Critical Contextualization

What should people do with their old cultural ways when they become Christians, and how should the missionary respond to these traditional beliefs and practices?

When missionaries arrive in a new region, they do not enter a religious and cultural vacuum. They find societies with well-developed cultures that provide for essential needs and make human life possible. They also find religious and philosophical beliefs that provide the people with answers to many of their deepest questions. How, then, should they relate to the existing cultural beliefs and practices? Are they all evil? Or are they good?

Traditional Cultures

As we have seen, cultures are made up of systems of beliefs and practices that are built upon the implicit assumptions that people make about themselves, about the world around them, and about ultimate realities. What are some of these beliefs and practices to which Christians must respond?

Material Culture

People create objects for use and entertainment. They construct houses out of branches, mud, stones, or cement. They make dugouts, outriggers, yachts, and steamboats; dog sleds, ox carts, and horseless
carriages; digging sticks, hoes, plows, and harrows; leather pouches, baskets, pots, and bins. They domesticate dogs, pigs, chickens, buffalo, llamas, elephants, and monkeys; raise wheat, rice, yams, chilies, chil- cory, plums, coffee, alfalfa, larkspurs, motherworts, bluegrass, and a thousand other plants; and they catch fish and birds and trap crabs and lobsters.

People make medicines for the sick. South Indian villagers grind up the leaves of indigo trees, the dried fruit of cherry plums, and po- wered iron with the juice from the roots of a tree and sheep urine, and put it on their hair to turn it from gray to black. Their cure for “cold diseases” includes eating hot, salty, chile-spiced foods, spitting often, massaging, taking snuff, and abstaining from sleep.

People also use magic as cures and protective charms. The Burmese cure the sick by burying small images of them in tiny coffins. Siamese magicians make effigies of people who are dangerously ill and recite chants over them in solitary places. Muslims make miniature Qurans that they hang around their necks. And Indian villagers chant sacred mantras or inscribe magical drawings on sheets of copper that they tie to their wrists or waists (Figure 24).

Other objects are used for religious purposes. Among the Yorubas of West Africa, when a twin dies, the people make a roughly fashioned human shape, which the mother carries with her. This not only keeps the living child from missing its lost twin, but also gives the spirit of the dead child something to enter so that it will not disturb the living child. The Haida of the northwestern coast of North America carved totem poles in memory of their ancestors. Other peoples make fetishes, icons, and idols, and build temples, mosques, high places, and other sacred shrines.

These and many more are the material objects of a culture to which Christians must respond. What should they do with all of them?

Expressive Culture

All cultures provide ways for people to express their feelings, whether these be the joy and excitement of entertainment, the sorrow of part- ings and death, the creative exhibitions of tribal artists or philosoph- ers, or the awe and fear of gods and spirits.

One of the most common of human expressions is music. In Central Africa this centers around rituals and entertainment and is closely associated with drums and dancing. In Tibet the people use long horns to announce the beginning of services. South Indian women sing work songs as they transplant rice. American Indians sing to their guardian spirits as they await death. North Americans listen to classical music, Country and Western, jazz, or rock.

Magical charms, when properly used in a South Indian village, will automatically bring about the desired results. These charms combine powerful figures, sounds, and words. A: Yantra for a headache, including writing it on a brass plate, lighting a candle before it after it is wrapped in string, covering it with red and yellow powders, and tying it to the head. B: Yantra for assuring conception, involving inscribing it on a piece of paper or copper sheeting and tying it to the arm of the barren woman. C: Used for malaria. D: To the god Narasimha, for power and general protection. E: (For use by young men), when written on paper and tied to the arm, it will cause the woman of a man’s choice to fall in love with him. (There are other charms to protect women from lecherous men who use this charm.)

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Cultural Differences and the Message

People sing about many things. Balengi mothers of central Africa sing lullabies to their children such as this (adapted from Radin 1957:140):

Why do you cry, my child?  
The sky is bright; the sun is shining.  
Why do you cry?  
Go to your father; he loves you,  
Go tell him why you cry.  
What! You cry still?  
Your father loves you, I caress you;  
Yet still you are sad.  
Tell me, then, my child, why do you cry?

Hindu mothers sing to their daughters:

Blessing on you, daughter of the mountain king.  
Maidens will sing of your beauty in a cradle of gold,  
Sleep, oh lily-eyed one, sleep peacefully,  
You are the chosen of Siva, play with your toys.

People also recite proverbs and riddles. One South Indian village aphorism is: "Flies, wind, prostitutes, beggars, rats, village headmen, tax collectors; these seven always pester others."

