

A THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR INTERVENTION MINISTRIES

MCC Seminars (Spring, 1994)



by C. Norman Kraus

MCC Occasional Paper, No. 20

May 1994

MCC Occasional Papers are a publication of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). This series features manuscripts by MCC volunteers and staff on topics related to MCC programs and concerns. The papers do not necessarily reflect official MCC policy.

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In Appreciation

We owe a special word of thanks to Donald Kraybill and the Young Center Program of Elizabethtown College under whose auspices I prepared and gave these lectures for the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) staff.

The Center’s invitation to be a Young Center Fellow (Spring 1994) prompted me to initiate the project and supported me through it.

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..... PRESENCE, INTERVENTION, PROCLAMATION

Preface to Series

A great deal has been written about “presence” in contrast to proclamation or evangelization. Too often the issues are stacked from the beginning by the way in which the words are defined. Characteristics often associated with “presence” are compassion, empathy, respect, humility, openness, dialogue. Words associated with evangelization are pity, monologue, arrogance, exclusivism, intrusion. Issues like the relative value of action and word, the relation between act and word, the imposition—perhaps well-intentioned, but nonetheless imposition—of one culture/religion upon another, the importance of a verbalized “gospel” for salvation are involved in this discussion.

Many of the same words associated with “proclamation” would also be associated with “intervention”—imposition, patronizing, implicit cultural arrogance which leads to well-meant ignorance and presumption. This negative association is so strong that we hesitate to admit that MCC is a service institution for agapeic intervention, much less an institution for relief and development. We do not like to be identified as a social “change agent.” We just want to be a “presence”—to stand alongside, “to suffer with,” “identify with,” and “learn from.”

But what if we add the adjectives empathetic, respectful, humble, or dialogical to intervention? Is that a kind of “presence?” And suppose we add the words compassionate, respectful, and dialogical to the word “proclamation?” Is that an oxymoron?

My thesis is that MCC is an institution for agapeic intervention in situations of need. It does not send service workers into the various parts of the world merely to be respectfully and sympathetically present, but to be *catalytic* and *dialogical* change agents. This is fundamentally implicit in its explicit Christian identity as a part of the God-Movement (Kingdom) inaugurated by Jesus Christ.

First, then, let me explain what I mean by “catalytic.” In chemistry, of which I know very little, a catalytic agent is one that induces change without compounding with and changing the molecular structure of its host elements. “Catalysis,” however, is a process of modification, of releasing the host element from inhibitive obstructions and inducing intrinsic changes in it.

Using this as a metaphor I would describe a social catalyst as a change agent that induces desired modifications in the host culture which are integral and intrinsic to its well being. The implication is that although the changes are desirable and desired, there are inhibiting elements that prevent the changes taking place. The catalyst attempts to work respectfully and unintrusively to induce changes that will enhance the host culture.

This leads to our second term, “dialogical.” Dialogue is the method of social catalysis. It is first of all a relationship before it is an activity—a relationship in which one is open to and respectful of the partner. It seeks to avoid all imposition. David Lochhead points out that it is a relationship implicit in the Christian concept of *agape* (*The Dialogical Imperative*, Orbis, 1988). The evangelical goal of dialogue is respectful, but frank and sincere, communication in order to establish voluntary human community on its highest possible moral and spiritual level. And, of course, from the Christian perspective Jesus Christ represents the pinnacle of human community.

In order to have a genuine dialogue several things are necessary. First, the dialogical partners must have clear self-identities. It is extremely difficult to dialogue with a “nobody.” Second, they must be willing to sincerely identify with the partner and listen to her/him. Such identification does not mean uncritical agreement. Rather, it means an empathetic willingness to put oneself in the others’ place and see from their perspective.

And third, dialogical partners must be willing to share frankly and intelligently from their own experience. Remember, the goal of catalytic dialogue is not to find the lowest common denominator, but to generate change toward the highest common denominator. In case you are thinking that this does not sound very theological let me comment that this is the heart of what we call “incarnational” disclosure.

This brings us to the concept of “presence.” What do we mean by presence as a missiological term? A lot of the debate about presence as a service strategy stems from the ambiguity of the term. In the first place the word has a strong theological association. The New Testament word is *parousia* which is translated coming, arrival or presence. In theology we speak of Christ’s first and second *parousia*. Thus the concept of presence is closely associated with incarnation in the first instance, and with the final realization God’s purposes in Christ at the end of history.

In missiological usage, then, “presence” indicates an incarnational identification with others. What does it mean to be truly present to someone? Or to be cross-culturally present? When we speak of the significance of “presence,” whose or what presence do we mean? And how is that presence to be identified?

Much of the discussion of presence treats it simply as a mode or strategy of service. It speaks to the question how I as an individual should present myself in the service context. For example, shall I be present as a “nice guy,” i.e., an exemplary humanitarian servant? an expert with helpful technical knowledge to share? a compassionate Christian ready to share the burdens? (E.g., see Sandra Franklin and Melody Rupley, “Presence vs. Intervention,” *Intercom*, February 1993.)

Actually, it is virtually impossible to be present simply as “I-myself-and-me.” Simply entering into the situation from the outside raises the questions where we come from, and who we represent. Further, a western origin almost inevitably raises a presumption of suspicion. We inevitably carry a socio-cultural identity that qualifies the presence we project. For example, we learned in India that house servants have a favorable bias toward Americans in contrast to British.

Is the identity we present that of an institutional North American church program (MCC) of which we are the “presence”? Is it the identity of western liberal Christianity which is received as basically a sympathetic secular presence? Is it the presence of a confessing fellowship of Christians, perhaps local, of which I am a part? Is it the identity of a religious proselytizer, or of a developer who wants to help me modernize?

Or is it the presence of God as he was present to us in Christ that we want to make explicit? And if so, how do we do this? Some years ago I visited a Roman Catholic project among the Muslims of Garisa, Kenya. A monastic order was running a secondary education program for Muslim children, and on the basis of theological as well as pragmatic principles they carefully avoided influencing children to become Christians. In fact, they strongly discouraged conversion. They justified their presence simply as a worshiping, sacramental presence there. “The sacramental presence of Christ in the eucharist sanctifies the work and brings salvation into the situation,” they told me.

In our own church tradition we have emphasized the presence of the Spirit of Christ manifest in actions and words of his followers. We have been promised that the Spirit/spirit of Christ will make God present in our actions and words. Thus MCC workers go “im Namen Christi,” that is, in the style and under the authority of Christ. To go in the name of Christ means to go explicitly as his representative signifying his presence and power at work inaugurating the rule of God.

But this raises a very real question. How do we communicate that it is God’s/Christ’s presence which is the basic reality, and not merely our own cultural-religious presence or that of some service organization? Can we do it with actions only? Can we separate actions and words? Is not speaking an act?

When we were in Chengdu, China we were buying some wall hangings from a local artist who knew a little English. We were trying to rivet his Chinese name into our minds when he said simply, “My Christian name is Timothy.” It was as if he had quietly drawn the fish symbol in the sand! His unassuming verbal identification changed the whole relationship paradigm. It gave his pictures of birds and flowers a new ambience.

The manner of our presence is part of our identity. For example, tourists have a definite presence and identity. What kind of presence is indicated in our role, attitude, and pattern of relationships? Is it a managerial presence? A presence of power and privilege? A serving presence? A sympathizing presence? An official presence? A patronizing presence? A learner’s presence? A teaching presence? On several occasions when I was first introduced into a new situation and culture I was asked, “Well, what did you come to teach us?” The missionaries, both missionaries and service workers, who had preceded me had left the impression that they were the “teachers.”

Related to this is the question of how we are perceived to be present. Is our presence understood as a “mission”? If so, how does that affect the possibility of real identification? One of our Japanese leaders once raised the question, “What is the difference between the missionaries and the Japanese church leaders?” And he answered his own rhetorical question, “After awhile the missionaries go home.” In any case we

must be careful not to confuse our presence with the PRESENCE we have come to represent. We do not want to leave the impression that the presence of the Spirit of Christ leaves when we go.

With this in mind I would like to consider with you the conception of our ministries; the spiritual formation necessary to intervention ministries; the nature of the evangelization process as we attempt to enculturate the gospel; and the nature of the world system that we are confronting in our ministries.

SEMINAR I CHANGE AGENTS—CATALYSTS FOR ALTERNATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

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My concern focuses on our basic conception of the mission and goals of MCC, and with the strategies and programs we follow to accomplish these goals. I am concerned that we underscore and strengthen the Christian spiritual nature of our mission and goals in contrast to their more secular (or neutral) character. I think that this is the same issue that Ray Brubacher addresses when he calls for a more explicit “missiology.” And it is definitely related to the kinds of issues that Tim Lind raised in his “Indochina/Thailand Evaluation Report” (June 1993). The evangelism/service, and proclamation/presence issues need to be worked out in this larger context.

I am convinced that a missiology adequate to carry us into the future must be one that encompasses both mission boards and service organizations. We begin to lose our integrity when we insist on two separate parallel tracks, one for service and one for evangelism. Perhaps we should think of the two kinds of organizations as the two rails making up one track heading to one destination. Such a unified missiology will have important implications for mission boards as well as service organizations.

Within MCC there are differences of opinion about the mission. Our missiology has been largely implicit and arrived at pragmatically. In part it reflects a negative assessment of a type of “spirituality” and evangelism that seems reductionist and narrow to us. In our reaction *against* we struggle to find an adequate, authentic, holistic alternative *to* the old model. Both in MCC and in our mission boards we struggle with the spiritual-physical schizophrenia of our sharply dualistic cultural heritage. We speak of “holistic ministries,” but we find it hard to integrate the spiritual, psychological and physical dimensions. (E.g., we do not have an adequate theology of work.) (Cf. Miroslav Volf, *Work in the Spirit*, Oxford, 1991.)¹

In both MEDA and MCC development work we have largely assumed that a “free market” economy is the basic paradigm for *Christian* relief and development work. We have downsized, contextualized and personalized the development model. We have worked self- consciously in the context of the local churches of the host countries to improve the lives of those we attempt to help. We have added explicit religious ministries such as translation of Bible commentaries, loans for church buildings, teaching in Bible schools and seminaries.

All this I affirm. But new economic realities, new cultural developments and sensitivities, new theological insights from liberation theology, and new practical experiences in the contexts of violence challenge us to reexamine our economic assumptions, and to define more clearly just what kind of “development” we want to promote. And this requires that we be more explicit about the fundamentally spiritual nature of our purpose and program strategies.

¹ Miroslav Volf is an evangelical voice from Romania, now teaching at Fuller Theological Seminary. He speaks of the “materiality of salvation” and “God’s desire to bring integrity to the whole human being including the body, and to the whole of injured reality.” (p. 104)

To further complicate the matter this redefinition must be done in the context of religious pluralism and the theological position which holds that God is equally at work for the salvation of individuals through all religions. For some people this has raised the issue of

MCC's explicit christocentrism. Does Christianity have a distinct spirituality and ethic that should guide us and be reflected in our program priorities and strategies? What does it mean for local organizations and programs to say that what we do is "In the Name of Christ"? How significant is it that the name of Jesus be verbally identified?

From the opposite direction, the Evangelicals are insisting on the priority of verbal proclamation of the gospel and the formation of churches as we know them in the West. Except for the most conservative fundamentalistic groups, they insist that this "church growth" approach be conceived in the context of a "holistic" mission that recognizes the physical and social aspects of life as well. However, they continue to clearly distinguish between spiritual and social and insist on the priority of the spiritual. (Actually MCC belongs in this tradition and has had a very creative influence on this ongoing discussion.)

This raises a different set of questions. How explicit need we be in advocating the name of Jesus Christ? How do we define "holistic"? Does it imply that social, cultural and physical aspects of life are dimensions of the "salvation" which Christ proclaimed? How are the healing, reconciling, economic sharing—the peacemaking and social justice aspects of life, involved in "spiritual" salvation? And is there a specific priority and order to these dimensions? Is there a strategic procedural order that must be followed in witness to the kingdom?

