

# Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion

*Folk religion and split-level Christianity is found in young churches around the world. It also is common in churches in the West which saps the vitality of churches. At best it limits Christian faith to a narrow segment of people's lives. How should missionaries and church leaders respond to the persistence of old beliefs and practices long after people have become Christian? "Properly understood, following the principles of "critical contextualization" will steer us towards an enduring solution.*

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**H**ow should Christians respond to split-level Christianity, including the bewildering variety of folk religions around the world? How can churches deal with the resurgence of witchcraft in Africa, spiritism in Latin America, Cargo Cults in Melanesia, new religions in Japan, and New Age and neo-paganism in North America? To ignore them and hope that they disappear as Christians grow in faith is to open the door for a syncretism that threatens the heart of the gospel. To try to stamp them out and replace them with imported beliefs and practices leads to split-level Christianity.

The latter is a two-tier Christianity that persists around the world despite centuries of instruction and condemnation by missionaries and church leaders. Sidney Williamson writes,

*Most Christians live on two unreconciled levels. They are members of a church and ascribe to a statement of faith. But below the system of conscious belief are deeply embedded traditions and customs implying quite a different interpretation of the universe and the world of spirit from the Christian interpretation. In the crises of life and rites of passage the Church is an alien thing. (1965, 158)*

"Split-level Christianity"<sup>1</sup> is found in young churches planted among traditional religionists around the world. It also is common in churches in the West. It has sapped the vitality of churches and limited Christianity to a segment of people's

lives. How should missionaries and church leaders respond to the persistence of old beliefs and practices long after people have become Christians?<sup>2</sup>

The answers we outlined in our book *Understanding Folk Religion*<sup>3</sup> deals with old beliefs and practices, and to provide biblical answers to the questions people face in their everyday lives. It will require what we call "critical contextualization."

## STEP ONE: EXAMINE LOCAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

The first step in the process of "critical contextualization" is to examine phenomenologically the people's beliefs and practices in order to understand these as the people do. In our book we developed a model for studying folk religions, and used this to examine four key questions most folk religions seek to answer. Preliminary Christian responses were given to each of these questions. In a later section we looked at the public expressions of folk religions—their symbols, myths, rituals, organization, and movements.

In our book much attention was given to the phenomenological study of religions for several reasons. First, this is the step most neglected by missionaries in the past. Many study Scripture and theology, but do not study the people. The effective communication of the gospel cannot take place, however, without a deep understanding of the language and culture of a people. Too often missionar-

ies focus their attention on the message they bring, and ignore the context in which they communicate it. Consequently, the gospel remains incomprehensible, fragmented, foreign, and irrelevant.

Second, missionaries need to understand the religious beliefs and practices of the people to provide biblical answers to the questions they face, and to contextualize the gospel and the church in the local setting. Good contextualization requires wise judgments, not an uncritical acceptance or rejection of old ways. Wise judgments, however, require a deep knowledge of local realities. Without such understanding missionaries often jump to false or premature judgments.

Third, many of the key issues facing young churches emerge out of real-life situations that are always in particular contexts. Each culture presents a different set of questions that must be addressed theologically. For one culture it is polygamy, ancestors, and the spirit world, for another it is social oppression, injustice, ideologies, and massive social systems that stand in opposition to God. Missionaries must address not only the issues that emerge out of the study of Scripture but also address those that emerge in the daily lives of people and churches.

## STEP TWO: BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING

The second step in the process of "critical contextualization" is to test the

people's beliefs and practices in the light of biblical truth and tests of reality. This calls for a deep knowledge of the Bible and theological frameworks for understanding Scripture that serve as the criteria by which human social and cultural systems are evaluated and judged. Because folk religions are so diverse, no single set of theological answers will solve all the problems that arise. Specific theological responses must be developed for each context. There are, however, general theological principles that can be used to deal with the many theological questions that confront Christian churches as they emerge from split-level religious contexts. We will return to the steps in the process of critical contextualization after a discussion of the theological principles and the dangers we must avoid as a result.

## THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS

Theological principles that apply particularly to the questions raised in folk religions and split-level faith must be grounded in a larger theology of God, creation, sin, salvation, and Christ's return. There is always the danger in dealing with the pressing needs of everyday life to focus on one or another doctrine, and to lose sight of the gospel as a whole. What we need are biblically balanced answers to the existential questions addressed.

### *A Theology of the Invisible*

Given the fact that the modern mission movement originated in the West, and the West increasingly depends on the world of sight, it is imperative that Christians recover an awareness of the invisible in this world. Eugene Peterson writes,

*Most of the reality with which we deal is invisible. Most of what makes up human existence is inaccessible to our five senses: emotions, thoughts, dreams, love, hope, character, purpose, belief. Even what makes up most of the basic physical existence is out of the range of our unassisted senses: molecules and atoms,*

*neutrons and protons, the air we breathe, the ancestors we derive from, the angels who protect us. We live immersed in these immense invisibles. And more than anything else, we are dealing with God "whom no one has seen at any time" (1994, 89-90).*

Until the invisible world becomes a living reality in the lives of Christians, they will not be able to deal with the questions folk religions raise. A theology of the invisible must take seriously a trinitarian understanding of God,<sup>4</sup> who is continually involved in his creation by his providence, presence, and power. It must take angels seriously, for they are God's ministers on earth, and it must take Satan and demons seriously, for they are fallen angels seeking to keep people from turning to God in repentance, faith and obedience to Him.