Another goes:

A wife who refuses to eat the leavings on her husband's plate  
will be reborn a buffalo,  
A wife who adorns herself when her husband is away  
will be reborn a pig.  
A wife who eats before her husband returns  
will be reborn a dog.  
A wife who sleeps on the bed and makes her husband sleep on the floor  
will be reborn a snake.

And another:

The saint who says the sound om  
Will become one with you,  
Oh great god Rama.

In all cultures people also pray. Villagers in Ghana pray to their ancestors at the burial ceremony (Taylor 1977:153):

Critical Contextualization

You are leaving us today; we have performed your funeral. Do not let any of us fall ill. Let us get money to pay the expenses of your funeral.  
Let the women bear children. Life to all of us. Life to the chief.

On the other hand the Pawnee Indians of North America prayed to the high but unknown God (Radin 1957:361):

Father, unto thee we cry!  
Father thou of gods and men;  
Father thou of all we hear;  
Father thou of all we see—  
Father, unto thee we cry!

Folk poets and philosophers also reflect upon the realities of life and human destinies. Often they provide down-to-earth answers with sharp insights into reality. One ancient Indian sage captured human avarice in the following ditty (Ryder 1956:374):

A beggar to the graveyard hied,  
And there "Friend corpse, arise," he cried;  
"One moment lift my heavy weight  
Of poverty; for I of late  
Grow weary, and desire instead  
Your comfort: you are good and dead."  
The corpse was silent. He was sure  
Twas better to be dead than poor.

One of the most widespread forms of folk literature is the story. People in all cultures tell anecdotes about the incongruities of life and the strange ways of others. They tell children's stories and stories for women and for men. They also tell tales about the origins of the world and of their tribes. Such stories, commonly known as myths, express their fundamental beliefs about the nature of things, especially about the nature of human beings and their relationships to their ancestors, the spirits, and the gods.

The Demon Who Destroyed Himself

Once upon a time Basma, the demon, was learning arts and sciences from Ishvara the god. Parvati, Ishvara's wife, was impressed with the student and begged Ishvara to give him a special boon. Finally because of Parvati's intercession, Ishvara gave the demon a secret mantra known as the "essence
of fire spell," which gave him the power to convert everything he touched to fire and ash.

In time Basma fell in love with Parvati and secretly thought of seducing her. He decided to touch Ishvara and burn him up, but when Ishvara saw him coming, he ran away.

Maha Vishnu, the great god, saw this and decided to put an end to the demon. He took on the guise of an even more beautiful woman and created a golden swing. When Basma saw the woman swinging and singing love songs, he was immediately infatuated with "her" and asked her who she was.

"Can't you see I am a female," Vishnu said.

"Are you married?" Basma asked?

"No," said Vishnu.

"Will you marry me?" the demon begged.

"Yes, but I do not trust men. So place your hand on your head and swear that you will be faithful to me and never leave me," said Vishnu.

Basma was so infatuated that he forgot his hand was charmed. He touched his head and swore fidelity to the beautiful woman and thus was consumed into ashes.


In the case of universalistic religions such as Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, such stories and the religious theologies related to them are codified in sacred scriptures such as the Tripitaka (Buddhism), the Quran (Islam), and the Vedas and Puranas (Hinduism).

**Ritual Culture**

Missionaries find it particularly difficult to deal with rituals in the new culture, since these often speak of the most profound experiences of human life and reflect the deepest beliefs of the people. How should Christians respond to them?

**Life-cycle rites.** All people face the question of the meaning of human life. And all of them do so, in part, by marking the important transitions in life with rituals for such events as birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death. These rites often show us the people's most significant assumptions about the nature and destiny of human beings and their place in the world.

A child does not become a human being merely by biological birth. He or she must be transformed into a social being, a member of the society. This is often done by mystically creative rites in which a baby is made human. Among the Chagga of Africa, for example, the baby is formally presented to the mother's relatives on the fourth day after birth. A week later it is made a member of the father's clan with an elaborate ceremony. After another month it is taken outside and lifted toward the snowy summit of Kilimanjaro with the prayer, "God and Guide, lead this child, guard it and let it grow and arise like smoke!" (Taylor 1977:94–95).

After a birth the Gikuyu of East Africa bury the placenta in an uncultivated field and cover it with grain and grass to ensure the strength of the child and the continued fertility of the mother. The father cuts four sugar canes if the child is a girl or five if it is a boy, gives the juice to the mother and child, and buries the scraps on the right side of the house if the child is a boy and on the left if it is a girl. He sacrifices a goat to celebrate, and the medicine man is called to purify the house. The mother and child are kept in seclusion for four or five days, and the husband sacrifices sheep of thanksgiving to God and the living-dead.

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**Omodo**

**Walter A. Trobisch**

On one of my trips I worshipped in an African church where nobody knew me. After the service I talked to two boys who had also attended.

"How many brothers and sisters do you have?" I asked the first one.