I have stated my own perspective in the prefacing chapter. There I said, "My thesis is that MCC is an institution for agapeic intervention." When I use the word agape I am referring to a specifically Christian concept which was embodied in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. When I say that we are interventionist, I am simply identifying MCC as an institution representing the continuing mission of God begun in Christ's incarnational ministry. Jesus Christ is God's **intervention** into the human scene, and the church through the presence and empowerment of the Spirit of Christ continues that intervention ministry.

Although we will be discussing it more at a later session, I might add here that I think that we need to give an explicit witness to Christ. This for two reasons. First, we must disassociate ourselves from Western Christianity as a cultural religion. This is especially true in Asia. Second, we need to identify the source and enabling power for the new possibilities and patterns we offer. We are not offering a Mennonite presence and package!

Catalytic Intervention—the Incarnational Style

The term that we have used for at least the last quarter century to describe our missionary and service stance is "incarnational." We took it for granted that we should intervene with the gospel and with material and social services, but we have become

increasingly sensitive to the way in which we stepped into situations of need. Now I am suggesting the word “catalytic” as a synonym of incarnational in order to indicate the way in which we attempt to bring about change.

While we are clearly interventionist, like most medical doctors we prefer “non-intrusive intervention” when at all possible. Webster defines intrusion as “the act of wrongfully entering upon, seizing, or taking possession of the property of another”—an uninvited forcible entry. To intrude is “to thrust oneself in without invitation, permission or welcome.” E.g., the United Nations’ intervention into Somalia was intrusive. Our concern is to not be *intrusive*.

According to an incarnational model, where the change agent is from the outside, it is important that the innovations should not be forced or manipulated. As Luzbetak says of applied anthropology, “we wish through cooperation rather than manipulation of any kind, to influence the society’s patterns of behavior” (*The Church and Cultures*, Orbis, 1988, 168). The innovations should be culturally relevant and “whenever possible be presented as something that will complete and perfect the existing cultural design” (*ibid.* 161).

The fact of cultural change is not problematic. Cultures are dynamic, highly adaptive, and constantly adjusting to new circumstances. What kind of change and how that change is brought about is of concern. Sometimes the change agent is from within the culture (innovation); sometimes from outside (diffusion). The Christian gospel is concerned with the nature and goals of change. Indeed, change (*metanoia* or repentance) is at the heart of the gospel.

Thus the outside change agent must be ready to adapt to the host culture, especially in its “overt” aspects, namely the physical and psychological-social. So far as the “covert,” or ideational, i.e., belief, thought patterns, and emotional evaluation aspects are concerned, empathy and honesty are required. One should view the cultural expressions “*emically*,” i.e., from the inside, rather than bring foreign cultural norms and meanings into the context as an immediate basis of judgment.

This calls for respect, understanding, honest self-examination, and non-threatening authentic communication. It does not require an indiscriminate adoption of the host culture (“going native”) in the hope of being accepted. Indeed, such a response is dishonest.

Such a stance does not necessarily imply a radical cultural relativity, i.e., that there are no absolutes and every cultural expression is as valid as every other. Rather it implies that every culture is a human creation and has the potential of expressing authentic human community under the covenant of the Creator. It also implies that every human culture is at best a relative expression of the absolute norm of **agape** (self-giving mutuality and interdependence).

To say that all cultural systems are relative implies further that *all* cultural systems, including Christian culture, have dysfunctional elements which degrade and alienate human beings. It simply is not true that every cultural pattern or religious value is equally functional and effective for authentic human development. As cross-cultural

catalysts, however, we must be careful to heed the warning of Jesus, namely, that we do not try to take the speck of dust out of the other culture's eye while ignoring the log in our own culture's eye (Matt. 7:3).

As change agents we are attempting to introduce innovations that will change dysfunctional aspects of the cultural system whether they be economic, social, or religious and moral values and practices. We are not simply trying to help individuals escape the system. Of course we must begin with individuals, but our aim is to introduce innovations into the system through changed individuals and relationships. That is why the contextualization, or as the Roman Catholics put it, the inculturation, of the new personal-social possibility (gospel) is so necessary. This is the reason for our insistence upon the change agent's identification with or incarnation into the culture.

What Kind of Intervention?

To determine what kind of intervention is needed we must first analyze and make a diagnosis. How do we view those we serve, and how do we understand the problem we have come to address? Is the problem basically maldistribution of the world's goods? Then finding ways to share material aid and working out fair trade policies is the solution. Is it technological? Then appropriate technology and "development" would seem to be the answer. Is it conflict and violence? Then mediation? Is it spiritual poverty and deviancy? Etc. Of course the actual situational problems are complex and vary in any time and place. But we bring basic presuppositions and definitions to each of these situations.

The biblical-christian view of humans is that they are spiritual covenant animals in contrast to Aristotle's view that they are rational social animals. They are more than "economic animals" as Adam Smith's theory of work and economic consumption seems to imply. More than "psycho-somatic" creatures, i.e., a single unified body of mental and physical processes and activities, which is the modern secular view. In these terms they are *pneumo-somatic*, i.e., creatures whose mental-physical bodies (*soma*) have a transcendent or spiritual (*pneumatikos*) destiny in God. Their ultimate self-identity is found in their relationship to God, not only to their physical world and one another.

Defining the Spiritual

Before this talk about a spiritual God-dimension can be very useful in our service strategy, we will need to define the spiritual dimension. I would identify it as follows:

- (1) the *self-understanding* of ourselves and others as children of God in the image of the Creator, namely, that characteristic which makes it worth a Mother Teresa's self-sacrifice to give a fellow human being a meaningful death in a compassionate setting.
- (2) the *personal quality* of human beings that opens them to the transcendent dimensions and moral demands of life, namely, submission to and trust in God

(faith) which enables them to put compassion and self-sacrifice (love) ahead of their own egocentric (sarx) desires and fears.

- (3) the *intuition of a destiny* beyond physical mortality (hope) which leads them to risk death in the pursuit of human value and well being.
- (4) the *self-awareness that humankind's highest self-identity* and ultimate meaning is found in solidarity (*koinonia*) under the loving dominion of the God whom Jesus called Father.

With this understanding of humanity's essential nature, it becomes obvious that the human problem is fundamentally "spiritual." Or to put it negatively, it is not simply technological, political, or economic. But in order to understand what this means we need a new conceptualization of spirit.

The human spirit is not a separate part of our individual being like an arm is part of the body. It is not something distinct from and added to our bodies and minds and somehow more essential than they are. Rather, spirit is a holistic term. Spirit describes the whole human being in his/her wholeness made "in the image of God;" for example, not as an "economic animal," or a "tool-making animal," but as a "spiritual animal." The whole self is more than the sum of the parts. In theological terms, it is a creation of the Spirit of God and shares in that Spirit.

So the spiritual describes the texture of our total being. It is the distinctly human dimension of our being both individually and socially. **We might speak of it as both a transcendent and depth dimension which involves us in relationship to God and to each other—what the Bible calls the "heart,"** i.e, the personal depth of our being. It expresses itself most clearly in our self-image which is simply the under side of our God-image; in our motivations, our underlying assumptions and rationalizations. It is expressed in our human cultures.

Thus to say that the human problem is fundamentally spiritual does not locate the problem in some religious or mystical realm, but rather, locates the material, the economic, the physiological and psychological dimensions within the context of the larger holistic and transcendent reality. It defines the problem, not in reductionist but in holistic terms, not simply in behavioral patterns but in terms of personal-social dynamics and values.

If the human problem, then, is basically a spiritual problem and we do not deal with it, our relief, development, and mediation work will be superficial. As Luzbetak observes, "technical development by no means implies that a technologically advanced society is necessarily able to deal more successfully with its social problems or that it has a greater capacity to cope with its ideational environment more satisfactorily than a less technologically developed society" (*The Church and Cultures*, 1988, p. 314). Or as Walter Wink puts it, "Structural change is not enough, the heart and soul must also be freed, forgiven, energized..." (*Naming the Powers*, 1984, p. 117).

This means that in our goals and strategies we must also deal with the elements of culture which inhibit and defeat the goals of holistic human development (salvation).

These are “spiritual” inhibitions—fatalism, depression of spirit, self-depreciation (“nobodies”), a sense of powerlessness which is the result of internalized oppression, structures and values that create co-dependency, and self-centered anxiety that often justifies or excuses deceitful and manipulative behavior.

Defining the Change We Want

Terry Alliband, who writes from his experience in India makes “modernization” the goal of development. “Modernization is a process in which group prejudices and group-thinking disintegrates, or, at least, is greatly reduced by the forces of individualism. *The individual begins to regard his or her personal fortune as being of greater importance than that of one’s hereditary group. . . . This shifting of allegiance is the basic transformation involved in the modernization process*” (Catalysts of Development, 1983, pp. 102-03. The emphasis is mine.)

This, he says, demands a “*comprehensive human development*” approach, not merely technological and economic development. The problem, he says, is one of ongoing motivation, and he sees this as the work of community development overcoming the inhibitions of an oppressive tradition. He holds that the only way to modernize Indian culture is to educate and advance the values of individualism.

Dor Bahadur Bista, a Nepali anthropologist, implies the same thing in his *Fatalism and Development: Nepal’s Struggle For Modernization* (1991). In page after page he documents the virtual impossibility of introducing the benefits of modern technology and a free market into a society like Nepal that is ruled by fatalism and the caste system which was introduced from India.

I tend to agree with this analysis of the problem which development workers face, but I have serious reservations about their proposed solution. India with its fatalistic doctrine of individual *karma* is plagued by individualism and a lack of social responsibility. Indeed, the Gandhian social experiment foundered on this rock, and I see little hope that the substitution of modern individualism will remedy the situation. We need a much more radical solution.

What kind of changes, then, do we want? In theological terms the mission is to be an anticipatory sign of and witness to God’s rule in our history, to be instruments of God’s justice and peace (shalom). The goal is to promote alternative communities of mutual concern, of shalom-justice that will operate as salt and light within the present world systems. This will mean motivating and energizing individuals as well as producing corrective structural changes in society.

To be more concrete I would suggest five basic social-personal changes which we want to stimulate through our catalytic action: (1) the liberation/conversion of individuals from patterns of violence and self-seeking; (2) the modification of inhibiting fatalistic traditions that stifle and repress hope; (3) the end of oppressive hierarchial social

structures that create and maintain co-dependency; (4) the replacement of dysfunctional ideologies (superstitions) that control human behavior, rationalize oppression, and are used to explain disease, disasters and accidents; (5) the introduction of technologies that will effectively improve the human quality of life.

It is simply not enough to change individuals economically, culturally or spiritually and leave them to function in the old system. On the other hand it is futile to change the social and economic structures if the hearts of individuals have not changed. And such *metanonia* is possible only through the motivating power of the Spirit of Christ.

SEMINAR II A CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY FOR INTERVENTION MINISTRIES

.....

Introduction

I want to begin with two quotations which have a direct bearing on the subject for today. The first is by Walter Wink in *Naming the Powers*:

Too often our social action has been as devoid of spirituality as our evangelism has been politically innocuous. . . Too much of the time we have drawn on secular models of social change without drawing as well on our own rich fund of symbolism and imagery, liturgy and story. Many dismissed the hymns and gospel songs, the eucharists and prayers of a Martin Luther King, Jr., or Cesar Chavez as merely shrewd accommodations to the subcultures with which they worked. Such critics did not perceive that these were essential forms of struggle in themselves, that the enemy is not always self-evident, that engaging a Power on its own terms guarantees that the victor, whichever it is, will perpetuate the same terms. They did not address themselves to the transcendent One who alone could work changes which do not themselves bear the seeds of new evils.
(p. 117)

The next is from Lynn Samaan in “Spiritual Formation for Relief and Development Workers.”

