

# Rooted or Uprooted: The Necessity of Contextualization in Missions

by *Herbert Hoefler*

## *Biblical Foundations*

### Biblical Precedent: Decision of the Jerusalem Council

**I**t is clear in New Testament era mission history that the Jerusalem Council recorded in Acts 15 was a great turning point. The decision of that council was to leave Gentiles in their culture. They did not have to become Jews culturally in order to enter into the new covenant.

The Council had the open-mindedness to believe the report of Barnabas and Paul that the faith of the Gentile converts was genuine and firm. They had the courage to trust that the Holy Spirit could do something new and different that was still authentic (Acts 15:28). They were persuaded that the Gentiles could live within their traditional cultures and still practice the faith in a God-pleasing manner. They could organize and worship and witness and theologize in the way that made sense to them—and to their Gentile neighbors.

As a consequence, the church spread in the Gentile world. The church was firmly rooted in Gentile soil. It's hard to imagine that the great mission expansion in the Gentile world could have happened if they had tried to impose a Jewish-style faith on Gentile believers.

When Paul visited the synagogues on his missionary journeys, the “God fearers” (Acts 10:2, 13:26, 50, 16:14, 17:4, 17) were a major focus of his ministry. These Gentiles understood and accepted the messianic hope of the Jewish prophets. They did not want to convert to Judaism, even though they accepted the faith and participated in the worship of Yahweh. It would have meant seriously alienating themselves from their Greek/Roman cultures:

- Hellenistic culture idolized the perfection of the human body. Male converts to Judaism would repulse their friends and family by mutilating their bodies through circumcision.
- They would have to remove themselves from eating with friends and family because none of the meat served would follow the laws of kosher.
- They would leave their social obligations completely for one day every week when observing the Sabbath.
- They weren't ethnic Jews, so they really didn't fit in there either.

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The alienations would go on and on. Very few were willing to make that sacrifice of their family responsibilities and social network. They were unwilling to be uprooted. The Christian message of St. Paul enabled them to remain rooted and still be faithful. The “God fearers” jumped at the opportunity to enter into the covenant through the common cultural practice of baptism instead of through the foreign custom of circumcision. Millions of their neighbors soon followed.

#### *Temptation of “Mother Church”*

However, this movement to a culturally rooted Gentile church did not develop unopposed. St. Paul and his followers continually had to fight against the influence of the “Judaizers.” These were well-intentioned believers who were sincerely concerned that these new Christians would fall back into their pagan habits. They were concerned that the Gentile believers were going to be syncretistic if they did not draw firm and clear lines between themselves and their pagan environment.

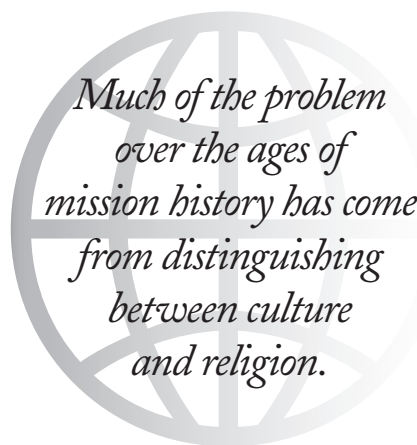
In addition, the churches of the Judaizers were the “mother church.” They were the ones with the long, proven history of the People of God. They simply wanted to share the truths of their heritage and enable these new believers to become rooted in the authentic biblical tradition. Then they would stand firm in the faith, grow in holiness, and be a true “light in the darkness” as God intended.

As it turned out, the impetus of the Jerusalem Council enabled a movement to develop that eventually overwhelmed the Judaizers. The Jewish-style church has revived in recent years among the “Messianic Jews.” However, the dominant form of church throughout the world—whether Western or Eastern—is rooted in cultures far different from that of the Old Testament.

Nonetheless, the problem of Judaistic tendencies in mission work did not end with the demise of Jewish Christianity. Pride and control are not a peculiar

sin of only the first-century “mother church.” All through mission history the well-intentioned desire to root new believers in new soil has been a pervasive and destructive temptation.