"Three."

"Are they all from the same stomach?"

"Yes, my father is a Christian."

"How about you?" I addressed the other boy.

He hesitated. In his mind he was adding up. I knew immediately that he came from a polygamist family.

"We are nine," he finally said.

"Is your father a Christian?"

"No," was the typical answer, "he is a polygamist."

"Are you baptised?"

"Yes, and my brothers and sister too," he added proudly.

"And their mothers?"

"They are all three baptised, but only the first wife takes communion."

"Take me to your father."

The boy led me to a compound with many individual houses. It breathed an atmosphere of cleanliness, order and wealth. Each wife had her own house and her own kitchen. The father, a middle-aged, good-looking man, tall, fat and impressive, received me without embarrassment and with apparent joy. I found Omodo, as we shall call him, a well-educated person, wide awake and intelligent, with a sharp wit and a rare sense of humor. From the outset he made no apologies for being a polygamist; he was proud of it. Let me try to put down here the essential content of our conversation that day which lasted for several hours.

"Welcome to the hut of a poor sinner!" The words were accompanied by good-hearted laughter.
"It looks like a rich sinner," I retorted.

"The saints come very seldom to this place," he said, "they don't want to be contaminated with sin."

"But they are not afraid to receive your wives and children. I just met them in church."

"I know. I give everyone a coin for the collection plate. I guess I finance half of the church's budget. They are glad to take my money, but they don't want me."

I sat in thoughtful silence. After a while he continued, "I feel sorry for the pastor. By refusing to accept all the polygamous men in town as church members he has made his flock poor and they shall always be dependent upon subsidies from America. He has created a church of women whom he tells every Sunday that polygamy is wrong."

"Wasn't your first wife heart-broken when you took a second one?"

Omodo looked at me almost with pity. "It was her happiest day," he said finally.

"Tell me how it happened."

"Well, one day after she had come home from the garden and had fetched wood and water, she was preparing the evening meal, while I sat in front of my house and watched her. Suddenly she turned to me and mocked me. She called me a 'poor man,' because I had only one wife. She pointed to our neighbor's wife who could care for her children while the other wife prepared the food."

"Poor man," Omodo repeated. "I can take much, but not that. I had to admit that she was right. She needed help. She had already picked out a second wife for me and they get along fine."

I glanced around the courtyard and saw a beautiful young woman, about 19 or 20, come out of one of the huts.

"It was a sacrifice for me," Omodo commented. "Her father demanded a very high bride price."

"Do you mean that the wife, who caused you to become a polygamist is the only one of your family who receives communion?"

"Yes, she told the missionary how hard it was for her to share her love for me with another woman. According to the church my wives are considered sinless because each of them has only one husband. I, the father, am the only sinner in our family. Since the Lord's supper is not given to sinners, I am excluded from it. Do you understand that, pastor?"

I was entirely confused.

"And you see," Omodo continued, "they are all praying for me that I might be saved from sin, but they don't agree from which sin I must be saved."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the pastor prays that I may not continue to commit the sin of polygamy. My wives pray that I may not commit the sin of divorce, I wonder whose prayers are heard first."

"So your wives are afraid that you become a Christian?"

"They are afraid that I become a church member. Let's put it that way. For me there is a difference. You see they can only have intimate relations with me as long as I do not belong to the church. In the moment I would become a church member their marriage relations with me would become sinful."

"Wouldn't you like to become a church member?"

"Pastor, don't lead me into temptation! How can I become a church member, if it means to disobey Christ? Christ forbade divorce, but not polygamy. The church forbids polygamy but demands divorce. How can I become a church member, if I want to be a Christian? For me there is only one way, to be a Christian without the church."

"Have you ever talked to your pastor about that?"

"He does not dare to talk to me, because he knows as well as I do that some of his elders have a second wife secretly. The only difference between them and me is that I am honest and they are hypocrites."

"Did a missionary ever talk to you?"

"Yes, once. I told him that with the high divorce rate in Europe, they have only a successive form of polygamy while we have a simultaneous polygamy. That did it. He never came back."

I was speechless. Omodo accompanied me back to the village. He evidently enjoyed to be seen with a pastor.

"But tell me, why did you take a third wife?" I asked him.

"I did not take her. I inherited her from my late brother, including her children. Actually my older brother would have been next in line. But he is an elder. He is not allowed to sin by giving security to a widow."

I looked in his eyes. "Do you want to become a Christian?"

"I am a Christian." Omodo said without smiling.

As I walked slowly down the path, the verse came to my mind: "You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel."