Charles H. Kraft related a conversation which Jacob Loewen once had with some of the nationals in Panama regarding values the missionaries had taught them. Sadly, without hesitation they responded, ‘money.’ When pressed as to whether they had actually been told these were the most important values they replied, ‘No, but this is what the missionaries’ actions clearly taught’ and what they themselves now wanted. (Elliston, *Christian Relief and Development*, 1989, p.133).

In my first presentation I tried to redefine the concept of spirit and spiritual. That understanding will provide the background for what I have to say today. Let me quote one paragraph from that session.

So the spiritual describes the texture of our total being. It is the distinctly human dimension of our being both individually and socially. **We might speak of it as both a transcendent and depth dimension which involves us in relationship to God and to each other—what the Bible calls the “heart,”** i.e, the personal depth of our being. It expresses itself most clearly in our self-image which is simply the under side of our God-image; in our motivations, our underlying assumptions and rationalizations. It is expressed in our human cultures.

For a long time the word “spirituality” has been suspect among us, so we must first take time to understand what we mean by it. With our sharp dichotomy between spiritual and the socio-physical we have been suspicious that spirituality may disqualify people for

practical, everyday work. You have probably heard the old quip, “He is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good.” For most Protestants “spiritual” was an epithet suggesting an aura of super piety somewhat like “saint” did for Roman Catholics. But in the past decade Roman Catholic writers and authors like Richard Foster have refurbished the concepts of spiritual formation and spiritual disciplines so that they have become more usable. Then, too, New Age spirituality has thrust the term into prominence.

Barbara Hendricks and Thomas Clarke speak of spirituality in the theological sense as “the relationship, in lived experience and reflective understanding (practice and theory), between the human spirit, individual and communal, and the divine spirit, or whatever is conceived... as ultimate in human and cosmic life.” Then they add, “Spirituality is distinctively Christian when this relationship is conceived as mediated through the one Mediator, Jesus Christ, and when the divine spirit is understood as the Holy Spirit, poured forth by Father and Son into the heart of each believer, the church, the whole of humankind, and the whole creation” (*Toward the 21st Century in Christian Mission, Eerdmans, 1993, 204*).

The spiritual dimension is not merely one distinct aspect of our work. It is the transcendent dynamic expressed in all that we do. It is expressed in the *basic assumptions and definitions* that undergird our work; in the *motivation* that energizes our work; in the definition of *mission* that determines our goals and guides our strategies; in the *relationships and communication* that characterizes our everyday work; and in the *transformation* we see taking place in our own lives and those whom we attempt to serve.

So we are speaking of spirituality as a kind of ethos, attitude, perspective, or style—as the basic operating values and attitudes that characterize and give a transcendent dimension to our work. In this mode Wink speaks of a “capitalist spirituality,” and the Liberation theologians speak of a “spirituality of liberation” (Segundo Galilea).

Spiritual Formation

Lynn Samaan defines spiritual formation as:

- 1) Knowing and experiencing God in an intimate relationship,
- 2) Holistic development towards holiness and Christlikeness, and
- 3) Obeying God and doing the work of his kingdom” (Elliston, p. 131). This, he says, divides spiritual formation into the “knowing-being-doing components which are so vitally important to any learning or growing process” (*ibid.*).

Samaan emphasizes that our real values shine through our actions and attitudes.

When we speak of spiritual formation, we are speaking of what our Anabaptist forebears called *Nachfolge Christi*, i.e., being formed into the “image of Christ” through “sharing his sufferings” (Phil. 3:10). Or what the Apostle Paul describes in Romans 5:3–5 as the formation of the Christian attitude—suffering, perseverance, character, and

hope grounded in the love of God poured into our hearts. All this he explains is the experience of life as a continual gift of grace and enablement which gives our lives and work an air of joy.

The reason why spiritual formation must be spoken of in terms of “suffering” is that our cultural formation has warped our outlook on life. Hendricks and Clarke call it “cultural deformation.” Their caution is worth quoting.

Too often the language of religious and spiritual formation tends to become bland and abstract. In contrast, mission bearers in the twenty-first century from technologically developed countries such as the United States must in their spiritual formation counteract the powerful cultural *deformation* affecting potential future missionaries. When this is done, then formation is understood in continuity with the biblical, and specifically the Pauline, themes of *reformation*, *conformation*, and *transformation*. . . (Phillips and Coote, 1993, p. 204).

Characteristics of Christian Spirituality

There are different spiritual systems—mysticism (Hinduism), humanism (Buddhist, western individualist), personal theism (Christian), and each has its own style. While it is dangerous to generalize too broadly, each system has its distinctive ambience. For example, while Christian mysticism has some things in common with Hindu and Buddhist mysticism, it has its own distinct rationale and ethical character which can lead to quite different human relationships and responses to need. Christian humanism based on *agape* is quite different in its theological rationale and style from Buddhist humanism based on *gnosis* (Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom*, 1988). And these basic differences elicit a different spiritual and ethical responses.

As background for our consideration of Christian spirituality it may be helpful to give the general characterizations of some of the major spiritual systems. Hinduism, one of the oldest, is many faceted, but it is held together by a deep mystical sense of the unity of divine and human, and of a *karmic* order to the universe. *Karma* is in the strictest sense a fate or destiny that is determined by previous lives in the cycle of reincarnation, and justifies things as they are. Historically Hindu spirituality has downplayed the significance of historical existence and has dampened the urge to social ethical responsibility and reform. We might speak of it as *karmic* spirituality.

Buddhism began as a reform of Hindu polytheism and developed its own humanistic spirituality. In the intervening millennia it has developed into many diverse religious patterns similar to Hinduism. (One might compare it to Protestantism’s relation to Roman Catholicism.) In its original form it focused responsibility for one’s individual condition on oneself. In the words of the Buddha, “I teach only two things: the cause of human sorrow and the way to become free from it.”

Buddhism has developed an ascetic and gnostic spirituality which stresses self-discipline and compliance with thing-as-they-are. The spiritual goal is enlightenment,

i.e., the self-realization that individual historical existence is merely a blip on the cosmic computer screen, a wave on the cosmic ocean. The enlightened one achieves *nirvana*, or reunification with the whole. This reunion and bliss is salvation. While Amidha Buddhism views the Buddha as a savior (bodhisattva), and some modern Buddhist sects have taken a commendable interest in humanitarian and peace work, such spirituality is not integral to the movement. Peace in this tradition has a countenance quite different from shalom.

Jewish and Islamic religions have developed a much more formalistic spirituality based upon Divine Law (Torah or Sharia). Indeed, one of the major criticisms of Christianity by Muslim scholars is that it has no clearly defined moral law and forms. There is a spirituality of strict obedience to divinely established divine patterns of behavior. Like Christianity, Judaism and Islam have also produced their mystics, but they do not characterize the general spiritual pattern.

All of these religious systems understand religion as a cultural product and adapt naturally to a *tribal, or civic spirituality*. But Shintoism, and to some extent Confucianism, are civic spiritual systems by basic definition and character. In anthropological terminology they are totemic systems. Shintoism, for example, is very tolerant of different religious expressions but demands civic conformity to its myth of the divine nation. (When Robert Bellah defined American “civil religion” and its demands upon the individual, he extrapolated from the patterns of the civil religion of Japan.)

We could continue these descriptions of diverse systems indefinitely, but perhaps we have established the basic point that **all spiritualities are not of the same genre**. On the other hand, however, we must caution that within these systems there are many similar and overlapping patterns. This is important for those who are engaged in cross-cultural service, and experience the religious ethos at the popular level. There is a kind of human substratum of religiosity that has much in common whether the cultural pattern is predominantly Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, or Christian. Nevertheless, the dominant cultural spirituality often dictates different ethical responses even when the religious patterns seem similar.

When I speak of the spiritual dimension I am assuming the Christian spirituality in which a personal Creator-God is related to us as sustainer, savior, dynamic guide and enabler. Since this broad definition could also include a Jewish or Muslim spirituality, we need to note the distinctive characteristics of Christian spirituality more precisely.

Every theological tradition will have its own list of distinguishing characteristics. Mine grows out of my understanding of the Anabaptist-Mennonite perspective on the Bible, our historical experience as a minority social group, and our cross-cultural experiences in mission. I would list the following six as essential.

- (1) Christian spirituality begins with a profound sense of grace. The beatitudes of Jesus begin with “Blessed are those who know they are poor” (NEV). Jesus is prophet and teacher-example, but before that he is savior-friend—

God's initiative. Christian service begins in gratitude to God for his gracious calling and enablement which gives meaning and fulfillment to our lives. In the words of Paul, Christian missionaries know themselves to be "debtors to all humankind" because of the grace they have received.

- (2) This sense of unearned blessing received as gift is the root of a spirit of compassion which identifies with all the needy. Such compassion is more than mercy or pity. It is more than altruism—sharing, perhaps out of pity, from that which is rightfully mine. *Compassion* (the Latin to suffer *with*) means feeling with, empathy, identification, experiencing life from the perspective of the impoverished. Roman Catholic writers speak of this as "a preferential option for the poor." This is not to say that there are no compassionate people in other religions. Only that compassion is essential to Christian spirituality, and grows out of a sense of grace rather than self-achievement.
- (3) It is a spirituality of *discipleship* to the nonviolent Jesus. This, as Walter Wink points out, places one in direct opposition to the "domination system" of the world which operates under the assumption that "redemptive violence" is the way of peace and justice. He translates "Blessed are the meek" as "Blessed are the nonviolent." As our forbearers knew well, the call to discipleship is a call to take up the cross, to be sent out into the world as "lambs in the midst of wolves."

We must make explicit the essential character of this discipleship because it is often misunderstood as simply following the example of Jesus. In our modern western culture the goal of learning is to become independent, and even to excel the teacher. But a disciple of Jesus never becomes independent of the teacher. For us Jesus is more than model. He is Master. A disciple is an *intern* or *apprentice*, a learner. In biblical terms we remain disciple- apostles, servant-representatives of Christ. And his Spirit is the enabling guide who remains in charge of the mission on which we have been sent. Thus a disciple spirituality is characterized not only by commitment to follow the example, but by constant dependence upon the Master.

Speaking of spiritual formation for mission Barbara Hendricks describes this kind of disciple internship well.

Learning to relate to God, to oneself, to other persons, and to society, with both the tender compassion and the firm justice inherent in the gospel, is a whole way of life whose paradigm is the story of Jesus, Lamb of God and Lion of Judah, Servant of Yahweh who does not break the crushed reed or quench the wavering flame, but who will not waver or be crushed until true justice is established on earth (Isa. 42:3-4). (Phillips and Coote, 1993, 211)

- (4) Christian spirituality emphasizes *praxis*—action in obedience to Jesus Christ as "Lord" rather than *doxis*, i.e., intellectual or mystical piety (Matt. 7:21-23). Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan contrasts the compassionate action of the Samaritan to the orthodox piety of the priest and Levite.—Koyama suggests that "it is better to be merciful in the name of Buddha than to be

cruel in the name of Christ. It is better to become a neighbor with a Samaritan theology than . . . to desert the beaten victim with a Jewish theology.” (Quoted from Bosch, p.37)

- (5) At the heart of Christian spirituality is the concept of “gospel,” or evangel. Thus we might call it an *evangelical spirituality*. The impulse to universality and mission is implicit and intrinsic to Christian spirituality. Service is not merely a good work. Servanthood and sharing the good news of the new possibility in Christ are at its very center.
- (6) In summary it is a spirituality of agape based upon the Jesus paradigm of incarnation. The Beatitudes are a good description of this new paradigm. It is a spirituality of cross and resurrection, not crusade and conquest. In his *Waterbuffalo Theology* Koyama calls missionaries from a crusading mentality to a crucified mind, and he reminds us in another volume that there is “no handle on the cross.”

Special Parameters of a Missionary Spirituality

For those whose special calling is to be representatives of the God-movement and catalytic agents of peace and justice there are a number of spiritual qualities that are essential.