In order to address this issue adequately, we must place it in a broad theological context. Much of the problem over the ages of mission history has come from distinguishing between culture and religion. In most societies, religion is an integral part of culture. How does a convert reject his past religion but not his past culture? Which practices of the culture are



actually religious? How does one make a clear witness to Jesus Christ while still participating in the culture?

#### **Biblical View of God**

##### *God's Valuing of Culture*

The simplistic answer to these questions is that we are called to have the same attitude toward culture as God does. What is His attitude?

As we look to Holy Scripture, we see how God respects and values cultures of His world. Most of the biblical passages referring to culture are expressions of God the Father. Since the creative activity of God is typically associated with God the Father, one would expect this Person of the Trinity to be the major referent. Some examples would be: Gen 18:18, Ps 22:27-28, 47:8, 67:2, 96:5-13, Is 2:1-4, 56:7, 60:3, 66:18, Jer 1:5, Acts 17:26, Rev 15:4, 21:24, 22:2.

God is the creator and redeemer of the “nations.” What must be noted is that the Hebrew and Greek words that are typically translated “nations” actually mean ethnic groups. During those times, there were only ethnic groups and empires. Nations as we now understand them did not exist. What tied people together over the centuries was their ethnic identity.

This identity is what the passages refer to. The ethnic groups, or cultures, of the world are what God the Father values and heals and brings to Himself purified and redeemed. All “the ethnic groups of the world will come and worship Him” (Rev. 15:4)

Likewise, it is to these ethnic groups (Gk: *ta ethnē*) that Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, called us to go in His Great Commission. We are to “make disciples of all ethnic groups...” (Mt 28:19) Then, in the Final Judgment, these are the ones of “every nation, tribe, people, and language who will stand before throne and in front of the Lamb.” (Rev 7:9) The cultures of the world will be represented and celebrated for all eternity. Thus, Scripture also portrays the Second Person of the Trinity as One who values and respects the cultures of the world. (See also: Ps 72:17, Dan 7:14, Phil 2:11.)

It is clear from Scripture, then, that God eternally values and respects the varied cultures of His world. They are varied dimensions of the potential He created in Man. They are part of the creative calling that God gave Man in His “image.” Just as an earthly parent loves and values each of her/his children, though they be very different, so the Heavenly Father loves and values each of the cultures that have blossomed as from the seeds He planted.

##### *God's Redeeming of Culture*

Secondly, it is clear that all cultures are as sin-ridden as the humans that have created them. Just as humankind is in need of redemption and reform, so are all the cultures of the world. “All our righteousnesses are as filthy rages” (Is 64:6), including all of our cultures. Just

as each human has her/his particular weaknesses and faults of character, so does each culture. So do we all have our particular strengths. We need each other to help us with our faults and to share with us our strengths.

Scripture makes it clear that the cultures of the world will also be part of the redeemed riches of heaven. That is why even now we are called to respect and honor, to preserve and cultivate the cultures of the world. We know what God's eternal will is, so we strive even now to carry it forward, that His "will may be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10).

### *Theological Principles*

Certain theological operating principles have been drawn from this biblical record. We will look at some of them now in relation to the necessity of contextualization for faithful, God-pleasing mission outreach.

#### **Orders of Creation**

One theological principle has traditionally been termed the "orders of creation." These are the universal structures of society such as marriage, family, government, court, etc. These structures take many different forms, but they are to be found at the core of every society. These are the structures that guide and uphold the dynamics of the society, especially in the spheres of the greatest danger to harmony and stability. These structures recognize the original sinfulness of human nature and the need to bring these personal drives of sex and greed and power under social control. Without the orders of creation controlling us we are doomed to self-destruction.

These orders have taken many different forms in the varied cultures of the world. In most societies marriages are arranged by parents or elders. In some societies people are free and responsible to make their own arrangements. However, in all societies there are mores and laws to govern this crucial element of social life. Similarly, there are many forms of family, but there is

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some way responsibly to raise children, whether by parents or grandparents or elders or wider society. Government leaderships may be elected or hereditary. It may be authoritarian or democratic. Courts may be adjudicated by elected officials or elders or religious leaders. These forms will always be there, and there are strengths and weaknesses inherent in any form.