What does it mean to take responsibility as a congregation for Omodo? I am sorry that I was not able to see Omodo again, because I had met him while I was on a trip. I just report to you the essence of our conversation because it contains in a nutshell the main attitudes of polygamists toward the church. It is always healthy to see ourselves with the eyes of an outsider. I asked myself: What would I have done if I were pastor in Omodo's town?

In most societies marriage is the central ritual of life. It rearranges the social order by taking one or both partners from the parental home. Marriage establishes a family and speaks of fertility and children, and it often is associated with deep religious meanings. Among the Bhotiya of Tibet, the process lasts at least three years! Some of the important steps along the way are (1) astrologers determine whether the marriage will be favorable; (2) uncles of the girl and boy act as go-betweens and carry gifts back and forth as the promises are made;
(3) the intermediaries give a feast and invoke the blessings of the gods upon the couple; (4) a year later all the relatives on both sides attend a great feast and the bride price is paid; (5) another year later the astrologer determines the auspicious time for the bride to join her husband, the lamas or priests come to celebrate, two "thieves" try to steal the girl and are driven away, guests give presents to the bride, and the girl returns home; and (6) after one more year the parents give the bride her dowry and she is escorted to the boy's home. The marriage ceremonies are now completed.

Among the most feared rituals are funerals. The spirit of the deceased is widely believed to join the ancestors or remain around the house for some years, influencing the affairs of the living. Funerals may also attract evil spirits who plague close relatives.

Such beliefs are found among the Kols of India (van Gennep 1960:151). The corpse is placed on the ground immediately after death so that the soul can find its way to the home of the dead beneath the earth. The body is washed and painted yellow to chase away the evil spirits who try to stop the soul on its journey. It is then placed on a pyre, together with rice and the tools of the deceased. Rice cakes and silver coins for the journey to the nether world are placed in the mouth of the corpse. After cremation the men gather the bones and take them to hang in a pot in the house of the dead. Rice is thrown along the way so that the deceased, should he or she return in spite of all precautions, will have something to eat and will not harm anyone. After a time the deceased is "married" to the spirits in the lower world with singing, dancing, and feasting. Finally, the bones are buried in a field.

The life-cycle rite least understood by Western missionaries is that of initiation. In most parts of the world, children are transformed into adults through a ritual that often involves tests of suffering, separation from parents and village, and initiation into adult gender roles. Those who do not go through these rites are considered to be children or incomplete humans, no matter how old they are.

The Chagga of East Africa, for example, have several rituals that mark entry into adulthood. When children approach puberty, their ears are pierced. This ceremony links them in a special way to their paternal grandfathers on the one hand and their maternal uncles on the other. They are then ceremonially introduced to domestic and agricultural work and, as a recognition of their new status, are allowed for the first time to taste game and beer. From this time onward, the young adults are taught about their ancestors through the recitation of stories and songs. Then, when they are about twelve, their two lower front teeth are removed and offered to the first ancestor. Finally they are circumcised, a ritual that transforms boys and girls into full manhood and womanhood within the family.

In such rites the initiates are often seen as dying to their childhood world and being reborn in the adult world. The Kore of West Africa, for instance, take the young boys into the forest for fifteen days. The initiation grove is situated to the west of the village, symbolic of the death they must experience. Inside, the elders whip them with thorn branches and burning torches. The former signify the pain of leaving their former life and the difficulties of acquiring new knowledge. The latter represent divine enlightenment.

The initiates are now regarded as "dead," entombed in the grove and surrounded by thorn hedges. But they are also embryos about to be reborn as adults. Mothers bring food to the grove but do not see their sons, who remain completely passive and helpless and must be fed by the elders.

Finally, the novices are covered with a large blanket of animal skins, and a leader chants a prayer of resurrection and fertility: "If the sky is curved, then it will rain. Let the millet be abundant, let births multiply, let sickness go, let the 'dead' [the initiates] return to life, forever, forever, forever" (Ray 1976:93). When the blanket is removed, the novices are reborn as adults.

Some initiation rites involve an introduction to sexual behavior. About the elaborate female initiation rituals of the Banaro of New Guinea, Richard Thurnwald writes:

[For nine months] the girls are confined to a cell in the family house, getting sago soup instead of water. . . . At last their cell is broken up by the women, the girls released and allowed to leave the house. The women get coconuts laid ready beforehand, and throw them at the girls, whom they finally push into the water; again peeling them with coconuts. The girls crawl out of the water on the bank, receive portions of sago and pork, and are now dressed, and adorned with earrings, nose sticks, necklaces, bracelets and aromatic herbs. After this a dance of the women takes place.

That same evening . . . the men assemble on the streets of the village. The old men consult with each other, agreeing to distribute the girls according to their custom. This custom was explained to me in the following way. The father of the chosen bridegroom really ought to take possession of the girl, but he is "ashamed" and asks his sib friend, his mndnq, to initiate her into the mysteries of married life in his place. This man agrees to do so. The mother of the girl hands her over to the bridegroom's father, telling him that he will lead her to meet the goblin. . . .