Let me begin with an observation by Michael Reilly who writes out of a Roman Catholic setting. He says, “The missionary is one whose interior life is oriented to non-believers, to those who do not profess faith in Jesus Christ. **It is this orientation which determines his life style and spirituality.** . . . The missionary is one who intends . . . to bring all people to explicit awareness of God’s loving plan for them, and one who works to establish the goals of God’s Mission of *shalom* so that humankind may both enjoy them and praise their source” (*Spirituality for Mission*, 1978, 237-38).

Such an orientation implies and requires a deep respect for those who differ from us—respect both for the persons and their cultures. The old militant attitude which viewed the pagan cultures and their representatives as the demonic enemy is totally inappropriate. Jesus did not view Judaism or Hellenism as the enemy, but “Satan,” the spiritual foe of all humanity. The “enemy” is a common opponent and despoiler of both the servant-evangelists and those whom they are attempting to evangelize! And in any case, if those whom we try to serve become hostile, we are commanded to “love your enemies.”

Further, respect implies appreciation for the values of other cultures, and the willingness to contextualize the expression of Christian spirituality. For example Lynn Samaan details some Muslim concepts of holiness that are quite commensurate with Christian ideals, such as “humility, regular prayer life, fasting, alms giving and concern for the poor; a life of sacrifice and suffering; a power to heal, deliver from demons (jinns) and miracles; memorization and meditation on the Word of God.” Then he adds, “A Christian called to work among an Islamic people has a responsibility to carefully learn the forms of spirituality and then diligently adjust to these forms as daily habits of life and worship.” (Elliston, 1989:140)

In that same context he observes, “Protestant Christian missionaries have often failed to identify spiritually with the various peoples and cultures, and as a result failed to incarnate the gospel for them in a manner the local people understand. Instead of representing holiness, they often represent materialism, immorality, pride, arrogance, insensitivity, and secularism” (*ibid.*).

In this connection we should note that Christian service is a reciprocal and mutual activity. That is, it is not something that the strong and mature do to and for the weak and ignorant. To be authentically Christian it must be a mutually shared experience of development and transformation. The service experience continues to be a formative part of the worker’s spiritual development. And this is inevitably, indeed, necessarily, a reciprocal spiritual development involving both receiving as well as giving.

We might speak of this as a kind of dialogical relationship, of listening and responding. For service workers this “dialogue” is seldom academic. Rather they must enter into the religious culture of the poor which engages them at a very personal level. At this level one is not so much discussing ideas as sharing aspirations, hopes and fears, and one’s response will grow directly out of her/his “spirituality” whatever its depth or lack of it. To be authentically Christian such a dialogical relation requires in the worker a counterpoint spirituality in which the melody of the gospel intertwines with the melodies of culture.

Finally, David Bosch points out that “true Christian spirituality is not to be found in the superhuman and miraculous, but in the commonplace.” In his seminal work, *A Spirituality For the Road*, he writes:

“In 2 Corinthians, however, Paul argues that true Christian spirituality is not to be found in the superhuman and the miraculous, but in the commonplace. Our problem is that we have even turned the commonplaces of the gospel into something romantic and folksy. We have provided the cross with a halo and changed the stable of Bethlehem into something idyllic and sentimental. This view misses the terribly mundane and ordinary nature of these images. Likewise, the criteria for missionary service and spirituality are not in magnificent and romantic accomplishments, but in ordinary daily existence. So Paul opposes the impressive arsenal of his opponents with down-to-earth weapons: patience, truth, love, weakness, service, modesty and respect. Under no circumstances should people be bulldozed with the gospel, for it ceases to be the gospel when foisted upon people. It is possible to be unaggressive and missionary at the same time. It is, indeed, the only way of being truly missionary.” (Bosch, 1979, pp. 32-33)

SEMINAR III EVANGELIZATION, SERVICE AND MODERNIZATION

A Lengthy Introduction

When I first sketched out the outline of topics for this series I assumed that this session would deal with issues like the need for *integrated* as well as *holistic* ministries for which the “Base Church” movement has given us a pattern; freedom for “*critical contextualization*” under the impulse of the Holy Spirit; the *importance of verbal explanation* in our service ministries if we intend to give a witness to Jesus as the way; the essential *nature and focus of “service,”* i.e., that we are serving Christ, the Lord even as we serve our fellow humans and therefore we must obey his orders; and, of course, an analysis of the *impact of modernization* on the nature and message of our ministries. The great missionary movement, of which our service programs are a vital part, is the historical counterpart of western modernization, and the gospel we preached from our position of power has contained more promise of “upward mobility” through technology and democracy than we may have intended.

Then it occurred to me that we have a significant paradigm shift on our hands which needs attention. This involves new anthropological views of culture, new insights into the communication process, new understandings of the biblical message and its relation to its first century (pre-modern) Near Eastern culture. And I was reminded of the wry observation of one of the baseball greats when a fight broke out over a referee’s call: “What we have here is a failure to communicate!” I think that our uneasiness, our self-searching and experimentation in service programming has grown out of our uncertainty about how to respond to this paradigm change. For this reason I decided to try to present a theological perspective on the paradigm shift itself.

What are some of the elements of this paradigm shift that have affected our mission ministries? Not all of these elements are of post-70s vintage, but they are cumulative and help to produce the present disquiet.

First, we have learned that all cultures are dynamic and constantly changing. Even so-called “traditional” cultures change and adapt to new situations. Earlier this century anthropologists described cultures as static and even suggested that it was inappropriate for missionaries to try to change them. The missionary assumption was that western culture is the normative outgrowth of biblical revelation, and traditional non-western cultures should be brought into line with the culture of Christendom. This was graphically illustrated in the motion picture film, “The Mission.” While this assumption was at its height in the middle ages, it has died a very slow death. I think of a recent missionary scholar in Japan who insisted that Christianity’s initial movement westward instead of east was a special leading of the Spirit in order to preserve the purity of the biblical message. (We still have some culture lag on this one.)

Now, I think we understand that cultural change is inevitable even though it may not always be desirable. The forces of modernization are irrevocable. Our task is to work creatively with respect and sensitivity to bring about those changes that promote authentic human community under God. Our model as Christians is biblical *shalom* modeled after Jesus’ pattern of “the kingdom of God.”

We have, however, also become much more sophisticated about the nature and effects of change. We have learned that “primitive” does not necessarily mean retarded or undeveloped. Neither does modernization necessarily result in authentic human development. The modern emphasis on individualism can lead to narcissism and anarchy. If we are going to work for cultural change, we will also need to work to change individual values and motivations.

Second, we have learned that all cultures, including Christian culture, are relative to the biblical ideal of the kingdom of God. Indeed, there are many conflicting cultural expressions within Christianity itself. Christianity is not a revealed religious cultural expression with an infallible pope at its head. While we rejected the infallibility of the pope long ago, this idea that Christian culture is the revealed norm for all cultures dies hard.

The other side of this coin is that there are cultures outside the biblical tradition which are viable and have validity. The varied cultural religious expressions in our world exist on a relative scale. There may be human and religious values in cultures outside the historical biblical tradition that excel those of our own western expressions. E. g., we appreciate the Inuit spiritual sensitivity to nature; the Coptic respect for dignity and form in worship; the Islamic reverence for divine covenant law; the Buddhist regard for the wholeness of the cosmic order of which the individual is simply a part; the traditional African respect for family continuity through the generations.

Third, the biblical culture and message cannot be equated with either western orthodox or liberal Christian expressions of it. The theoretical recognition of this is as old as the Reformation which drew a sharp line between church tradition and the Bible. However, we have been slow to recognize the ramifications of this “Protestant principle.” The constant tendency has been to equate our Protestant orthodoxies with “the Bible says!”

This presumption is very old and very stubborn. It is built into the very definition of “orthodoxy” in the ecumenical creeds of the third and fourth centuries. Orthodoxy is defined as what has been believed in the church *always and everywhere*. That implies that the philosophical language of the creeds, which in fact represents three centuries of development and a radically different cultural setting, is an exact replication of the biblical message. Thus begins the substitution of the authority of church tradition for the original biblical message.

Especially in cultures where the pace of change is relatively slow, it is difficult to understand that historical change results in distinct cultural mutations which in turn affect the essential meaning of language and life. In cases of more rapid change such as has taken place in Japanese culture over the past fifty years, it is more easily perceived. The change there has been so drastic that it is difficult for contemporary Japanese readers to understand the pre- World War II meaning of words which are still in common use.

Or, to take another example, Thomas Jefferson’s America was quite different from the culture of Virginia and Washington D.C. today, although politicians continue to appeal to his literal words to justify current political action. And conservative pundits continue

to appeal to 19th century America to justify late 20th century social and political policy. In similar fashion religious conservatives have often identified the biblical message with their current orthodoxies and tried to enforce a uniform and universal application.

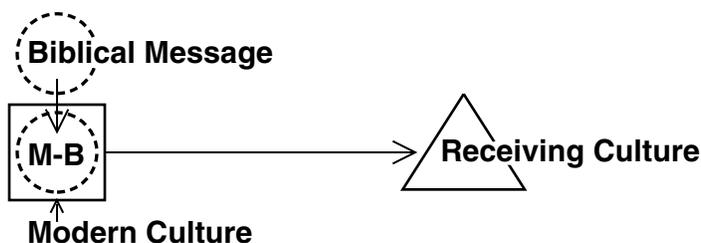
The religious art of the middle ages up to the 17th century gives us a good visualization of the way in which the Bible stories were read in the contemporary context. For example, soldiers are wearing the armor of the particular time and nation contemporary to the artist. Buildings, landscapes, facial features, style of clothing, etc. of the artist's time and place provide the visual image of the story and give its meaning a distinct coloration. While there is limited validity in this kind of "contextualization," the resultant contextualized picture cannot be substituted for the original biblical picture. Until very recently we simply did not recognize the importance of this for contextualizing the gospel across cultures.

Fourth, we are beginning to realize how crucial is the tie between relationship, communication, and truth. (In Asia relationship is more important than ideational truth.) The communication of truth is impossible apart from mutually respectful and deferential relationship. The New Testament's insistence that we should consider others more significant than ourselves is not merely a matter of pious self-depreciation. It is a necessary stance for effective communication of the truth about Jesus. For example, how can our Muslim brothers and sisters understand the profound truth of God's vulnerability in the incarnation if we relate to them as invulnerable, superior persons and insist that their cultural patterns must yield to ours? Paul calls the "gospel" of God's gracious relation to us "the word of truth" (Col. 1:5). A proper relationship to God and to each other is "the truth as it is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21). Authentic human relationship creates the possibility of communication, and truth is the shape of authentic communication.

Mapping the Paradigm Shift

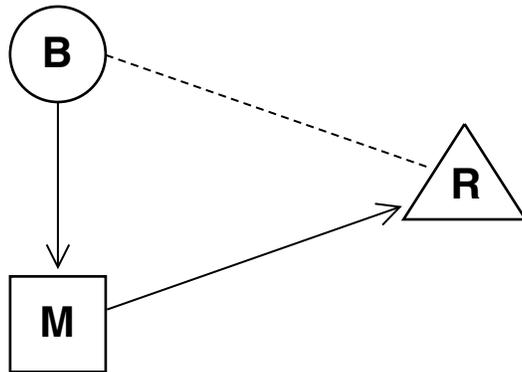
Some thirty years ago Eugene Nida called for a distinct paradigm shift in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. He called it a shift from the "two language" model to the "three language" model for communication (Message and Mission, 1960). The implications of this shift have finally caught up with us, and we are only now seriously wrestling with them. We can diagram the models as follows:

Traditional linguistic model



- a. assumes identity of modern evangelical message and biblical message, therefore
- b. transmission is "monological."