What is critical for us in our cross-cultural mission work is that these structures are honored and preserved. We are not called to change the workings of the orders of creation—unless they are clearly against the Word of God, as we shall see. We are called to preach the Gospel and enable the working of the Holy Spirit for the redemption/sanctification of all sin-ridden people and their sin-ridden cultures. We do not uproot people from the comfort of their cultures and the stability of their orders of creation.

#### **Adiaphora Principle**

A second, related theological principle is the "adiaphora principle." This term means "things that do not matter." It arose at the time of the Reformation, particularly in Lutheran circles, to identify what elements of the Roman Catholic Church needed to be discarded and what simply reformed. The idea was to maintain the unity and continuity of the church as much as possible. For example, in the liturgy, Martin Luther saw the need only to discard the canon, the portion of the liturgy around the Words of Consecration that spoke of the Eucharist as a sacrifice generating merit. Everything else was simply "adiaphora," things that could be changed or not.

Luther followed the same principle in the "iconoclastic controversy." When more radical reformers were knocking down the statues of saints in the

cathedrals because they were "graven images" and forms of idol worship, Luther objected. He said that these statues were "adiaphora." They could be properly understood simply as inspiring recollections of great examples of the faith. Of course, people of the Reformation would no longer pray to or through them, but it was a matter of reform not of rejection.

In fact, Luther preached that there is a great danger in attacking the statues, for people could begin to minimize the call of the Reformation to a change in architecture instead of a change of heart. He said there is only one idol that needs to be removed, and that is the one in the human hearts. Once that idol is removed, we will see and use these statues in a God-pleasing way. If that inner idol remains untouched, no change in church architecture will be God-pleasing.

Luther applied the same principle to church governance. Even the papacy could be reformed. Just removing the papacy would not be a true, God-pleasing Reformation.

In relation to contextualization, the same principle applies. We strive to change only that which is clearly against the Gospel, that which cannot be reformed. Otherwise, we strive to maintain stability and continuity in the society. In applying this principle, we will most likely find, as Luther did, that only a very small percentage needs to be rejected.

As in any sin-ridden society, the vast majority of structures simply needs on-going reform. We do best to keep everything intact as much as possible. Let the Gospel permeate the society, and let the people gradually sort out what needs to be changed.

### Two Kingdoms Distinction

A third theological principle in our approach to contextualization is that of the “Two Kingdoms.” This is the theological recognition that God works through more than the church to accomplish His will. This principle distinguishes between God’s work with His “right hand” and His work with His “left hand.” With both hands, God is battling the forces of Satan. With His right hand, God is working to cure evil through the Word and Sacraments of His church. With His left hand, God is working to prevent the spread of evil through government, courts, social mores, orders of creation, etc.

This principle recognizes that both of these spheres are arenas in which God works. Both are instituted by God for His purposes of love and grace toward His fallen children. Both are to be respected, upheld, and served as God’s faithful people. We “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Lk 20:25). Even further, we recognize that nothing is truly secular, for all things of society are potential tools of God. When His People and church go astray, God may even need to use His left hand to set them right, as He did with the Babylonian Empire in Old Testament times.

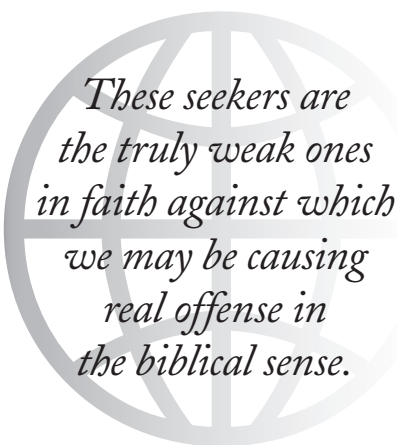
### Syncretism

A fourth guiding principle is the concern to avoid syncretism. Syncretism is any doctrine or practice that violates a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith, particularly the doctrine of salvation. In the Hindu context, for example, it would be syncretistic to accept that all of the Hindu gods and goddesses are just as valid revelations of God as Jesus. Therefore, Christians avoid participating in the worship features of Hindu holidays.