The bridegroom is not allowed to touch her until she gives birth to a child. This child is called the goblin's child. When the goblin-child is born, the mother says, 'Where is thy father? Who had to do with me?"

The Banaro bridegroom, for his part, is initiated into sexual activity by the wife of his grandfather's friend.

**Healing and prosperity rites.** All societies seek prosperity, whether in the form of offspring, good crops, success in love, or special power. And all face crises of illness, death, droughts, floods, earthquakes, and the like. Every society also has common folk knowledge to deal with these problems. But what happens when human knowledge fails? At that time many people turn to religious or magical rites for answers.

In Guinea in West Africa, for example, young women offer carved dolls of women suckling children to a fetish in order to assure pregnancy, while young men fire guns and brandish swords to drive away the demons. Among the Chukchee the shaman becomes possessed by a spirit of healing, speaks in strange tongues, and goes to the spirit world to bring back the soul of the patient who has gone astray. The Greeks in New Testament times went to oracles who prophesied the future and helped their clients avoid danger.

Many people are afraid of evil spirits and have ways to exorcise the demons from individuals or from whole towns. In Ball the people make a feast for the devils, which they place at a crossroad outside the village. They then drive the spirits out to the banquet by waving torches lit from the holy temple lamp and making a great noise. Then suddenly all is silent as the people steal home, leaving the spirits to feast. The silence continues the whole next day and no work is done. After the feast the demons want to return home, but hearing no sounds, they believe the village is some deserted island and leave.

**Annual Cycles**

Many rituals are corporate in nature and are celebrated by the society as a whole. Among these are the annual cycles that mark transitions in time, such as the beginning of the year, the cycles of the week or of the moon, the planting and harvesting of the crops and other fertility rites, and the changes in the seasons.

The Chinese, for example, used to close the gate between the Mongol and Chinese sections of the city of Peking for a half hour at midnight on New Year's Eve. Pieces of red paper and similar items were fastened to house doors and cupboards. After this, sacrifices were made to the ancestors and deities, and a meal was eaten by all the relatives who gathered to celebrate the New Year. Many Chinese still observe the Feast of the Hungry Ghosts, in which the spirits of wandering ancestors are fed in order to satisfy them and keep them from harming the living.

Similarly, Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists have a great many annual rituals that mark important points in their religious calendars. To these we must add the many national and secular rites such as independence days, memorial days, and birthdays of great heroes.

**Feasts, Festivals, Fairs, and Pilgrimages**

People love celebrations. It should not surprise us, therefore, that they take any possible occasion to sing, dance, play, and eat together.

There are festivals of all kinds: secular and religious, joyful and sad, local and national. All Muslims, for example, celebrate Ramadan and Id Al-Kabir; and many observe the festivals of the Wali or saints. Chinese Buddhists set aside the eleven days following New Year's Day as a festival of supplication and honor various Bodhisattvas or lesser gods throughout the year; Hindus celebrate Holi, Diwali, Ugadi, Shivaratri, and a great many other festivals. One study of an Indian village showed that there was some festival or other, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or caste celebration, on more than three hundred days in a year.

Christians, too, have their religious celebrations, including Saint Thomas à Becket's Day (December 29), Epiphany (January 6), Ash Wednesday (first day of Lent), Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, and, of course, Christmas.

Most cultures have many other rituals, such as religious fairs with markets and sideshows, drama or music performances, and religious processions; public feasts and celebrations; sports events; and pilgrimages to distant shrines.

**Dealing with Tradition**

How should Christians respond to all this? How should new converts relate to their cultural past—to the food, dress, medicines, songs, dances, myths, rituals, and all the other things that were so much a part of their lives before they heard the gospel? What responsibility do missionaries have to young churches regarding all this? How far can the gospel be adapted to fit into a culture without losing its essential message? And who should make the decisions about the old culture? These are crucial questions we face constantly in our work.
Denial of the Old: Rejection of Contextualization

Past missionaries often made the decisions and tended to reject most of the old customs as "pagan." Drums, songs, dramas, dances, body decorations, certain types of dress and food, marriage customs, and funeral rites were frequently condemned because they were thought to be directly or indirectly related to traditional religions, hence unacceptable for Christians.

Sometimes this rejection was rooted in the ethnocentrism of the missionaries, who tended to equate the gospel with their own culture and consequently judged other cultural ways as bad. Sometimes, however, the missionaries even realized that in traditional cultures it is hard to draw a sharp line between religious and nonreligious practices. In many societies religion is the core of the culture and permeates all of life—there is no division between sacred and secular beliefs, behaviors, and institutions, as there is in modern societies. Yet these missionaries felt that most customs, because they did have religious connotations, had to be rejected indiscriminately.