Three language model

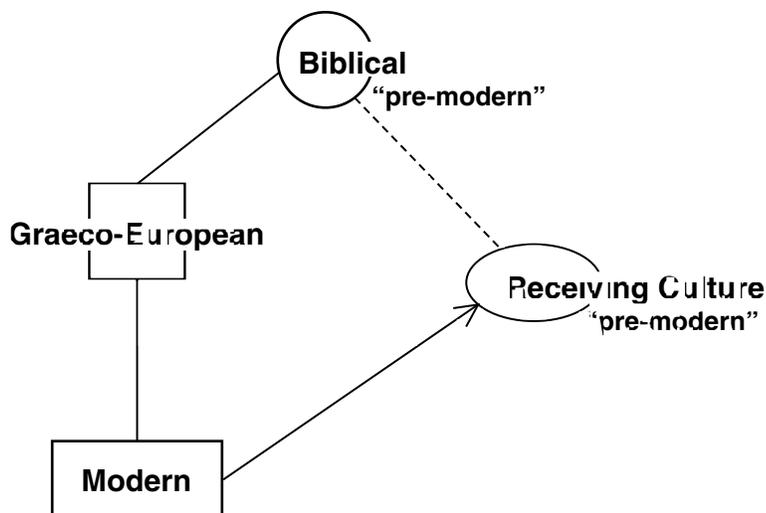


- a. assumes biblical, modern and receiving cultures are different linguistic expressions,
- b. implies need for interaction and cooperation in communicating the message—
“dialogical.”

I have described this new model in *The Authentic Witness* (1979) as follows:

Our contemporary witness (or translation) of the biblical message cannot be equated with the biblical witness itself. It is at best a cultural translation interposed between the original and the new culture to which it is being presented. Thus there is at least a three-way dissimilarity between the participants. Nor can we assume that our own secular western culture is nearer to the Bible than are the cultures to which it is being introduced. When we recognize that some of the cultures receiving the gospel may in fact be nearer to the biblical culture than that of the missionary, it becomes apparent that the spirit of dialogue is fundamental to authentic witness. Indeed, missionaries from the West may receive much new understanding. This is what Fred Smith has called “the mutuality of evangelism” (45).

With minimal adaptation we can use these diagrams to plot the characteristics of modern and postmodern approaches to cross cultural mission (both service and proclamation



ministries).

First, notice the Graeco-European step inserted between biblical and modern cultures. Actually this represents more than one simple paradigm shift in the history of the last 2000 years.

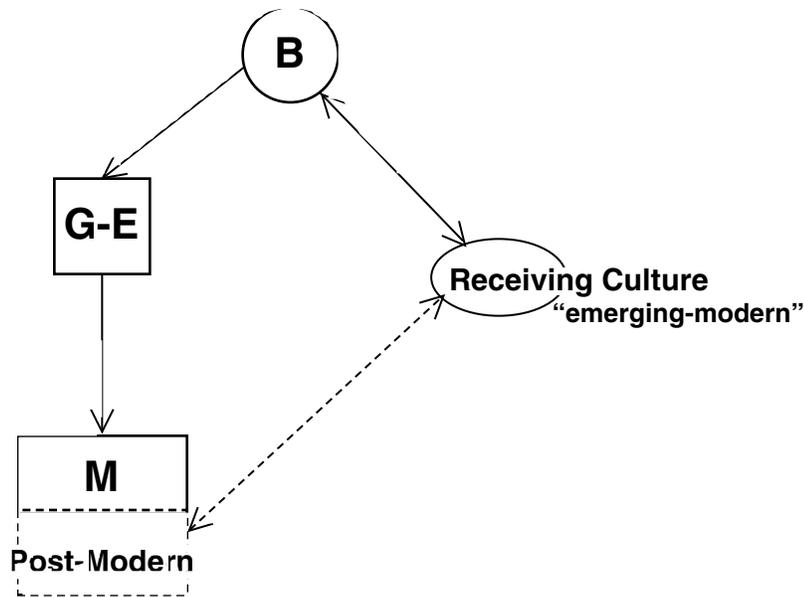
Second, note the solid line between the modern and pre-modern receiving cultures, and the dotted line between the pre-modern and biblical cultures. The solid line denotes the control and management mode of modernity. Both development and evangelism models have assumed this mode. Both are “monological.” Lines of definition and authority flow one way. The dotted line represents the missionary attempts at Bible translation into the various languages.

And third, we might note the characteristics of western modernity which have provided the medium for our cross cultural activities:

- (1) “Application of technology to virtually every dimension of life—from birth control to embalment, from robotics production to generic engineering” (Driedger and Kraybill, *Mennonite Peacemaking*, 1994, 40).
- (2) “Rationalistic”—scientific. Emphasizes management, control and choice—the parameters in “development.”
- (3) “Individualization”. Breaks down the sanctions of collective values and goals. Stresses private individual rights and freedoms (democracy), and capitalistic economics (entrepreneurship).
- (4) “Differentiation”—the specialization of occupations and social functions which erodes the cohesive community structures; and diversity of ideas and values caused by new technologies of communication.
- (5) Secularization—a loss of the sense of transcendence (the desacralization of culture) which undercuts the deep religious presuppositions and values which are the foundation of culture.

Driedger and Kraybill note that “specialization, mobility and technology in the modern world unravel the structural ties that knot the individual into long term relationships with permanent groups” (*ibid.* 42). Operating in the modernistic mode we have too often furthered a process of cultural erosion which was actually inimical to the gospel!

Analysts of the past half-century have noted that we are going through a new paradigm change in the West, and they have tagged the new era postmodern. Whatever the merits of this terminology, we do notice a distinct change in cultural temperament which is reflected in the theological rationale for mission. Perhaps the concept that most clearly denotes this change is “contextualization.” The change might be diagramed as follows:



First, we may notice that the “postmodern” prototype has not completely emerged. We are very much in the midst of the revolutionary changes! The postmodern attitude is less rationalistic and less optimistic about western hegemony. It is still highly individualistic, specialized and secularized.

Second, the dotted line between postmodern and premodern cultures indicates a less managerial and control oriented approach, and a more pluralistic and tolerant stance. This indicates a much more appreciative attitude toward the premodern cultures, and an attempt to involve them in their own change process. Emphasis has shifted to “sharing,” “witness,” “presence,” “dialogue,” and “contextualization.”

Third, there has been a deliberate effort to strengthen the relationship between the biblical culture and the premodern cultures (“third-fourth-fifth worlds”) which have received the western missions. This is represented by the solid line. Not only has there been an emphasis on Bible translation, but a change in the way the translation is made. The western translator engages the native linguist in a much more intimate dialogical process as they together attempt a “critical contextualization” of the biblical message.

Response to the New “Postmodern” Situation:

A theological perspective will not give us immediate answers to questions of strategy, but it can help us to set priorities. With that in mind I want to offer a few suggestions for a response in our new cultural and political climate.

We are not working in a vacuum, and a variety of options present themselves. A brief comparison of the following perspectives may help us to formulate our own stance.

- (1) “Pluralistic”—Celebrate diversity and relativity in a dialogical search for solutions to the present inequities.

- (2) “Evangelical”—Concentrate on personal motivation and enablement, offering a “gospel”/transformational alternative in a respectful dialogical relationship.
- (3) “Educational”—Share knowledge; stress literacy and informative relationships between the modern and premodern societies.
- (4) “Appropriate technology”—Share scientific method and material benefits of modern technology, e.g., medicine, irrigation, etc.
- (5) “Social development”—Emphasize individual worth/rights within community as we try to broker the relation between modern and traditional values.
- (6) “Entrepreneurial”—Introduce “free-trade,” i.e., capitalistic economic strategies to ameliorate poverty.

These options do not necessarily exclude each other, but one needs to establish basic presuppositions, priorities, and strategies. To do this we will need to reevaluate Western culture in both its conservative and liberal guises. (For example, individualism in its fundamentalist guise has been as harmful as liberal individualism.) Western culture is by no means an unmixed blessing! We have already noted along the way that technology, individualism and secularism have been much less effective in bringing about desired change than had been anticipated.

Relativistic pluralism (number 1 above) is a typically modern western option—a carryover of post-Enlightenment thinking. It is the religious parallel to the secular political state, and ultimately can only take us toward secularism. However, we do need to think through a new stance toward culture religions that confront us. While I am referring mainly to religions other than Christianity, we must also reposition ourselves vis-a-vis Catholicism, and the various Orthodoxies in the Middle East.

While the “Evangelical” option (number 2 above) may still seem too heavily weighted toward verbal proclamation and too leery of any cooperation or dialog with competing religions, a christocentric approach requires a distinctly evangelical stance. Perhaps we could call our position “Evangelical inclusivism,” and focus on those aspects of culture that reflect the light that has shown universally since creation (John 1:4-5) as points of dialogical witness. Within this paradigm we should continue to emphasize an integrated-holistic approach to our task as catalytic change-agents.²

Concerning option number six, my observations of what is happening as a result of the “privatization” in countries like Vietnam, China, Russia, and Albania lead me to suggest that we should go slow in giving priority to the entrepreneurial option. The optimism with which some of our theologically conservative business people are encouraging private enterprise in former socialistic and pre-modern settings is quite unwarranted. Teaching poor people how to accumulate wealth by adopting the rationale and motivation of private profit will only make richer sinners out of poor sinners! If we

² Some of the more progressive evangelical theologians, like Clark Pinnock, are moving in this direction. And it is interesting to note that the Hayama Missionary Conference in Japan, one of the more conservative groups, made this the subject for its 1993 session.

promote this option, we will need to do so within the carefully considered implications of a *gospel* ethic.

In all of this *we must distinguish quite clearly between gospel and modernization*. For the first time in two hundred years modernization is not necessarily linked with western Christian values. The disassociation of the two began already in the nineteenth century with the Japanese and is now pretty well established in the countries of the “Asian rim.” For the first time in two hundred plus years the gospel message comes in “weakness” without the implicit promise of upward social and economic mobility through the altruism of a rich and powerful church or the techniques of modernization and entrepreneurial know-how!

What does this “weakness” imply for mission strategy? The words we have used in the Anabaptist tradition to describe this stance of weakness are “servanthood” and “nonviolence.” However, as John Driver points out, “we should not confuse this servanthood with service. Service tends to mean that which is done in the interests of a noble and just cause for which one is struggling. In reality, this may represent a theocratic orientation [domination] even though the means may be nonviolent. Servanthood is symbolized in the church by the basin and the towel and really amounts to a *form of being* more than a *strategy for doing*. Servanthood is the form that the community’s concern for persons takes.” (“The Anabaptist Vision and Social Justice,” in *Freedom and Discipleship*, edited by Daniel Schipani, Orbis, 1989, p. 109)

Of course this does not rule out the possibility of all material self-improvement for individuals and groups. Nor does it mean that we must revert to a spiritual gospel which does not address the socio-economic aspects of life. However, it does not promote the superiority of modern civilization, promising the blessings of a consumer society. Servanthood offers a holistic alternative that does not appeal to the economic and military power structures for their sanctions. This is “foolishness” and “weakness” from the perspectives of power.

The gospel offers liberation from poverty of spirit, from the greed and fear that impoverish our relationships with other. It offers new motivation and enablement, and calls us to “share each others’ burdens.” It calls on the privileged to share their advantage—a call that has significant implications for those who go as “servants.” It promises a rich life rather than riches in life.

It is important that our service programs be of such a character and spirit that they do not perpetuate the gospel of Christ as the gospel of upward mobility. On the one hand, we must be careful in our service projects not to practice a kind of favoritism toward those who convert to Christianity. On the other, we must make it clear that the source and enabler of agapeic service is Jesus, the Christ. It is not enough to simply establish a modern humanitarian program of development “in the name of Christ.” It is simplistic, to say the least, to think that our altruistic presence assuming the capitalistic system and settling for a neutral, or pluralistic religious stance will achieve the transformation we hope for.