### *Worship and Submission*

At their core, folk religions are human efforts to control life. This is reflected in the first sin, when Satan tempted Adam and Eve, not to worship him, but to worship themselves. They could, he said, become their own gods. Self-centeredness and self-possession remain the greatest human temptation and the central concern for most folk religious beliefs and practices. People make sacrifices to gods and spirits to bargain for healing and prosperity. They turn to ancestors and divination in attempts to control their own well-being.

The desire for control also leads to a magical approach to problems, for magic enables humans to control their world, the gods, ancestors, and other beings in the middle zone.<sup>5</sup> Even Christians are tempted to seek to control God by sacred formulas when their prayers do not bring the desired results.

The gospel rejects an ego-centered religion and a magical mentality. The center of its message is God and what he does. It calls humans to submit themselves to God, and to live not by control but by faith in his plan (Isa. 8:19-22; Jer.

27:9-10; Gal. 5:20; Rev. 21:8). This change from self-centeredness to God-centeredness is one of the most difficult for humans to make. The problem is compounded when people with middle-zone (split-level) worldviews are asked to develop a theology that emphasizes God's volition and human response rather than searching for and trying to manipulate God.

### *A Holistic Theology*

Christians need to present God's work in the whole of creation. This begins with a theology of cosmic history: of God, the heavens, and eternity. This answers the ultimate questions raised by high religions regarding the ultimate origins, purpose, and destiny of all creation. It must include a theology of human history—of humans created in the image of God, the fall, God's redemptive acts in the Old Testament, Christ's death and resurrection in the New Testament, and the work of the Holy Spirit in the church. This answers questions related to redemptive history. It must also include a theology of God's work in the lives of individuals—of the meaning of life, desire for a good life, need for guidance, and longing for justice, and explanations of death, disasters, the unknown and evil in poverty, injustice, racism, and oppression. This answers the existential questions of everyday human lives

An holistic (whole) theology must also include nature—its design, its voice praising its Creator, its suffering at the hand of evil, and the new creation in which it will be fully restored (Rom. 8:22; 2 Peter 3:11-13). Nature is the place where humans meet God and converse with him. Modern-day Christians are ready to see God's hand in cosmic history, and, at times, in human history, but they see nature as an autonomous reality operating by itself according to impersonal laws. Only as they see God at the center of nature will they root out the secularism that plagues the contemporary world. This is an important process in

churches in the West as well as traditional mission contexts. The rapid shift to post-modernity, with its focus on self-fulfillment and ultimate narcissism forces a reevaluation (i.e., a need for an application of critical contextualization) of the Western, well-entrenched, and institutionalized church.

It is not easy for modern Christians to recover a holistic theology. Implicit in English and other Western languages is a Neo-Platonic dualism that separates supernatural from natural reality, God from nature, and religion from science. This dualism is not found in biblical thought. For instance, the word in Hebrew used for this world and its order is *bara*, "what is created," which includes angels, humans, animals, plants and matter. The word implies that these originate in and are continuously dependent on God for their very existence. Events in human lives cannot be divided into ordinary and miraculous. This affirmation of God's presence in all things is essential in answering the questions raised by folk religions as well as by modern man.

#### *The Kingdom of God*

A whole gospel is founded on a theology of the kingdom of God—in God's rule and work in the world. After the fall, sickness, suffering, starvation, and death became part of the world. Christ's response was to come as a human, as the Second Adam, and to establish and proclaim his kingdom as the new work of God on earth. The message of salvation includes good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight for the blind, and liberty to the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). But how does this kingdom relate to human experiences as people live in the kingdoms of this world with famine, oppression, poverty, suffering, disease, and death?

Down through history prophets have claimed that the kingdom of God has already come in its fullness. Christians, they say, need not be sick or poor or failures or sinners, or even die. In Paul's day some claimed that the resurrection had

already taken place (2 Tim. 2:18). Despite such preaching, sincere, devout, praying Christians remain poor and broken. In fact, they become sick and die.

The kingdom of God has come to earth in the person of Christ. It is found wherever God's people are obedient to the King. It has also come to humans in signs—those times when God shows them through extraordinary experiences what

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the kingdom is like. But signs are not the reality to which they point. Signs of the kingdom are all around, but the kingdom will come in its fullness only with Christ's return (Rev. 12:10). Until then, Christians live between two worlds. They are people of this sinful world. On the one hand they are tempted and sin, they are weak and fail, and the processes of disease, degeneration, and death are at work in them from the moment of birth. On the other they are people of the kingdom—although they sin, in God's sight they are sinless; although they face death, they have eternal life; although they see a decaying world around them, they also see the signs of a heavenly eternal kingdom in the transformed lives of God's people.