However, it is not syncretistic to participate in the social events of these holidays. Likewise, it is not syncretistic to adopt some of the forms of traditional Hindu religious organization and worship, as long as it is clear Who alone is being worshipped and fol-

lowed. I will give further details on this phenomenon in India at the conclusion of this article.

Basically, the discernment of syncretism is an application of the adiaphora principle: Is this matter of practice or this framing of doctrine an area of Christian freedom and relevancy? Or does it render unclear the fundamental Christian witness to God’s saving work in Christ? Another example: In the Japanese context, may Christians participate in and conduct the traditional tea ceremony? Just because it has been associated with Shintoism in the



past, is it an essential expression and practice of Shintoism? Or is it simply a part of traditional Japanese culture that Christians should value and respect as a beautiful, creative work of God?

In the USA and the great cities of the world, business enterprise is a central part of the urban culture. This business culture easily slips over into wasteful consumerism, self-centered greed, and social oppression. Should Christians, then, avoid participating in business ventures, or is there a way to conduct business that does not compromise Christian witness?

The examples go on and on around the world in all the varied contexts in which Christians live and work. We are called to discernment: Is this facet of our culture redeemable, or must it be firmly and publicly rejected?

### Giving Offense

Another biblical principle that is brought to bear on this topic of

contextualization is the giving of offense. Often Christians caution others to be careful not to offend brothers and sisters in the fellowship with their efforts at contextualization. For example, one’s use of particular instruments or dance in worship or vocabulary in witness or participation in public events may upset fellow Christians. They may be requested to cease those practices because it is causing offense to others in the faith.

However, we must be very clear about the way in which Scripture cautions us in this regard. The term for “offense” is “skandalon” in Greek. It means a “stumbling block,” something that causes others to fall in their walk of faith (cf. Rom 14:12-23, I Cor 8:9-13, Mk 9:43). Therefore, it is not simply that one Christian dislikes or disagrees with something that another Christian individual or group is doing. They are saying that these actions are dangerously close to causing this fellow Christian to lose her/his faith.

When someone calls someone to cease participating in the tea ceremony or using this musical instrument in worship or participating in this public event because it is “causing offense,” they are saying that they are so weak in the faith that they may fall away from Christ if this practice is continued. In fact, it is highly unlikely that efforts at contextualization will cause offense in this sense. People may not like and they may disagree, but it would be a rare occasion that such an action will cause them to lose their faith.

On the other hand, our use of Western forms and practices may well cause people who are beginning to look at the faith to turn away. Our unbiblical judgmental attitudes toward culture may lead to the impression that the “Christian God” doesn’t like or want them. These seekers are the truly weak ones in faith against which we in the traditional church may be causing real offense in the biblical sense.

### “In the World but not of the World”

Finally, there is the biblical principle of being “in the world but not of the

world” (Jn 17:15-19). Jesus specifically prayed that His disciples should not be taken out of the world. Christians are called to be a “light,” “salt” and “ambassadors.” In order to serve as this strong and clear witness to the world, they must be in the world. They must be an integral part of the society. Only then will people see what a difference life in Christ really makes.

Instead of being offended and repulsed when Christian faith extricates people from families and cultures, people will be impressed and attracted by the love, forgiveness, generosity, and loyalty that Christian faith brings into their midst. One of the tragic facts of mission history has been that we have lost the thousand by the way we have won the one. People are to blossom where they are planted and bear fruit for eternal life. Our mission strategy is not to extricate a few converts and keep them safe for eternal life, but to stand by them and with them where God has placed them to be His witnesses.

The term “world” in John’s writings has the connotation of being “worldly.” It is this fallen world that God loved so much that He sent His one and only Son (Jn 3:16). As Jesus came into this world of sin and walked among His people in the manner of a typical wandering rabbi, so we are called to be present in our particular vocations of life, in Martin Luther’s term, as “little Christs.” Christian theology is incarnational theology still today.