Finally, *in light of the impact of secularism we need to quite self-consciously identify our approach as religious and Christian.* Secularism destroys the religious base of pre-modern cultures in order to save them! The secular development models assume that modernization will be the salvation of traditional societies. We must reject such an assumption. We are not interested in eroding the religious base of pre-modern societies, but we are interested in offering an effective transforming alternative that can provide a spiritual rationale for authentic human development in a modern world. Thus we need to take the traditional religions seriously, engaging them in respectful dialogue and cooperating with them where possible, and such a serious engagement will require a clear Christian self-identity and discernment within the Christian group.

The gospel of the kingdom of God offers a religious alternative to both secularism and the status quo of traditional religions which can furnish discriminatory guidance in the selection of modern options.

SEMINAR IV CONVERSION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION— ENGAGING THE POWERS



Modern theological Liberalism has been optimistic about the possibility of reforming the socio-economic systems by rational means. Similarly it has been optimistic about the freedom of individuals to determine their own destiny. Liberals were confident that the universe is ruled by divine reason, and that human rationality reflects that divinity. Working in cooperation with the laws of reason humans could make real progress toward social, economic, and political equity and justice. Even after the demise of theological liberalism following World War II, economic and political liberals perpetuated this optimism in their liberal “development” schemes to raise the status of the “less developed” nations referred to as the “Third World.”

But the cultural mood was changing. The cocky confidence in the United States’ power and wisdom to manage the world was shaken by events like the Bay of Pigs and the Vietnam fiasco. At the same time the failure of the War on Poverty, the loss of faith in the political system, the waning results of international development schemes, and the continual eruption of irrational violence on the international scene eroded confidence in the ability of national and international institutions to control and manage world affairs.

The management of the socio-political order was proving far more complicated and intractable than had been expected. The rational laws did not seem to operate smoothly in the social order. I remember my major professor in graduate school, himself an erstwhile liberal, introducing the word “surd” into our vocabulary. There is a mysterious irrational element in the cosmic machine, he said. There are frustrating constraints upon individual efforts. There seems to be a self-defeating element in even our best intentioned and most scientific schemes for resolving human problems. In the words of Robert Burns, “The best laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley!”

This loss of confidence in institutions is also reflected in attitudes toward the institutional church and its programs. Since the mid-60s we have seen a steady decline in the global programs of both the ecumenical movement and major denominations.

In theology the prophetic voices of the Barths, Brunners, and Niebuhrs were already challenging liberal optimism in the 1930s and 40s. They were making a much more sober assessments of the human situation. Reinhold Niebuhr spoke of “moral man and immoral society,” and favored a realistic politics of power rather than rational idealism. In the late 1960s William Stringfellow, a lawyer and lay theologian, analyzed the social crisis in apocalyptic terms. He spoke of the demonic powers dominating human beings and ruling society by the threat of death. Paul Ricoeur wrote about “the symbolism of evil.” And both theologians and biblical scholars began to reexamine the New Testament teaching about “the principalities and powers.”

The great development vision was undermined in part by the naive assumption of the “innate goodness” and rationality of the human heart. When a critic suggested that Niebuhr’s phrase, “moral man and immoral society” might better read “immoral man and worse society,” Niebuhr agreed. Part of the problem was an oversimplification of

the social complexity and an unwarranted faith in the individual's ability to triumph over the system. In the fifties and sixties we were not yet so aware of the "System" and "systemic violence." The civil rights movement helped rivet that concept in my mind. And in part the secular disdain for the spiritual dimensions in the analysis and cure of the world's social problems betrayed the developers. Secularism assumed that religious belief itself was part of the problem, certainly not part of the solution. Unfortunately, as Charles Elliott points out in his *Comfortable Compassion* (1987), the churches bought into this secular vision.

More recently, beginning in the 1960s, theologians began to recognize that the biblical picture of "principalities and powers" offers a more realistic assessment of the nature of the social order. I am not talking about the pentecostal/charismatic revival of demonism, and missions as a war against the demonic legions of darkness. The biblical picture is far more sophisticated than that! But the recognition that there are spiritual authorities and powers—call them social, ideological, systemic, institutional—that control human cultures. And the theological task has been to understand the socio-spiritual nature of these powers and how they fit into God's intended order for the world.

Are they inherently evil, or are they created orders gone wrong? Are they detached spiritual personalities that impact the fallen human mind? Are they projections of the human subconscious? Are they to be identified with the institutional empires that dominate the life of individuals? Or are they the personification of ideologies, myths and rationalizations that sanction the self-centered systems which control society?

We cannot explore all of these questions, but we can make several observations which are pertinent to our topic. The New Testament uses a variety of words to describe this phenomenon—powers, authorities, "rulers of this age," elemental spirits, angels, demons. This in itself suggests that we are not dealing with a simple phenomenon. Modern words like the "office" (of sheriff), system, "spirit of" (the meeting, mob, culture), institution, ideology, religion, tradition, i.e., those authorities that provide the rationale and control life in society, seem to translate the idea.

These "authorities" become institutionalized and harden into "traditions," which in turn condition the self-definition of individuals. We encounter them in the slogans, symbols, and organizations of society. They define and dictate the spiritual (as defined earlier) mode of cultural patterns and relationships. They define "justice," "wisdom," social values, the meaning of "human," the status and roles of individuals in society, etc. They provide rationalization for the social order, e.g., concepts like karma, dukkha (suffering), chance or fate, private property, self-defense, free trade, individual rights.

The Powers dominate through a system, which Walter Wink calls the "Domination System," that controls and constrains the possibilities of individuals. Although the System has its origins in human society it is not completely under the control and management of human individuals. It takes on a life, identity, goals and dynamic of its own, and in a kind of frankensteinian reflex conditions the definitions, values, assumptions, social classifications, and myths with which a culture operates. David Bakan characterizes the core values of this system as "self-assertion, self-protection and self-expression" (Wink, 1992:57). Wink, himself, emphasizes the basic myth as "redemptive violence."

Two more things need to be said about these Powers. First, they are not essentially evil or demonic. They were created by God as part of the human reality. God did not create demons. The institutional system which is the concrete manifestation of the Powers is of human origin and embodies the spirit of the society. Thus its demonic expression is actually a reflection of human idolatry, autonomy and self-centeredness. Paul says in Colossians that all these “thrones, powers, rulers and authorities” were created by Christ and for him (1:16). But they have become perverted and alienated (“fallen”) through their idolatrous self-centeredness. And the results of their idolatry are anarchy, dehumanization, violence, and death.

Second, as their creator and redeemer Jesus Christ is their “Lord,” and through the cross he has “disarmed the powers and authorities” and exposed their foolishness (Col. 2:15). And in Ephesians 3:10 he says that God intends for the church to make that lordship known to these “rulers and authorities in heavenly realms.” So the principalities and powers are redeemable, and the church has a mandate to make known God’s original intention/plan for them. This is the basis for the church’s intervention in the social, political, economic aspects of culture. But note carefully that it is an intervention characterized by the cross and God’s power of resurrection.

As a case in point, consider the phenomenon of poverty. Poverty is not simply the lack of material wealth. In that respect poverty is a relative term. Neither is it caused or cured simply by the supply of material goods or money. Poverty can only be fully understood as a dehumanizing social syndrome where the poor have internalized the values of and adapted to the violence of an unjust system (the “powers”). It is a cultural network of co-dependence in which the poor see themselves as “nobodies,” “second class citizens,” “failures” who are somehow guilty and deserving of their fate (karma). Wink tells of the South American peasant woman who was surprised to find out that the Bible nowhere said that she had to suffer!

So we have a system that has been manipulated by the powerful for their own self-serving advantage, and accepted/internalized by the weak for their own survival. The ultimate sanction for the system is the fear of deprivation and death. The rich fear the poor masses who want what they have, and the impoverished masses fear the physical violence, humiliation and loss of life which the rich can inflict. All this is institutionalized into an ideology that rationalizes poverty and a legal system that enforces the socio-economic order. This is a rough sketch of the complexity of the inner workings of the “Domination System,” i.e., the “principalities and powers,” as they have been perverted through idolatrous self-interest.

Charles Elliott, in his book, *Comfortable Compassion? Poverty, Power and the Church* (1987), explains how inadequate the secular presuppositions and models of development are to deal with this situation, and how difficult it is for the churches to confront it with the radicality of the gospel.

At the end of chapter 8 Elliott comes to what he calls the core of his argument:

What I have tried to show, both in analysis and anecdote, is that the Churches have over-invested in approaches to development that are not

necessarily destructive or unnecessary, but which are inadequate by themselves and which are very easily subverted into countersigns [of the Kingdom of God]. The school becomes a school for the elite. The agricultural project becomes an agricultural project for the successful, progressive farmer. The hospital becomes a disease palace. The Church development office becomes another middle-class, top-down bureaucracy. That is not to deny that they do a perfectly respectable job and a job that perhaps has to be done. *It is, however, to call in question whether that is the real vocation of the Church, and whether it is likely to produce an authentic pattern of development which fully reflects biblical understandings of the nature of man and of society.*” (Pp. 116-17; Emphasis mine.)

Elliott contends that the ontological basis for the inequality in the world lies in human nature and not in economic systems. Liberation theologian Domingos Barbe writes that the sickness of our world is a spiritual illness that comes from a lack of a living relationship with God (Wink, 1992:75). Wink agrees: “God must supplant the upstart ego. People do need to be ‘reborn’ from their primary socialization in an alienated and alienating system” (1992:75). And Vaclav Havel wrote, “A better system will not automatically ensure a better life. In fact the opposite is true: only by creating a better life can a better system be developed” (*Living in Truth*, 1987:91).

We cannot assume that appropriate technology and small entrepreneurial projects will result in the kingdom of God, i.e., the kind of interdependent community that Jesus advocated. When, for example, we help impoverished farmers on to the economic escalator with a loan and/or appropriate technology, we are inducting them into the “System”—a system of greedy profit making. Whether the individual is greedy or not, the superhuman powers that inform and control the system exercise constraints and define success or failure. So long as the entrepreneurial project stays small we can control the effects to some degree, but unless the farmer has been resocialized in the kingdom of God, i.e., “born again,” there is little or no chance of systemic change.

Therefore the mission of the church, concludes Elliott, is “the creation of an *alternative consciousness* (emphasis mine), which in the spirit of the magnificat and beatitudes puts the poor and the powerless at its centre, that is the true task of the Church in development.” And he explains,

This alternative consciousness is not paternalistic or condescending: it is a consciousness that turns upside down the priorities and assumptions of twentieth century industrialised, secularised acquisitiveness (whether capitalist or socialist) and judges relationships, structures, and economic ties not by what profit it brings to the dominant partner but by how much it enlarges the life chances of the subordinate partner. . . . The rich and powerful, in other words, have to learn to use their wealth and power not for their own aggrandisement, but for the goals set by the poor and powerless.

And that is *metanoia*. Conversion. Revolution. Gospel (*ibid.* 117-18).

What we must also emphasize is that *the poor as well as the rich must be converted*. They have internalized the values and adapted to the violence of an unjust system. They aspire to be rich and self-sufficient. The only option they see is to use the system to beat the system. They identify the way of individual initiative and competition rather than interdependence as the way to achieve this individualized goal. They see salvation as an escape from the system rather than a radical conversion of the system.

The coconut project in Bangladesh is an excellent example of an entrepreneurial job creation project. It gives some 50 women and men a chance to improve their economic situation. After we had toured the various processes, just before we left, all the workers gathered to have their pictures taken with the visitors. Then as we were ready to get into the car and leave, the women gathered around our wives with outstretched hands begging “Take me with you.” How can this mindset be changed?

Characteristics of a Program for Transformation

Gustavo Gutierrez has said, “The core of human and social transformation is spiritual. Without the change in attitudes and behavior implicit in metanoia (conversion), humans remain self-centered creatures. Sin, both individual and institutionalized, is a basic deterrent to social transformation. Sin has been defined as the ‘social and cosmic anti-creation’ resulting in injustice and exploitation; racism and oppression; alienation and anomie” (Sine, 1983:81).