#### *Power Linked with the Cross*

Most folk religions seek power as the key to prosperity, health, success, and control over life. In response, Christians need a biblical theology of power. They face two dangers, on the one hand, they may avoid every kind of bold and sensa-

tional act for fear it is magic, even when God asks it of them. The church then is poor in the manifestations of God's power. On the other hand, through zeal to demonstrate God's power Christians can run after the sensational, even when God does not will it. But neither miracles nor the cross can be taken out of the gospel without distorting it.

The Scriptures have much to say about power. God is the God Almighty (*El Shaddai*, Gen. 17:1), who created and sustains all things by his power (Gen. 1), who defeated Satan and his hosts (John 16:33), who will bring all things into subjection to himself (Eph. 1:22). More over, by his might he saves those who turn to him and gives them power to become like him and bear witness to his greatness. All this must be affirmed.

Scripture also has much to say about the ways in which power is to be used. Unfortunately, many Christians think of power the way the world around them does. They see it as active—it manifests itself by demonstrations of might that overcome the resistance of the opposition. Consequently, they seek to show the world God's superiority by means of power encounters that demonstrate his ability to heal and cast out demons, confident that when non-Christians see these, they will believe. Scripture and history show that demonstrations of God's power lead some to believe, but many rise up in opposition, persecuting and often killing God's servants. This includes Satan and his hosts, and humans who oppose God and his kingdom of righteousness both individually and corporately through human institutions such as those that crucified Christ and persecuted the early church.

We need to see anew that God's use of power is demonstrated supremely on the cross. There Satan used his full might to destroy Christ—to provoke him to use his divinity wrongly. Either would have meant defeat for Christ—the first because Satan would have overcome him and the second because it would have destroyed God's plan of salvation. Godly power is always rooted in love, not pride; redemption, not revenge; and concern for the

other, not the self. God's power is humble, not proud, and inviting, not rejecting. Its symbol is the cross, not the sword. This is why the world sees God's power as weakness (1 Cor. 1:23-27).

Christians and churches are in desperate need of showing God's power in transformed lives in a Christlike confrontation of evil wherever they find it, whether demonic, systemic, or personal. They must guard against distortions of a biblical view of power, divorcing it from truth, and the temptation to use power for their own glory. They are stewards, called to be faithful in using the power God gives them for his glory, not their own.

### *A Theology of Discernment*

In dealing with folk religions and split-level Christianity, God's people need a theology of discernment. People seek signs to assure them that God is present, but apart from the fruits of the Spirit, there are no self-authenticating phenomena. Miraculous healings, speaking in tongues, exorcisms, prophecies, resurrections, and other extraordinary experiences are reported in all major religions. For instance, Bab Farid, a Pakistani Muslim saint, is said to have cured incurable diseases, raised a dying man to life, converted dried dates into gold nuggets, and covered vast distances in a moment (Gilchrist 1987, 32).

Hundreds of thousands of people flock each year to the Hindu temple of Venkateswara at Tirupathi, South India, to fulfill vows they made when they prayed to him for healing. Upwards of 15,000 people claim healing each year at Lourdes, and many more at the Virgin of Guadalupe near Mexico City. Scripture points out that Satan counterfeits God's work, and warns God's people to guard against being led astray (Matt. 7:15-16; 1 Tim. 4:1, 7; 2 Tim. 3:1-4:5; 2 Thess. 2:9-10). They are to test the spirits to see whether or not these come from God (1 Cor. 12:3; 1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 John 4:1-6). In this, their attitude should not be one of skepticism, but of openness to hearing the voice of God when he truly speaks to them.

What are the signs that enable Christians to discern the work of God and differentiate it from the work of self or Satan? It is too simple to say that what God's people do is of God (cf. Matt. 7:21-23) and what non-Christians do is of Satan (cf. Num. 22-24). Human experiences must themselves be tested, for they are not self-authenticating.

The Bible provides several clear tests of God's work. First, does it give the glory to God rather than to humans (John 7:18; 8:50; 12:27-28; 17:4)? Around the world today people are drawn to strong personalities, and tend to deify them. This is particularly true in folk religions. Second, does it recognize the lordship of Christ (1 John 2:3-5; 5:3; James 2:14-19)? The test here is not one of orthodoxy, but of submission to Christ in humility and obedience. Third, is the evidence of God's power through the Holy Spirit emphasized, or the manifestations of the flesh? Fourth, does it conform to scriptural teaching? Are those involved willing to submit their lives and teachings to the test of Scripture? Fifth, are the leaders and people accountable to others in the church? The interpretation of Scripture is not a personal matter, but a concern of the church as an hermeneutical community. Sixth, do those involved manifest the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25)? Is there love or self-centeredness, patience or short tempers, gentleness or arrogance? Seventh, does the teaching and practice lead believers toward spiritual maturity (1 Cor. 12-14)? Some things are characteristic of spiritual immaturity which should be left behind as Christians grow spiritually. Eighth, does it lead Christians to seek the unity of the body of Christ, or is it divisive (John 17:11; 1 John 2:9-11; 5:1-2)? This does not mean that divisions will not occur. Rather it means that teachings that lead believers to a sense of spiritual superiority have led them astray, and therefore must be avoided.