### *Practical Implications*

If the clear Scriptural call is that our mission work be contextual, what are the practical implications? I’d like to make a few suggestions from my experience living in and studying different cultures around the world.

### **Styles of Logic**

When we do theology, we use logic. However, logic itself is a highly culture-based phenomenon. Logic is simply a set of assumptions and a set of rules. Those assumptions and rules can be different in different cultures. What

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is persuasive argument in one culture will not be in another. What makes a doctrine clear in one culture will not make it clear in another.

For example, in India, the most common form of persuasive logic in religious matters is what I have termed “evocative theology.” The theologian/philosopher uses analogies and metaphors to evoke insight into a particular truth. When this illustration evokes an “Aha!” experience in the listener/reader, it is persuasive.

For another example, we use the typical Western form of logic in doing Western theology. Western logic assumes clear categories and distinctions. One thing cannot be another. However, in other forms of logic around the world, reality is viewed as much more porous and fluid.

Think of the “yin/yang” worldview of traditional Taoist philosophy. Reality is in flow and interpenetrating. One thing is part of another and indistinct. In Western theology, concepts such as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ and the bread and wine of the Eucharist as also the Body and Blood of Christ are logically absurd. However, in the yin/yang view of reality, such complexities are perfectly acceptable.

Clearly, our Western form of logic may not be suitable for doing theology and apologetics in different cultures. It may not even be the best form of logic for religious discourse at all.

### **Levels of Existence**

One of the textbooks I use in teaching my cross-cultural courses is *The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective* by Jacob A. Loewen (William Carey Library, 2000). In this fascinating book, the author has a series of tables contrasting the African worldview with the Biblical worldview and that of Western Christians and Western secularism.

He demonstrates how most of the categories of thought are very similar between African cultures and biblical witness. In contrast, most views of the secular West are quite contrary to the biblical views, and to a great extent Western Christians share that secularist view and not the biblical view.

For example, in one table on pp. 135-36, Dr. Loewen lists phenomena such as communicating with ancestors and spirits communicating with us and souls of people being stolen. Dr. Loewen records how all of these phenomena are documented in the biblical record; yet, Western Christians are quite skeptical and hesitant about accepting this view of reality. In contrast, for Africans, this is precisely how they see the world.

Most cultures and religions see reality as filled with many—even innumerable—levels of existence. We in this visible world live in only one of them. Traditional cultures speak of these different levels of existence in remarkably similar ways whether as leprechauns, jinn, angels/demons, ancestors, or by many other names. Is our purpose in evangelism to contradict and change those worldviews? Do we dismiss them as superstition?

Or is it possible that we in the West are the ones who have a very limited and closed view of the full Reality? Do we want to keep reality under our control and therefore deny anything that is beyond our ken? Should we be learning from these traditional worldviews so that our worldview might become more biblical?

### **Symbols**

Cultures have many different symbols that they use to convey meaning and identity. Can we and should we use these symbols in our doing and practice of theology? Certainly these symbols often have their origins and meanings

in other religions. Are they redeemable for Christian witness and identity?

This process has happened over the centuries in Western Christendom. We all know the non-Christian origins of customs that are now integral to Western Christianity, from the date of Christmas to the Christmas tree to the name of “Easter” to the Easter egg and on and on. These non-Christian symbols have become infused with Christian meaning.

Can we encourage the same process in our missiological approach to other cultures? We don’t want to violate and expropriate the sacred symbols of other religions. But we can respect them and show how these symbols can also carry Christ-centered meanings, whether these are public festivals like Kwanza in Africa or religious artifacts like oil lamps and symbols like the lotus flower in India.

We typically see the American flag in Christian churches in the USA. It is a symbol of our Christian vocation to be responsible, active participants in the Kingdom of the Left. Why not have the national flag in churches around the world, even where religious freedom is restricted and Christians are persecuted? Especially where the national loyalty of Christians is doubted, it might be a very important symbol to convey Christian commitment to the good of the land.

