning Across Culture*.

³⁰ Nida and Reyburn, *Meaning*, 32.

³¹ For a more detailed discussion of critical contextualization and some steps in the process see Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," *International Bulletin* 11 (July 1987): 104-12.