### *Suffering and Death*

Christians need a theology of sickness, injury, suffering, and death. The consequences of sin cannot be divorced from each other. The processes of aging and death are at work in humans from the moment of their conception. The side effects of this are sickness and bodily suffering.

Although God often does heal people both by natural and by extraordinary means, for Christians, their full deliverance is only after death, when they receive their new bodies. The hope and joy Christians manifest in godly dying and at funerals has been and often is a powerful testimony to others of the power and nature of the gospel.

Today there is little recognition that it may be God's will for a Christian to be sick, suffer, or undergo trials and difficulties in life, or that God can use these for their good. God can use sickness and suffering to draw people to himself, and to teach them patience and maturity (Job 42:5-6; James 1:2-4). These are also the consequence of persecution for Christ's sake and so Christians, in small measure, share in the suffering of Christ.

Many Christians do not recognize that illnesses are often the body's warning to stop them from living unhealthy lifestyles. Also there is little acknowledgment that Christians and non-Christians share in the common lot of fallen humanity, which includes famines, plagues, and illness. This does not mean that God is uninterested in the lot of his people. Rather it means that he loves both the saved and the lost, that he is working out his purposes in a fallen world, and that one day he will bring in a new and perfect creation.

In dealing with the longings expressed in split-level religions, it is important for churches to be caring communities in which the fallen, sick, oppressed, and needy find refuge, and in which the hostilities and jealousies of life that give rise to witchcraft are handled and forgiven. Churches must also be

places where believers gather to pray for God's blessings, and his deliverance from public crises such as droughts, plagues, and wars. Churches must also be communities that read the Scriptures together and hear what God is saying to them in their particular contexts.

## DANGERS TO AVOID

In dealing with folk religious beliefs and practices, including split-level Christianity, there are dangers to avoid. This fact should not keep us Christians from engaging in the critique of folk religion as well as theological development in specific contexts. It does mean that we should be aware of problems that may arise. Here we seek to caution churches and leaders concerning certain areas that frequently give rise to various problems

### *Syncretism*

The danger in responding to folk religions is not so much heresy as it is syncretism—combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the gospel loses its integrity and message. The problem here is not with old religious beliefs, but with the underlying assumptions on which they are built. The gospel must not only change beliefs, but also transform worldviews, otherwise the new beliefs will be reinterpreted in terms of the old worldviews. The result is Christo-paganism.<sup>6</sup>

One important area needing transformation is that of the magical mentality that dominates most folk religions. If this is not challenged, Christianity will be seen as a new and superior magic. This magical tendency is not restricted to traditional religionists. It is just below the surface in all fallen human beings. Magic makes them gods because it gives them control over nature, supernatural powers, and even God, through the practice of proper rites.

This was the experience of Simon (Acts 8:9-24) the magician who, seeing the miracles of Philip, Peter, and John, wanted to buy their kind of power with money. Peter severely rebuked him for his

old magical worldview. Simon repented, but he had learned a hard lesson—the gospel cannot be reinterpreted in other worldviews. It brings with it its own worldview that supersedes all others.

Magic is the opposite of Christianity. In magic humans are in control. In Christianity they are called to submit uncondi-

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tionally to God and his will. The difference between the two is not in practice. It is in attitude. Magic is formulaic and mechanistic. Christianity is based on worship and relationships. Prayer is magic if supplicants believe they must say the right things in the right tone of voice accompanied by certain right words and actions to be assured of the right results. It is worship when they kneel before God and cast their cares on him. The difference is often subtle. Christians can begin to pray seeking God's help, but, when the answer is delayed, unconsciously begin to become coercive. For instance, Christians can read Scripture to learn and grow, or to gain merit that earns them their desires. Some carry Bibles in their pockets, confident that these, like amulets, will protect them from harm.

Engaging worldviews is not only the task of new Christians in non-Christian contexts. The danger of becoming captive

to non-Christian worldviews is as great or greater among followers of Christ who live in the West where Christian assumptions still often dominate. They are in danger of reinterpreting the gospel in terms of their own cultural categories—of equating it with Western civilization, material prosperity, individualism, human rights, and freedom.

### *Andro-centrism*

One of the most difficult worldview themes to deal with is the andro-centrism of religions created by humans. People see themselves as the center of the world, and everything revolves around them and their lives. Their religions provide them ways to get what they desire by bribing or begging the gods, spirits, and ancestors, and by controlling supernatural powers. The modern worldview shares in this andro-centrism.