In his contribution to the “Evangelism and Social Responsibility” Conference (Wheaton, 1982) Wayne Bragg offered a “Transformation” model to go “beyond development.” “Transformation,” he said, “is intended to:

- (1) enable persons to become fully human;
- (2) change social and economic principles to conform to the Kingdom principles of peace, justice, and love manifested in the community of God;
- (3) transform both the material and spiritual dimensions of life as a joint enterprise between God and man [sic].”

And he summarized the characteristics of transformation as: “(1) providing life-sustenance, (2) equity, (3) justice, (4) dignity and self worth, (5) freedom, (6) participation, (7) reciprocity, (8) ecological soundness, (9) hope, (10) spiritual transformation.” (Sine, 1983:38). I would like in closing to call our attention to some characteristics of a program of intervention aimed at this kind of transformation. Focus on the spiritual dimension of our work will affect our understanding of “service”—our program priorities, and our way of operating. It is not enough to simply add a spiritual component to our otherwise secular program. I suggest the following.

- (1) An *agapeic* approach which willingly makes itself vulnerable in unilateral conciliatory service after the pattern of Christ (Phil. 2:6-11). Christ is the pattern of

agape, not some principle of self-abnegation. Agapeic service is service of Christ in the fellow human being. It does not hesitate to take the towel to wash others' feet, or if necessary to die for them. However, it serves "in the name of Jesus," i.e., by his power and according to his command—"ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."

This will call for the spiritual gift of tactful discrimination. We must be true to our own deepest experience and understanding of the love of Jesus. He did not always give people what they wanted or thought they needed. On the other hand, as servants we must not dictate the terms of our service.

- (2) An *incarnational* approach in which service includes solidarity with and dependence upon those we attempt to serve. This adds the dimension of identification and compassion. Of course we cannot in any full sense become incarnate in a foreign culture, but we can take an empathetic stance. I have tried many times to put into words what an incarnational or solidarity stance might involve. Here is my latest effort.
 - (a) Accepting the parameters of the cultural pattern as the limiting context for work, and freedom to contextualize (freedom from "legalism"). Jesus operated very self-consciously as a first century Jew. Of course he broke through some of the cultural barriers this imposed upon him, but he lived, ministered and died as a Jew. (Note our difficulty with some of the Jewish things he said and did, e.g., "I have come to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ". . . should not feed the children's bread to the dogs.")
 - (b) Being respectful, taking the culture seriously and learning to know its values from the inside.
 - (c) Being genuinely dependent upon and appreciative of the hosts' hospitality and sustaining support. I am convinced that genuine interdependence is fundamental in a spiritual approach to social and material services: listening, learning, adopting cultural styles. I think MCC's "partnering" stance is incarnational.
 - (d) Making penetration of the culture with the spirit of Christ the aim of the mission, not the rescue of individuals from it. As much as possible one does not attempt to substitute one's own modern culture/religion, but to introduce Jesus. We seek to incarnate the Spirit/spirit of Jesus. The question is how Jesus would impact the culture.
- (3) An *integrated holistic* approach based on our understanding of the essentially spiritual nature of human beings. This implies a social community development approach in which verbal ministries (witness, counseling, teaching) and peacemaking are integral to the project. And presupposing, as I do, that the program is Christian, the witness would be to Christ as the source and dynamic of authentic human life and relationship. Jobs creation and economic development, emergency relief, conciliation and conflict resolution ministries, medical programs, etc. should be done in this contextual framework.

- (4) A *participatory* approach in which “service” means the active inclusion of the “poor” whom we serve in their own transformation. (Peru “Declaration Towards a Wholistic Transformation in Latin America,” *Mission Focus*, 3/89, p. 15) This would include what Samuel Escobar called a “Eucharistic” approach in which those who receive help are expected to voluntarily and generously share from the benefits they have received. In this regard Escobar is concerned that we share “the Christological sources of [our] compassion and spirit of service” (1988).

In her book, *India, India* (McGraw Hill, 1967) Lisa Hobbs tells about a trip to a Maharastran village with Father Ferrer who was director of the Roman Catholic Seva Mandal (Service Society). They were going to locate and dig a well in the village. But Father Ferrer saw it as more than a well-digging project. He saw it as starting “a quiet revolution there.” He explained, “The Mandal means simply Society, and that is what we have formed to help the farmers—a cooperative society but with a difference. We don’t just want to feed the people; we want to give them an understanding of all the forces that can change their lives....”

When they arrived, Ferrer spoke to the villagers about our one humanity under the one God, and of the responsibility such “brotherhood” lays upon us to freely share our wealth. He asserted the basic gospel, although he did not identify it as such, principle that in order to receive we must give. And then, before he agreed which farmer should get the first well he engaged the farmer in a spirited public conversation which ended with the farmer promising to pay back the full loan, half of the first year’s profits even though they were small, and beside that to give one-third of his fifty acres of land so that others could live—and to do all this voluntarily and in good grace. Only then did he agree to go and locate the well on the farmer’s property.

Then he comforted the man, “You are frightened. Remember. When you give you become rich. And the more you give the richer you become. You do not believe, but truly it is surprising” (pp. 198ff.).

This is an excellent picture of participatory development!

- (5) A *transformational* approach in which service is defined as empowerment. In his “Anabaptist Vision,” written in 1943, Harold Bender wrote, “Discipleship is a concept which meant the transformation of the entire way of life of individual believers and of society so that it should be fashioned after the teachings and example of Christ.”

In a recent issue of *MCC Contact* John Lapp has written that we do not want to simply be ameliorative but transformational. The word transformation has taken the place of development in some Evangelical circles, and I think it is a good exchange. Not only has the concept of “undeveloped” or “underdeveloped” nations lost favor, it is questionable from a gospel point of view whether the word development is radical enough to describe goals of Christian intervention in any case.

Whether or not we have used transformational language, I think that it has been essential to the MCC and mission boards' goals. I would like to think that this is at least the implicit reason for adding peace as a dynamic, transformative ideal to the explicit agenda of every service program in MCC. The reorganization of the Peace Section in order to more carefully integrate it into the total mission of MCC-US is clearly a move in the same direction. Shalom as a transformative ideal has been given a functional role in the various programs, namely, "to discover and live out the gospel of peace in all areas of life."³ This is a call for a more explicitly spiritual, in contrast to technical, dimension in our service programs.

If we seriously define our peace mandate as a mandate to transform and empower the "poor," then we must raise the question of how they are to be motivated, in the words of the Peru Declaration, to be "agents of their own transformation." And if, as the MCC U.S. Women's Concerns Mission Statement puts it, we choose "to use our power to empower others rather than to dominate," we must consider how we do this. We raise this question to a new level of importance.

If we remember that Jesus' preaching of shalom and justice was mainly to the poor, perhaps we can take our clue from him. How did he expect them to be motivated and energized to share, serve, bear each other's burdens, etc? According to John 6 they would receive such nourishment from partaking in the body and blood of Christ, not from eating the bread which Jesus miraculously provided.

³ John R. Burkholder and Howard John Loewen have pointed out that there has been a major transition in the Mennonite understanding of the implications of our peace position. We have moved from a stance of "withdrawal" in which peace was understood in a more passive mode, to a stance of "transformation" in which peace is understood in dynamic terms ("Peace in the Mennonite Tradition," in *Baptism Peace and the State in the Reformed and Mennonite Traditions*, Bender and Sell, editors, 1991).

SEMINAR V RELATING TO PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS

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It seems clear that we need a new paradigm for dealing with religion in the post-modern socio-political order. The missionary movement of the 19th and 20th centuries has assumed the Enlightenment paradigm of “toleration” for religion within an overarching secular order. In that model the political society is to be secular, and morals are to be regulated by empirical and pragmatic factors. Religion is reduced to the private sector. Clearly, this model is under attack both in the western democracies and in traditional religious states like India and Iran. The fall of secular communism in the Soviet empire and the less dramatic, but fully as significant, revisionist shift toward religious tolerance in China, Cambodia, and Vietnam—all this signals the need for some careful rethinking.

Christianity must find some approach other than that of “culture wars”—one “fundamentalism” versus another! The older religious imperialism must become a thing of the past. On the other hand, toleration based upon the secularizing of public culture also seems to be unsatisfactory except in the post-communist societies. From the experience of Europe and America it seems inevitable that secular interests cancel out public religious values in the long run.

What might toleration based upon mutual respect and cooperation among the religious groups look like? We do not yet know how a genuinely pluralistic mix of religions in a single society would work; but it is clear that it would require a more cooperative, consensus model than the fifty-one per cent winner take all model which we have championed in the United States. And how might the church give an authentic witness to the unique and universal revelation of God in Christ in such a political order? Would it rule out all competitive proselytizing? If both neutrality and imperialistic competition are out, what stance shall we take?

We cannot solve all these questions in this brief paper, but merely raising them frames the context in which we are asking the question of our relation to people of other faiths.

Perhaps no government has attempted a more pluralistic stance than ancient Rome with its Pantheon of gods for the empire. And it was precisely in this cultural climate that Christianity was born. This suggests that we might get some strategic insight from the New Testament itself. How did the men and women of first generation Christianity bear witness to Jesus as the Christ? What were their attitudes toward those of other religions? After examining the biblical material briefly for leads, I will suggest some theological ABCs that can give us direction, and then call attention to some practical guidelines.

Strategy Suggestions from the New Testament

First, I would call your attention to the fact that the apostle Paul faced much the same kind of problem that we do today as we cross cultures. He could not, indeed, chose not to, go into the various cultures of West Asia without a predetermined religious identity. He was automatically identified with the culture religion of Judaism just as we are identified with a cultural model of Christianity.

However, he did not require his listeners to become Jewish. Indeed, Paul refused to perpetuate the central cultural symbol of pharisaic biblicism as a necessary expression of faith in Christ, and dealt with the mores of the Jerusalem Council contextually (Acts 15:28-29, cf. 1 Cor. 8). He taught that Christ has inaugurated a new reality which requires a radically new approach to cultural religions. Thus he could write to the Galatian Christians, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6, NEB; cf. 1 Cor. 7:19). He called both his Jewish compatriots as well as pagans to the same new social-spiritual reality. In the same sense we are not to proselytize our listeners into cultural Christianity, but to call them to a new identity “in Christ”—an identity to be lived out in their own culture (Gal. 3:26-28).

Second, Paul did not condemn pagan religions as demonic in their totality. He recognized the values and spiritual insights in some of their religious teachings and practices. On Mars Hill in Athens he commended his hearers for their religious devotion and identified his message with their image to an “unknown god” (Acts 17:5ff). He was concerned to point to the true source and authentic pattern of these values, namely, the disclosure of God in Christ; and he was particularly careful not to take credit to himself as a new religious guru (Acts 10:14-18).

He plainly acknowledged that the sincere virtues of pagans who keep the spirit of God’s law are valid in God’s sight. Their virtues are not “splendid vices,” as Augustine put it! Further, they will be judged by their actions (“works”), not their profession, just as will Jews and Christians (Rom. 2:4-7, 14-16). Then he adds that God is God of both Jews and Gentiles, and both will be saved “by faith,” i.e., not by observance of religious codes, either Mosaic or pagan, but by a sincere will to do God’s will (3:28-29). This is quite a contrast to conservative Jewish proselytizers among the pagans.

The risen Christ establishes a new criterion by which to evaluate religious cultures. They are not subject to the relativities of any other religious culture. Rather, they are under the judgment of God as He has made himself known in Christ. While this may give the biblical religions some historical tactical advantage, he wrote, it does not mean that they are God’s favorites (Rom. 3:1-2). All people of the earth have the same access to God through the true and living way which has been disclosed in Jesus Christ.

Finally, Paul and the other apostolic missionaries focused their criticism on those social-spiritual values and practices that were dehumanizing. Thus they addressed such cultural practices as slavery, violence, poverty and economic injustice, sexual promiscuity, prostitution, pederasty, wife and child abuse, and idolatry. The latter had to do, not so much with theological concepts of God, but with superstitious delusion, and the political and social domination of the “powers” which destroyed the “image of God.”