This wholesale rejection of old cultural ways created many problems. First, it left a cultural vacuum that needed to be filled, and too often this was done by importing the customs of the missionary. Drums, cymbals, and other traditional instruments were replaced with organs and pianos. Instead of creating new lyrics that fit native music, Western hymns and melodies were translated into the local idiom. Pews replaced mats on floors, and British- and American-style churches were built, although they appeared incongruous alongside wickiups and mud huts. Western suits were often required of pastors preaching in hundred-degree temperatures to scantily dressed audiences. It is no surprise, then, that Christianity was often seen as a foreign religion and Christian converts as aliens in their own land.

It is also no surprise that Christianity was often misunderstood. For example, missionaries in India rejected red saris for brides, for this was the color worn by Hindus. Instead, they introduced white saris to symbolize purity, not realizing that in India red stands for fertility and white for barrenness and death.

A second problem with suppressing old cultural ways is that they merely go underground. It is not uncommon in Africa, for instance, for the people to conduct a formal Christian wedding in the church and then go to the village for the traditional celebrations. In the long run, when pagan customs are practiced in secret, they combine with public Christian teachings to form Christopaganism—a syncretistic mix of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. For example, African slaves in Latin American homes taught the children of their masters the worship of African spirits. When the children grew up and joined the Roman Catholic church, they combined the Catholic veneration of saints and the African tribal religion into new forms of spirit worship that had a Christian veneer.

A third problem with the wholesale condemnation of traditional cultures is that it not only turns missionaries and church leaders into police, but keeps converts from growing by denying them the right to make their own decisions. A church only grows spiritually if its members learn to apply the teachings of the gospel to their own lives.

Acceptance of the Old: Uncritical Contextualization

A second response to traditional practices has been to accept them uncritically into the church. Here, old cultural ways are seen as basically good, and few, if any, changes are seen as necessary when people become Christians.

Those who advocate this approach generally have a deep respect for other humans and their cultures and recognize the high value people place on their own cultural heritage. They also recognize that the "foreignness" of the gospel has been one of the major barriers to its acceptance in many parts of the world. Consequently, they call for an uncritical contextualization that minimizes change in the life of the converts.

This approach, too, has serious weaknesses. First, it overlooks the fact that there are corporate and cultural sins as well as personal transgressions. Sin can be found in the institutions and practices of a society in the form of slavery, oppressive structures, and secularism. It is found in the cultural beliefs of people and exhibited as group pride, segregation against others, and idolatry. The gospel calls not only individuals but societies and cultures to change. Contextualization must mean the communication of the gospel in ways the people understand, but that also challenge them individually and corporately to turn from their evil ways.

Because first-generation converts often feel this call to change most deeply, they are adamant in rejecting specific customs in their past. They are all too aware of the meanings of these old ways, and they want to have nothing more to do with them now that they are Christians. These rejections by the people themselves, however, are radically different from changes imposed upon them from without.

A second weakness in uncritical contextualization is that it opens the door to syncretisms of all kinds. If Christians continue in beliefs and practices that stand in opposition to the gospel, these in time will mix with their newfound faith and produce various forms of neo-paganism. Obviously, new converts bring with them most of their past
customs, and they cannot immediately change all those things that need to be changed. Even mature Christians have many areas of their lives that need to be examined in the light of biblical truth. But they must all grow in their Christian lives, and this demands that they continually test their actions and beliefs against the norms of the Scriptures. In naive contextualization, it is precisely this critique that is missing.

Dealing with the Old: Critical Contextualization

If both the uncritical rejection of old ways and their uncritical acceptance undermine the mission task, what should we and the Christian converts do about their cultural heritage? A third approach may be called critical contextualization, whereby old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted without examination. They are first studied with regard to the meanings and places they have within their cultural setting and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms (Figure 25).

How does this take place? First, an individual or church must recognize the need to deal biblically with all areas of life. This awareness may arise when a new church is faced with births, marriages, or deaths and must decide what Christian birth rites, weddings, or funerals should be like. Or it may emerge as people in the church recognize the need to examine certain other culturally based customs. Discerning the areas of life that need to be critiqued is one of the important functions of leadership in the church, for the failure of a church to deal with its surrounding culture opens the door for sub-Christian practices to enter the Christian community unnoticed. This can be seen in the way we in the Western churches have often indiscriminately adopted the dating practices, weddings, funerals, music, entertainment, economic structures, and political traditions around us. We must never forget that our faith calls us to new beliefs and to a changed life.