### Styles of Communication

What is open, honest communication in one culture is highly offensive in another. What is frank confrontation in one culture is a total breach of propriety in another. What is never getting to the point in one culture is tactful persuasion in another. What is persuasively alluding in one culture is pointlessly eluding in another culture. What is effective teaching through inductive, participative pedagogics in one culture is embarrassing and offensive confrontation in another culture.

I have so many examples of these differences causing miscommunication and breach of trust. Let me just share one. A senior Indian Christian told

me this story of how his close relation with a previous Western missionary was totally and irrevocably broken. He was traveling with the missionary in his car. The missionary decided to practice Matthew 18, as he understood it. He informed the friend that he had heard he said something critical and untrue about the missionary in a meeting. The Indian Christian was shocked and replied, “If you could even think that I would do such a thing, we are no longer friends.”

How Matthew 18 is to be carried out in one culture will be different in



another culture. How Christian unity is maintained in the bond of truth and love differs from culture to culture. How we communicate and clarify matters in Christian love and fellowship is culturally determined.

### The Arts

Which arts are appropriate in Christian worship? Can we use artistic forms that are common in the culture, even based in non-Christian worship? Are certain musical instruments and styles of music secular while others are sacred? Can any cultural form potentially be redeemed and used for the glory of God in Christ? Are there forms of art that communicate much more effectively with the non-Christian world?

One of the major movements among First Nations Christians today is the recovery of their art forms. They relate how their traditional dance, for example, was rejected by Western

missionaries and banned from church practice. It had been used for demonic and violent purposes. The movement now is to recover those forms, fill them with Christian content, and use them for Christian worship and witness.

The First Nations people testify that they finally feel that God is at home in their culture. (See videos *The Promise* and *Call to the Nations* produced by Don Mapes for Whole World Network in 2002 and 2003.) They finally feel they are worshipping God from the depth of their own being. Their faith is now rooted in the culture of the land, and it feels right and strong. These Christian forms of expression now appear as part of the traditional culture, not as a Western import and imposition. The message to their non-Christian neighbors is that one can indeed be a true national and a true Christian.

### Sources of Authority

In Western theology, the Bible is the norm for all doctrine and practice. However, it is obvious that for non-Christians the Bible does not carry any of this authority. When we seek to convey biblical truths, it means very little to them that we quote from the Bible.

We need to discern how people address spiritual questions within their own cultural framework. In some cultures, it may be the wisdom of the elders passed down from generation to generation. With others, spiritual questions may be addressed authoritatively in their proverbs. When we can cite the wisdom of the elders or a relevant proverb, we find them nodding in approval of our biblical truth.

### Gestures

We have traditional gestures of Western worship, whether making the sign of the cross or lifting arms or kneeling or holding hands. Of course, these gestures may well be meaningless and even offensive in another culture. On the other hand, there are gestures in other cultures that may evoke and express the same feelings of piety. They may be used in the wor-

ship of other religions, but does that mean they cannot be used in Christian worship? Might these gestures even be encouraged among new believers?

We know of congregations of Muslim converts who express their submission to God in Christ through traditional Muslim bowing and lifting of hands. We know of Christian speakers among high caste Hindus in India who sit and speak in the traditional pattern of Hindu gurus. We know of Buddhist converts who use sitting meditation. We know of male converts from popular Hinduism who come for their baptism bare-chested and then raise their hands over their head at the time of baptism, as their expressions of devotion and humility.

### System of Education

How is the faith to be nurtured? What are the sources of authority for deepening and guiding the faith in practice? Our Western form has been trained clergy, organized classes, printed materials, lectures, etc. It's really the model of the school and the university.

However, in other cultures, other forms are prevalent and authoritative. It may not be an academic degree or ecclesiastical appointment that brings authority but seniority in the community or spiritual charisma. If the appointed clergy lacks community status or spiritual magnetism, his word may mean very little in those societies.

In addition, how one learns is culturally determined. Some cultures teach through stories, others through dance, others through recitations, others through mystical experiences. A new movement now in Native American cultures is to use the traditional "Vision Quest" as part of adult Confirmation.