This certainly is not the pattern of cultural or religious imperialism. Paul self-consciously identified himself as a “servant” of Christ and those to whom he was sent, and made his appeal “in weakness.” If this is imperialistic, it is an imperialism of the cross.

Some Theological ABCs

Many of our old mission rubrics were formulated when “crusading” Christianity was at its height. They have, in fact, become restrictive like “old wine skins” which have lost their elasticity. We need to reexamine the fundamental theological definitions which carry the message of the cross, and reformulate them so that they do not carry imperialistic implications. During this time of shifting cultural paradigms there are a number of basic theological principles that can give us direction.

First, there is only one God, who is God of all humankind. This one God is the Creator-Savior of the human race from the beginning of time. Indeed, the creation story of Genesis is told as a salvation story. The earth in chaos and darkness is given light and order. This God is the source of all life, light and order in the universe. Jesus said that God sends his blessings to the “evil and the good,” the “just and unjust,” and by the same token he judges everyone by the same covenant law given in the first instance to all humankind (adam).

This one God has “revealed” himself universally for the life of all humankind. In fact, God’s revelation is equated with the acts of creation and salvation. As the Psalmist wrote, if God hides his face from us we die (104:29). This self-disclosure is spoken of as God “speaking” to us. God “spoke” and the worlds were created. And the Gospel of John begins by telling us that God has spoken the word of light and life from the beginning.

Throughout the history of humankind God has spoken in “many and various ways” (Heb. 1:2- 3), and finally this “Word” was definitively embodied in the life and message of Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Thus the light that shines in Jesus is identified with the universal light “which enlightens everyone coming into the world” (John 1:9). This is the biblical basis for the concept of the “cosmic Christ.” We need to reexamine the implications of this universal note in God’s self-communication.

Second, salvation is by grace, not by religion. No one is saved by religious practices such as going to church, offering sacrifices, making donations to temples, which are identified in Scripture as “works of the flesh.” No matter what religious culture one is socialized in, one is saved only by the Creator-Savior God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. This certainly suggests that participation or non-participation in religious ritual is not of the essence. As Paul put it, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but the new creation” (Gal. 6:15). Or again, “Do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews, or to Greeks or to the church of God” (1 Cor. 10:31-33).

The only way to life (salvation) is the way of *agape*, that is, love as it was defined in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. By formal definition *agape*, or *chesed* in the Hebrew, is God’s relation to us described as his covenant law of “life and peace” (Mal. 2:5). Substantively it is the kind of relation displayed in Jesus Christ and described by him as the “reign of God.” Thus the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as in heaven,” is a prayer for salvation. This salvation from the human side is attained by a positive response to the life, light and love (the Word) which comes from God. To put this negatively, there are not many different ways of salvation, or many different “saviors.”

We need to understand salvation as healing, and not as an instantaneous rescue from perdition. (The New Testament word *sodzo* means to heal or save.) Salvation is both a process (healing) and goal (health), and it describes both individuals and societies. (Revelation 22:2 speaks of the healing of the nations.) Further, we must understand healing as a holistic concept. The goal of individual salvation is personal wholeness, i.e., spiritual, social, and physical health. The goal of social salvation is *shalom*, or the peace of God—both material, social and spiritual well being. Both of these kinds of healing are included in the prayer, “Thy kingdom come.”

When we think of God as the Creator-Savior continuously involved in the life of the world, and salvation as the process of healing and being healed, then we can understand how our “presence” can be truly a “working together with God” to reconcile and rehabilitate the world.

Third, religions are relative human responses to the “light” of God which has shone in human darkness. Religions are cultural, human expressions. While they are responses to revelation, we should not speak of them as revealed. This is true of all religions including Christianity. The old teaching that Christianity is a “revealed religion” and the others are “natural religions” gives us a false lead in relating to those of other religious faiths. The ritual, moral and theological response of the Christian church to God’s revelation in Christ is imperfect and relative like those of other religions. We need to keep this in mind when we engage in comparative dialogue or attempt to give witness to Christ.

Unfortunately, most human responses have been relatively negative—a phenomenon which is referred to as “original sin” in theology. These negative as well as the positive responses have been institutionalized in the religions of the world. Thus while one must always deal sensitively and with respect in matters of religious conviction, one does not assume that a “religious” response is ipso facto a life enhancing response. As the old spiritual suggests, there is “good religion” and “bad religion.” Our concern for ourselves and others is to “have good religion.”

Fourth, when light is refused, it becomes exposure and judgment (John 3:19-21). Such a negative response usually takes the form of psychological denial, or, in theological terms, self-justification. Cultures have a bias for the authority of tradition, and initial reaction is to give it precedence over the “light”—“We are okay. This is our way. Nothing is wrong. You have no right to interfere with our culture.”

The tobacco industry’s reaction to recent disclosures about the effects of cigarette smoking is an excellent example of such denial. While they argue vehemently that cigarettes are not deadly, and smokers in denial insist on continuing, people keep dying from smoking (the “judgment”). But those who listen and abstain/quit become relatively more healthy (“salvation”).

The reality of this kind of reaction should caution us against naivete in our relations to people of other faiths, and especially in our relations to the institutionalized system. We must be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves.” At the same time it should greatly humble us and open our eyes to the denial in our own culture. We must not try to clean the speck of dust from their eye when we have a log in our own.

We must be very careful not to promote our religion in competition with their religion. The light of which we have spoken is not the prerogative of any one religion. We must appeal to a self-authenticating authority in life as Jesus himself did, and not to religion. The promise of Jesus to his disciples is that his holy Spirit, the Paraclete, will give such authentication (John 16:8-11).

Finally, in our review of theological fundamentals, we need to face the question so often raised whether one can be “saved” without knowledge of the earthly Jesus. I am quite confident that from a biblical perspective the answer is “yes.” Here we must make a theological distinction between “Jesus,” the historical person, and “Christ,” or the “Word,” which is the active principle of God’s self-disclosure. We have a good example of this distinction in 1 Corinthians 10:4 where Paul identifies the “spiritual rock” from which Israel drank in the wilderness with “Christ.” And John, in a figurative utterance, represents Jesus as saying, “Before Abraham was I am” (8:58).

According to the biblical story God has made covenants of salvation with humankind from the beginning of creation. As a common noun “*adam*” means humankind, and when it is used as the name for the father of the race, it represents the race. Noah represents a new beginning of the human race, and again God made a covenant with his family for the salvation of humanity. Then at a later date we read of Melchisedek, priest of the Most High God, whom Abraham recognized as God’s priest. All of these characters represent humankind outside the Abrahamic tradition, but, of course, not outside the scope of God’s saving self-disclosure. None of them knew about the earthly Jesus or even worshipped Yahweh as God, yet all of these “pleased God” (Heb. 11: 5).

Abraham represents the beginning of the historical tradition which culminates in the coming of Jesus, and became the prototype of “salvation by faith” because he anticipated the fulfillment of God’s promised salvation. Jesus referred to this anticipatory faith as “seeing my day,” but this does not mean that he knew the earthly Jesus. It is significant for our question that Paul makes Abraham the progenitor of the faithful, rather than Moses, the prophet of institutionalized Israelite religion.

One should note also that the prophets and apostles are not nearly so “exclusive” in their assessment of God’s saving exploits as are many modern Christians. Amos challenged Israel’s presumption that they were God’s favorites (9:7). Jonah was called to warn the Ninevites, and to his own dismay witnessed their salvation. Paul criticized the Jews for assuming that God’s goodness meant God’s exclusive approval, and warned them that judgment would be according to deeds, not preferential standing (Rom. 2:4-7). Peter was shown that “God shows no partiality” in his saving concern (Acts 10:34).

Thus one should not conclude that God is not at work for the salvation of humankind in other cultures and religions. Neither should one assume that no one is “saved” in these cultures until the story of Jesus is told. Indeed, one should go to these cultures with the presumption that God is already there and effectively at work, and that the story of Jesus will be self-authenticating when it is told because there are those like Noah, Melchisedek, Abraham and Cornelius who have anticipated the message of a saving God.

Practical Considerations

People's religion is part of their cultural self-identity. Thus our relationships to individuals of other cultures and faiths inevitably involve us in relations with their culture religions. One cannot, for example, relate with integrity to individual Hindus in any depth without taking their Hindu religion seriously. To ignore their religious culture is to not take them seriously. To simply reject their religion as "heathen" or demonic, inevitably means rejection of the people whose identity is bound up with it.

I remember how sensitive Indian Christians refused to sing the hymn, "From Greenland's Icy Mountains to India's Coral Strands," because of the words ". . . the heathen in their blindness bow down to wood and stone." While they did not necessarily agree with their Hindu friends, they deemed this to be a prejudiced judgment. Or the Japanese lass studying at a Christian college in America who asked me, "Do you think that Japanese people are bad (because they are Buddhists)?" When I asked her why she asked, she told me that some classmates thought that Buddhism is a heathen religion.

Further, to reject a religious culture in toto as evil implies that individuals must leave it in order to follow Christ. When 19th century missionaries presumed that heathen cultures with their religions were simply the work of the devil, they assumed that those cultures were incapable of becoming vehicles to carry the gospel. Converts were expected to reject their own culture and join the culture of the western compound in order to be Christian. This implies, for example, that a self-sacrificing act of love by a committed Hindu cannot be an act of true agape. Or that such a Hindu's adoration of Christ as his/her Istadevi (own personal god) cannot be pleasing to God.

The principles of contextualization, or enculturation, of the gospel, and a holistic approach to mission demand a revision of such assumptions. To contextualize means to communicate the gospel from within a given culture and in terms relevant to that culture. And if we are to be holistic, we must approach individuals-in-their-culture, and search for ways in which the gospel can be a catalyst for change, both in the life of individuals and in the society.

This holistic approach to other cultures (religions) may be threatening for those of us in a Believers Church tradition with a sectarian bias that assumes the separation of religious faith and societal culture. We may be unaware how much our own identities are bound up with particular forms of moral and religious practice, and how much we have read our own religious (cultural) expressions into the Bible. But if we are to effectively relate our faith to people of other faiths, we will have to become more self-aware along these lines. We must learn to distinguish between the meaning we project on to the foreign cultural forms and the inner meaning these practices have for people to whom the culture is native. It is also our responsibility to learn what our cultural practices may convey to them. While we want to avoid mere eclecticism and syncretism, we must open ourselves to the possibility that their cultural practices do convey meanings compatible with the gospel.

It is important to remember that we are dealing with people and not ideologies. Christian witness is not an argument, but an act of genuine caring for the other person.

Thus in all our relationships and decisions we must be flexible and concerned for the other person's welfare. We must be open and honest in our responses to them. That will mean that we confess that we do not have all the answers, and that our religion is not always better in every way!

For the sake both of the community and the individual we must take care not to unnecessarily alienate individuals from their cultural settings. Both Jesus and Paul warn about the seriousness of unwarranted offenses (Mat. 18:7; 1 Cor. 10:32). On the other hand, we want to motivate and enable individuals and local groups to achieve their highest God-given destiny. The line between alienation and enablement is often tough to call, as, for example, in cultures where the local customs denigrate women.

Finally, in our relationships with those of other cultures we must be aware of our own cultural identity as Americans. America is assumed to be a "Christian culture." They will presume that we as American Christians share the attitudes, values, politics, etc. of our national society. The burden of proof otherwise is upon us.

It is our responsibility to distinguish for them between our faith in Christ and American religion. And we will have to learn how to introduce Christ, not American religion, so that he will impact their way of life. In this task the institutional identity of Mennonite Central Committee as a "Christian resource for meeting human need" can be a great advantage. Of course, each of us must show genuine respect for the culture as we embody the Spirit/spirit of Christ in genuine servanthood, but the institutional reputation of MCC will help to cover a multitude of individual failings!

by C. Norman Kraus
May 1994

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