Christianity challenges andro-centrism, and calls believers to a theocentric view of reality. New believers come to Christ with their own interests in mind—their salvation, their health, their well-being, their freedom from oppression. God begins with them where they are, and the church must do the same. The starting point is not the problem. The danger is institutionalizing immaturity. God calls Christians to spiritual growth in which their focus on themselves gives way to a love for God and others. While ministering to seekers at their point of need, the primary focus should be on moving them to mature expressions of worship and ministry. Unfortunately, many Christians have bought into the emphasis on personal health and prosperity as ultimate ends, and focus on themselves rather than on the millions around the world who are lost and dying because of poverty, oppression, and violence.

Believe it or not, it is a small step from self-centeredness to self-deification, i.e., the first and most fundamental of human sin. Satan did not tempt Adam and Eve to worship him, but to worship themselves—their own freedom and rights,

and their potential of becoming gods. Self-possession, not demon possession, is the greatest danger facing human beings. It is hard for Christians to move from feeling they need to be in control of their lives to entrusting themselves completely to God's mercy and totally submitting their lives to his will.

The results of self-centeredness in the church can be devastating. It leads to authoritarian leadership, competition, divisions and spiritual pride. Even those renewed in spiritual movements often look down on those not involved, and have a judgmental attitude toward those who disagree with them. Christ-centeredness, in contrast, leads to humility and a desire for the unity of the church, as well as a willingness to hear and speak (Rom. 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:12).

### *Experienced-based Theology*

Folk religion, including split-level Christianity, is existential and experience-based. The result is a pragmatic concern for power rather than truth. Different methods are tried simultaneously to solve human dilemmas, with little concern that these often contradict one another. In such settings it is easy for Christians to base their theology on experience. From this point of view the test of truth is success. The sign of spiritual life and vital worship is feelings of excitement, health, and prosperity. As Jonathan Edwards pointed out, experiences are not self-authenticating.<sup>7</sup> They must themselves be tested for their reality and cause. Christians need to avoid reading their experiences and theologies into Scripture—focusing on their experiences rather than on Scripture itself.

A corollary of experience-based theologies is confusing reports with reality. In folk religions there are many stories of spirits, visions, miraculous events, magical powers, witchcraft, fulfilled prophecies, guidance through divination, and the successes of amulets and rituals to protect people from calamities. It is important to take these seriously, for they reflect the reality as the people see it and upon which

they act. It is equally important not to equate all phenomenological reports with ontological reality. Careful, sensitive investigation of these reports is needed, and independent verification sought when possible. Christians must also test the sources of these events when they prove to be real. Certainly not all that is attributed to God is his doing.

### *Reinforcing Secularism*

Contradictory as it may seem, by overemphasizing miracles Christians can reinforce secularism. For instance, by looking for supernatural events as manifestations of God's presence, they imply that God is not directly at work in natural phenomena which in the West are studied by science. As the knowledge of science grows, God is increasingly pushed to the margins of life. Moreover, as miracles become routine, they no longer appear to be extraordinary, and people look for new and more spectacular miracles to reassure themselves that God is with them. The net effect of these dynamics is the secularization of everyday life. The answer lies neither in seeking miracles, nor in denying them. It is to reject the dualistic dichotomy of miracle and natural together, and to see the naturalness of God's extraordinary healings and the miraculous nature of his ordinary ones. The church must avoid making miracles the signs of God's presence—making the phenomena the center of its attention and ministry.

Christians rejoice when God works in extraordinary ways to heal the sick, deliver the bewitched, and bring justice to the oppressed. What about those who are not delivered? Too often they experience a false sense of guilt and despair, but who are in the greatest need of ministry. To attribute sickness and death to a lack of faith or to spiritual defeat is too simple an answer—nor is it biblical (Job; John 9:2; 2 Cor. 12:7-9). Even more than a theology of healing, the church needs a theology of suffering and death—one that does not see these as failures, but as part of God's greater redemptive work in a fallen world.

It is important to be biblically balanced (Matt. 23:23-24). It is easy to emphasize one truth at the expense of others. It is easy to begin with Christ as the center of a Christian's life, but in the business of life to unwittingly move the center to one of the expressions of the gospel such as healing, justice, peace, or deliverance. The pitfall is that in time Christ becomes peripheral and the justifier of what is now the Christian's real concern. Balance is maintained only if Christ, not a particular cause, remains the true center of believers' lives.

In folk religions leaders are often charismatic authoritarian prophets, who develop personality cults. People who do not understand what is going on in life are attracted to a big leader who claims to know the way. Such leaders often appear in young churches, but this creates problems. It encourages most Christians to be followers, who have an uncritical trust in their leaders. They attribute healings, prophecies, and miracles to the leader. The leaders are tempted to take credit for the work, and encourage the adoration of their followers, and not be accountable to others. We must see that leadership, healing, guidance, exorcisms, and other ministries in the church belong to the congregation. Some members may have particular gifts, but they use these as members of the body.

We now return to the critical contextualization model to follow through on an understanding of the first two steps with their emphasis on local phenomenology and biblical understanding.

## **STEP THREE: DISCERNING THE TRUTH**

The third step in the process of "critical contextualization" is to evaluate old beliefs and practices in the light of biblical truth. It is important to recall that our aim is not to destroy folk religions and to replace them with formal Christianity. It is to develop a vibrant Christianity religion that is rooted in the gospel. The life of the church is found in a laity for whom

the gospel is a reality that reconciles them to God and one another, and touches every area of their lives.