Second, local church leaders and the missionary must lead the congregation in uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional customs associated with the question at hand. For example, in dealing with funeral rituals, the people should analyze their traditional rites—first describing each song, dance, recitation, and rite that makes up the ceremony and then discussing its meaning and function within the overall ritual. The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to evaluate them. If we show any criticism of the customary beliefs and practices at this point, the people will not openly talk about them for fear of being condemned. We will only drive the old ways underground.

In the third step, the pastor or missionary should lead the church in a Bible study related to the question under consideration. For example, the leader can use the occasion of a wedding or funeral to teach the Christian beliefs about marriage or death.

This is a crucial step, for if the people do not clearly understand and accept the biblical teachings, they will be unable to deal with their cultural past. This is also where the pastor and missionary have most to offer, namely, an exegesis of biblical truth. It is important, however, that the congregation be actively involved in the study and interpretation of Scripture so that they will grow in their own abilities to discern truth.

The fourth step is for the congregation to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and to make a decision regarding their use. It is important here that the people themselves make the decision, for they must be sure of the outcome before they will change. It is not enough that the leaders be convinced about changes that may be needed. Leaders may share their personal convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision if they wish to avoid becoming policemen. In the end, the people themselves will enforce decisions arrived at corporately, and there will be little likelihood that the customs they reject will go underground.

To involve the people in evaluating their own culture draws upon their strength. They know their old culture better than the missionary and are in a better position to critique it, once they have biblical instruction. Moreover, they will grow spiritually by learning to apply scriptural teachings to their own lives.

A congregation may respond to old beliefs and practices in several ways. Many they will keep, for these are not unbiblical. Western Christians, for example, see no problem with eating hamburgers, singing secular songs such as "Home on the Range," wearing business suits, or driving cars. In many areas of their lives their culture is no different from that of their non-Christian neighbors, and much was brought from their pre-Christian past.

Other customs will be explicitly rejected by the congregation as unbecoming for Christians. The reasons for such rejection is often not apparent to the missionary or outsider, who may see little difference between the songs and rites the people reject and those they retain. But the people know the deeper, hidden meanings of their old customs and their significance in the culture. On the other hand, at some points the missionary may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked, for they often fail to see clearly their own cultural assumptions.

Sometimes the people will modify old practices to give them explicit Christian meanings. For example, Charles Wesley used the mel-
Dealing with Old Ways

The Gospel Is Foreign — It Is Rejected

The Old Goes Underground

(1) Gather information about the old

(2) Study biblical teachings about the event

(3) Evaluate the old in the light of biblical teachings

(4) Create a new contextualized Christian practice

Denial of the Old (Rejection of Contextualization)

Dealing with the Old (Critical Contextualization)

Uncritical Acceptance — Symcretism

Old Beliefs, Rituals, Songs, Customs, Art, Music, etc.

Fig. 2

Critical Contextualization

odies of popular bar songs, but gave them Christian words. Similarly
the early Christians used the style of worship found in Jewish syna-
gogues, modified to fit their beliefs. They also met on pagan festival
days to celebrate Christian events such as the birth of Christ. In time
the pagan meanings were forgotten. Contemporary Western Christians
use bridesmaids as symbols of friendship and support. In our pre-
Christian past they served as decoys sent ahead of the bride to attract
the attention of those in the audience who might have an evil eye, thus
drawing out their power. The people believed that since the maids
were not being married, they were immune to such power. Brides,
they thought, were susceptible to the evil eye and would become ill or
even die if it struck them. On occasion Christians may retain pagan
religious objects, but secularize them as the European church did with
Grecian art.

The local church sometimes substitutes Christian symbols or rites
borrowed from another culture for those in their own that they reject.
For example, the people may choose to adopt the funeral practices of
the missionary rather than retain their own. Such functional substi-
tutions are often effective, for they minimize the cultural dislocation
created by simply removing an old custom.

Sometimes the local church may add foreign rituals to affirm its
spiritual heritage. All Christians live with two traditions, cultural and
Christian. The addition of such rituals as baptism and the Lord's Sup-
per not only provides converts with ways to express their new faith,
but also symbolizes their ties to the historical and international church.
Another example of this is an American bridal couple's decision to use
the biblical practice of washing feet as a symbol of their mutual sub-
mission to each other.

The people may also create new symbols and rituals to communi-
cate Christian beliefs in forms that are indigenous to their culture. For
example, in one tribe the Christians decided to lift up their newborn
babies to dedicate them to Christ. In India, when a seminary wanted
to inaugurate a missions study center, the faculty, staff, and students
looked for an appropriate way to express their commitment to min-
istry. They decided to plant some stalks of ripe grain in a bucket of
earth and then have representatives from each group—faculty, staff,
and students—cut sheaves as a symbol of their united dedication to
missions.

Having led the people to analyze their old customs in the light of
biblical teachings, the pastor or missionary must help them arrange
the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the
Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it
explicitly seeks to express biblical teachings. It will also be indigenous,
Critical Contextualization

parents give up without a fight and permit their children to listen to rock indiscriminately. Their children learn no discernment and accept uncritically the ways of the world.

The youth leader in this Los Angeles church used critical contextualization to deal with the issue. He had the young people bring their rock records to a Bible study. There he discussed with them the meaning of Christian lifestyles and the place of music in their lives. Then the young people played each record and evaluated it. They smashed those they decided Christians should not listen to, keeping the rest and listening to them without guilty consciences. The following Sunday they triumphantly brought the records they had broken for their Lord and presented them to the church. There was no need, thereafter, for their parents to monitor their listening habits. They had learned discernment for themselves.

Theological Foundations

What are the theological foundations for critical contextualization? First, it affirms the priesthood of all believers. With critical contextualization, decisions are made not by the leaders for the people, but by all of the believers.

Leaders and missionaries throughout history have often felt threatened by this approach to biblical hermeneutics. Since they believe themselves better trained, they claim for themselves the exclusive right to make theological decisions. They are afraid things might get out of hand if the laity were involved in interpreting the Bible and in applying its message to their everyday lives.

What does keep matters from going astray when all are involved in the application of Scripture to the problems of life? Does not the process open the door for wild interpretations of the Bible and Christian practices? There are three checks on such excessiveness.

First, the Bible is taken as the final and definitive authority for Christian beliefs and practices. Everyone, therefore, must begin at the same place.

Second, the priesthood of believers assumes that all the faithful have the Holy Spirit to guide them in the understanding and application of the Scriptures to their own lives. It is all too easy for leaders to accept this belief in theory, but too shy away from it in practice. To deny young believers the right to be involved in biblical interpretation and decision making is to deny that the same Holy Spirit we know to be within us and guiding us into the truth is also within them.

Third, there is the constant check of the church. C. Norman Kraus (1979) points out that the contextualization of the gospel is ultimately

A Case of Contextualization

The process of critical contextualization can best be seen by way of illustration. We could, for example, by looking at the case of the weddings of the Bhotiya of Tibet described earlier, try to understand how Bhotiya Christians should respond to their cultural practices in the light of biblical teachings. We will, however, examine a case of critical contextualization in the United States. We are often aware of the need for evaluating the practices of other cultures when the gospel is first introduced into them, but we too easily take it for granted that our own culture, with its long history of Christianity, has already been molded by biblical values. The result, too often, is comfortable accommodation between Christianity and Western culture, including an uncritical acceptance of Western cultural ways. This is true of many areas of life, one of which is music.

This case has to do with the young people in an inner-city Los Angeles church who faced the question whether as Christians they should listen to hard rock music. Most of them were new converts from gangs and drugs, and they knew both the messages and the power of contemporary songs.

The response of many Christian parents is to reject rock music altogether. When that happens, their children end up listening to rock at their friends' houses, and the parents serve as policemen. Other
the task not of individuals and leaders, but of the church as a “discerning community.” Within that community, individuals contribute according to their gifts and abilities. The pastor and missionary have a greater knowledge of the Bible and therefore should provide the exegesis of the appropriate texts within their biblical context. The people, however, understand their own culture and problems and should play an important part in determining the hermeneutical application of the Scripture to their own lives. But they must be subject to the church as a whole.

The church is not an aggregate of individuals, each seeking his or her own interpretation of the Bible. It is to be a true community of people seeking to follow Christ and serve one another. Only then will it become what Kraus calls an “authentic Christian community,” a hermeneutical community that strives to understand God’s message to it and bears witness to the world of what it means to be a Christian, not only in beliefs but also in life. The church as a body is a “new order.”

The Fourth Self

We have seen how cultural differences affect missionaries as they identify with the people and influence the message as it is translated into the forms of a new culture. But what about theology? What happens when the Bible is seen through the eyes of people in another culture? How should we respond when they disagree with our interpretations of the Scriptures?

Behind these queries lies one of the most fundamental questions raised by modern missions, namely, the autonomy of new believers and churches. To what extent are they or should they be dependent upon missionaries? How fast and how far should missionaries encourage them to make their own decisions? Should they govern themselves? If so, do they have a right to change the patterns of church organization brought by the missionaries? Should they be encouraged to develop their own theologies, and what should the missionaries do when these theologies seem to be going astray? These are the most crucial dilemmas facing modern missionaries and mission agencies.

The Three SELVES

During the first years of the modern mission movement, people were won to faith and congregations planted. The question then arose as to how the mission agencies and sending churches should relate to the new churches. It soon became clear that the paternalistic missionary attitudes common in that day were stifling the maturation and