It is important to note, too, that there is no standard formula for dealing with folk religions. They vary greatly from culture society to culture society, and a different response must be made to each of them. There is not one kind of witchcraft. Practices loosely labeled witchcraft are found around the world. Similarly, there are many varieties of ancestor veneration, ways of seeking guidance, and beliefs in spirits and possession.

Given this diversity, it is important to provide churches with broad theological principles for dealing with the specific beliefs and practices they face. It is even more important to teach them how to do theology and how to do contextualization in their own contexts. Only as churches take this task upon themselves will they become mature and learn to live as Christians in their particular socio-cultural contexts. Only then will they learn to preach the gospel in ways that are understood by the people, and respond to needs without compromising the church's prophetic call. Answers to the questions raised by folk religions must be hammered out in the context of the local beliefs and practices, and constantly be reformulated as times and cultures change. This is best done by local Christians who understand and live in these settings.

Today young churches around the world are formulating their own theologies. Severe tensions often develop between daughter and parent churches, but the young churches can no longer turn back. If they are to make the gospel relevant to their own people, they must do theology in their own cultural settings. Attempts to export theologies developed in the West and to preserve them unchanged have to a great extent failed.

#### *Developing a Meta-Theology*

If believers are free to do theology, what are the theological absolutes? Evangelicals hold the Scripture to be true, for it is God's revelation, but how can Christians preserve that truth if they allow all

believers to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own cultural settings? The answer lies in a meta-theology—a biblically based way of doing theology that sets limits to theological diversity. What follows are some principles for a biblically based meta-theology.

## THE VITAL CONTINUITY AND EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY AROUND THE WORLD REQUIRES BOTH A TRUE GOSPEL AND A TRULY TRANSFORMED CHURCH.

#### *Rooted in Divine Revelation*

The first principle of a biblically based meta-theology is that theological reflection must be rooted in the acceptance of Scripture as divine revelation. The Bible is not a record of humans searching for God, but of God revealing himself to them in the particular contexts of history, culture, and society. It is the source not only for finding answers to human questions, but of defining the worldview through which they should look at reality and live their lives.

#### *Guided by the Holy Spirit*

The second principle of a biblically based meta-theology recognizes that, believers must seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in when interpreting Scripture. They must study it on their knees, in a spirit of humility, willing to listen and learn rather than with traditional dogmatic self-assurance. Christians must recognize that their theology is an understanding of Scripture—not Scripture itself. Consequently, although they must hold their theological convictions strongly, to the point of being willing to die for them, yet must not equate these with Scripture. They must admit that their understanding of truth is partial, biased, and possibly

wrong, needing correction. They must test their convictions by returning to Scripture and to the God of Scripture. They must recognize that the same Holy Spirit that they seek to guide them in their understanding of the Bible is also at work in other believers. They must allow others the greatest privilege they allow themselves—to make mistakes.

#### *Done by the Church*

The third meta-theological principle emphasizes the need for Christians to be open to the checks of the larger Christian community. Interpretation and application of Scripture in everyday life are not just personal matters based on one's private and personal opinion. Ultimately the church as a whole must interpret the Word and act as an hermeneutical community.

On the global level, when people from different cultures study Scripture together, they can help one another check cultural biases. It is almost impossible for individual Christians to see the cultural grids they bring with them to their understanding of the Bible. These are better seen by other worldviews. For this reason, missionaries and church leaders from outside play important roles in helping local churches to do theology, not by dictating the answers, but by acting as catalysts helping the people to understand Scriptures better, and to gently remind them of their cultural biases. It is more important that Christians learn to take their questions to Scripture and the God of Scripture, than that they get all their answers right from the start.

#### *Evaluating the Context*

A fourth principle of meta-theology highlights one of the hermeneutical tasks of the church which is to evaluate and respond to the socio-cultural and historical contexts in which she finds herself. Here it must undertake the process of "critical contextualization". Missionaries and church leaders can help local churches work their way through the process by encouraging the congregations to

gather information on the old ways when problems arise. Christians may respond to old beliefs and practices in different ways. They will keep many old cultural ways, just as Christians in the West do, but they will reject other customs as unchristian. Outsiders may not understand the reasons for this repudiation, but the people know the deep hidden meanings of their old ways. Sometimes missionaries and pastors need to question practices people have overlooked because these seem so natural to them. Christians will transform some old practices by giving these explicit Christian meanings.

After critically evaluating their old ways, people, led by their leaders need to create new beliefs and practices that are both Christian and indigenous. Although they are no longer pagans, they should not imitate Western Christianity. The process of "critical contextualization" takes the Bible as the rule of faith and life seriously. It recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God's leading. It also strengthens the church by making it an hermeneutical community in which everyone seeks to understand God's message to his people in the context of their culture and everyday lives.

*It is the need for this dynamic interplay between text and interpreters which we wish to emphasize. Today's readers cannot come to the text in a personal vacuum, and should not try to. Instead, they should come with an awareness of concerns stemming from their cultural background, personal situation, and the responsibility to others. These concerns will influence the questions which are put to the Scriptures. What is received back, however, will not be answers only, but more questions. As we address Scripture, Scripture addresses us. We find that our culturally conditioned presuppositions are being challenged and our questions corrected. In fact, we are compelled to reformulate our previous questions and to ask fresh ones... This process is a kind of upward spiral in which Scripture remains always central and normative. We wish to emphasize that the task of understanding Scriptures belongs not just to individuals but to the*

*whole Christian community, seen as both a contemporary and historical fellowship (LCWE 1978, 11).*

Contextualization must be an ongoing process in the life of the church. On the one hand, the world is constantly changing, raising new questions that must be addressed. On the other hand, all human understandings and obedience to the gospel are partial. Through continued study and response, all Christians should grow in spiritual maturity.

#### STEP FOUR: MINISTRIES OF TRANSFORMATION

The fourth and final step in "critical contextualization" is to establish ministries that transform individuals and churches. This enables individuals and congregations to move from where they are to where God wants them to be. Christian faith is not simply an intellectual exercise in search of truth, nor is it primarily positive feelings of worship to Christ. It must go beyond knowledge of biblical truths to their application in the lives people live. It is the process of hearing and applying the unchanging truths of the gospel to life issues in specific contexts. It is to follow Christ as Lord in every area of life.

How does this transformation of lives and communities take place? Missionaries and church leaders cannot expect people simply to abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. People can only move from where they are by a process of transformation. This is true for individuals as well as social and cultural systems. The leaders must begin where the people are, and lead them step by step toward God's ways. This process is often slow and halting, as believers move forward and slide back. It is often piecemeal. Believers deal first with one area of their lives and then another, often overlooking what to outsiders are important areas needing transformation. In all this, leaders must be patient and redemptive, and not give up.

On one level, transformation is personal. In Christ, people become new crea-

tures. As Bible points out, their lives should reflect the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, making them holy and Christlike in character. The transformation begins with conversion, but it must continue throughout life as believers grow in holiness and Christian maturity. People come with their sins and scars, and leaders must begin with them where they are and gently lead them to Christian maturity. Evangelism and discipling are both essential to the life of the church. The first without the second leads to weak, immature churches poorly grounded in faith. The second without the first leads to ingrown, pharisaical churches that die in their self-centeredness.

On another level, transformation must also occur in social and cultural systems. Corporate transformation must begin in the church. The Christian community, as the body of Christ, is the outpost of God's reign on earth and should manifest the social order of the kingdom of God, which is based on love, reconciliation, servanthood and submission to Christ. The explicit beliefs and underlying worldview of the church must also be transformed to fit those in Scripture. If new converts learn Christian teaching, but continue to think in terms of the underlying categories and assumptions of their old worldview, the gospel will be subverted. The social organization of the church must be transformed. A church that holds to orthodox teachings but operates like the world denies the reality of the gospel. The vital continuity and expansion of Christianity require both a true gospel and a transformed church. The gospel gives life to the church, and the church proclaims the gospel. Either without the other soon dies (cf. Lingenfelter 1998).

Ministries of transformation must focus on people, not programs. They are not tasks to be accomplished by means of human engineering and action. They begin with learning to understand people, identifying with them, and building relationships of love and trust. They involve communicating the gospel in ways the



people understand, and helping them to critique their old ways and think biblically in their everyday lives.<sup>8</sup>

Ministry is an ongoing process, not a job to complete. People hear the gospel through their existing categories, assumptions and beliefs. Conversion begins when they turn to Christ as Lord, but it must lead to the transformation of their beliefs, values, worldviews and lives. The movement toward a mature, truly biblical understanding of reality is a long and difficult one because it calls Christians to new and radical ways of thinking and living in their societies and cultures.

## Conclusion

Every church has a prophetic calling. It must proclaim the good news that creation will one day be restored to perfection; that sickness, loneliness, pain, and death will cease; and that all God's people will spend eternity in his presence with unbounded joy and wholeness. This, truly, is the good life. The church must examine the socio-cultural context in which God has placed it, and speak out against sin, injustice, oppression, and hatred. The criteria for making judgments are not the values of the world, nor the majority vote of all those who call themselves Christian. It is the Word of God, understood and applied by communities of committed believers, and proclaimed to the society in which they live. Particular responsibility is placed on leaders to help their congregations in this ministry (1 Tim. 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9).

Churches must deal with the challenges raised by folk religions. If they do not, their public witness will be compromised by the private practices of their members. Only when all areas of life are brought under the lordship of Christ will churches have a vibrant life and winsome witness in the world.

Increasingly in our pluralist world, these issues are no longer pertinent for missionaries, but regularly confront the churches in what used to be largely homogeneous communities in Western Europe and North America. Split-level Christian-

ity is a phenomena that impacts every corner of the world today. Presenting the underlying principles, we hope will enable Christians to effectively relate to their neighbors next door as well as half way around the world.

“Critical contextualization” remains an ongoing process that will not end until we all stand around the throne of God and join that great throng of believers from every language, tribe, and nation, and worship the Lamb who was slain for the

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salvation of all people. To him alone be wisdom, honor, power, and glory for ever and ever, amen! (Rev. 7:9, 11).

## END NOTES

1. Father Jaime Bulatao who referred to it in 1962, and later elaborated on the concept in *Split-Level Christianity*, Manila: Ateneo de Manila, 1992)

2. [Editor's note: The authors call this two-tier phenomena "religious schizophrenia." They claim that this has its roots in the modern missionary movement that largely originated in the West which was profoundly shaped by the Age of Exploration and the Enlightenment. This is studied in their book *Understanding Folk Religion*, especially in the very important first chapter of their book: "Split-Level Christianity."]

3. [Editor's note: This article is a condensed version of chapters 14 and 15 from their book *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices*, 1999 Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Mich.]

4. [Editor's note: The trinitarian and biblical concept of God is presented in Chapter 5 of their book.]

5. By "middle-zone" is understood a reality of life, beliefs and practices existing between formal religion on the one hand and science and the natural world on the other. In Western societies this middle-zone is frequently a hidden reality, or worse, an excluded from existence reality. It includes this-worldly supernatural realities such as earthly spirits, magic, evil eye, divination, and the like.

6. Christo-paganism is the older term used for syncretism. It was widely used in Latin America where much of folk religion looked Christian (or looked Catholic) on the outside, but where the inside (worldview) remained essentially pagan or animistic.

7. Jonathan Edwards was involved in a great revival in which there were many experiences, both positive and negative. In the process he

developed a number of criteria for discerning the work of God in a person's life. (Edwards 1959)

8. Those who expect to find in *Understanding Folk Religion* strategies for quick solutions to the problems raised by folk religions will be disappointed. Ministry is built on principles, not formulas. Transformative ministries have to do with the particular. The gospel is truth for people living in specific places and times, and caught in their own dilemmas. In dealing with folk religions it is important to remember that they are incredibly diverse. There are many kinds of witchcraft, divination, spirit possession, and magic, and each requires a biblical response that deals with its particular nature. Specific missiological answers must be formulated in specific contexts. Our book does not provide ready answers to the many different beliefs and practices of folk religions around the world. It seeks to provide a conceptual framework whereby Christians can think biblically about folk religions they encounter.

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[Editor's note: This article has been extracted and edited from *Understanding Folk Religion* published last year by Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Mich. Permission granted.]

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The largest folk religion in the world is the Chinese folk religion which has an estimated 400 million followers worldwide or about 6.6 percent of the world's population. All folk religions combined have more followers than Buddhism or Judaism, claiming about 10 percent of the world population in total. Only Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism have more followers. And in so doing, these practices are labeled as "folk Christianity" among Christian countries and "folk Islam" in those of Islamic nations. Without question, folk religion is considered a distorted, if not meaningless, practice of religion by lay people outside of the control of clergy or the supervision of theologians. As one would imagine, there is a certain amount of acrimony between the two. Understanding folk religion: A Christian response to popular beliefs and practices. PG Hiebert, RD Shaw. Baker Books, 2000. 352. 2000. Exotic readings of cultural texts [and comments and reply]. RM Keesing, RD Davis, A De Ruijter, JW Fernandez, JA Fishman, Current Anthropology 30 (4), 459-479, 1989. 148. 1989. Transculturation: The cultural factor in translation and other communication tasks. RD Shaw, RD Shaw. William Carey Libr., 1988. Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion. PG Hiebert, RD Shaw, T Tiñou. International Journal of Frontier Missions 16 (4), 173-182, 1999. Kathairo discipleship studies would help split-level Christians experience God's cleansing from dependence upon folk beliefs and cures. Romanian church leaders need to master biblical teachings that reject folk beliefs and practices. Another step necessary in addressing the issue of split-level Christianity in Romania is specific missiological training for local church leaders. In Romania 60 percent of pastors were trained during Communism when schools and seminaries were poorly equipped and lacked trained professors. This is especially true in the field of missiology and the contextualization of the gospel. In religious studies and folkloristics, folk religion, popular religion, or vernacular religion comprises various forms and expressions of religion that are distinct from the official doctrines and practices of organized religion. The precise definition of folk religion varies among scholars. Sometimes also termed popular belief, it consists of ethnic or regional religious customs under the umbrella of a religion, but outside official doctrine and practices. Adherents of folk religions, Jews and members of other religions make up smaller shares of the world's people. Muslims experienced the greatest natural increase among all religious groups, including Christians. Births to Muslims between 2010 and 2015 outnumbered deaths by 152 million (213 million births vs. 61 million deaths). Globally, all major groups had more births than deaths. Indeed, fertility differences between religious groups are one of the key factors behind current population trends and will be important for future growth. Globally, Muslims have the highest fertility rate of any religious group " an average of 2.9 children per woman, well above replacement level (2.1), the minimum typically needed to maintain a stable population.