### Terminology

We need to be thoughtful also in how we use theological terminology. Biblical metaphors may not only fail to communicate; they may miscommunicate. The term "Son of God" has deep and meaningful roots in the Old Testament. For Hindus, however, the term is quickly understood in terms of their gods and

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goddesses having divine offspring. For Muslims, it is understood the way the Qur'an portrays Christians' understanding of the Second Person of the Trinity as the offspring of a relationship between God and Mary. It is an honored biblical term, but it totally miscommunicates.

Likewise, there are many biblical terms that are steeped in Old Testament and first century history, but which mean nothing to people of a different cultural heritage. Think of terms such as "Son of Man," "Messiah/Christ," "Lord," "Lamb of God," "atonement," "justified," "adoption," "shepherd," "Father," "king." Also the forms of literature in the Bible such as parables and apocalyptic literature and allegories. Do we need to educate people on history and literature from another culture before we can communicate to them the Gospel? Are there terms within the culture that we can use to convey these same concepts?

### Social Order

Societies are organized differently. They all implement the orders of creation, but in different ways. Some use tribes, some use castes, some use hereditary rulers, some use patriarchy, some use matriarchy. All of these forms have their strengths and weaknesses, as do our traditional Western forms. All are redeemable.

Clearly, there is a great variety of cultural expressions and structures in God's world. We are to respect and follow them as much as we possibly can. We do this not only so people feel comfortable and at home in the church, but also because we want to honor what God honors. It is not just a pragmatic and even manipulative attitude. It is a theological conviction and necessity.

### *Example of Jesu Bhaktas in India*

Finally, let me share with you one development of the faith that is intentionally attempting to remain

rooted in traditional culture. Twenty-five years ago, I did research among the hundreds of thousands of what I then termed "non-baptized believers in Christ." (USA edition: *Churchless Christianity*, William Carey Library, 2001) A number of us have been trying to encourage this culturally rooted form of Christian faith in India (see [www.rethinkingforum.org](http://www.rethinkingforum.org)).

Their forms are basically drawn from Hindu religious practices. They see themselves as part of the culture, and converts are not seen as alienated or separate from their families and society. Here are some of the features that have been unfolding:

- They have named themselves. They call themselves "Jesu bhaktas," "devotees of Jesus."
- They are public about their faith in Christ, but they keep themselves separate from the organized church.
- They participate in the social dimensions of Hindu festivals, but separate themselves from the religious aspects.
- Many came to faith through miracles, visions, and answered prayers in Jesus' Name.
- They use the traditional "bhajan" (an antiphonal response between leader and congregation) for their worship, with the traditional handbell to keep rhythm.
- They have started "ashrams" (retreat centers) in sacred places and around charismatic figures.
- They sit on the floor with the leader seated similarly on a slightly elevated platform.
- They have no organization or central leaders, only the spiritual individuals whom they respect.
- Pilgrimage places have spontaneously developed in locations

where prayers to Jesus have been found to be powerful.

- Christian “sanyassis” (wandering holy men) have taken the traditional vows of poverty and celibacy of the Hindu guru and traveled around the land wearing the saffron robe, teaching disciples.
- They use the Bible as their authority for the faith, but they also reference Hindu philosophy and mythology.
- Baptisms are carried out as a family and community celebration in the home.
- They access church facilities and occasions such as roadside shrines, open sanctuaries (usually Roman Catholic), mass rallies, correspondence courses, radio/TV programs.
- They welcome pious Christian pastors into their home for prayer and instruction.
- They hold their own prayer and praise times, sometimes with a local pastor or Bible woman and sometimes without.
- They emphasize personal experience of God and communion with Christ.
- They encourage the Jesu bhaktas to remain in their families and communities as a witness.
- They are not registered on church rosters as Christians in the country, but remain legally as Hindus.
- They consider “Hinduism” (which is a way of life followed by those of many different religious beliefs in India) to be their culture, not their religion, and people accept them as part of the “Hindu” community.
- They are proud of their cultural identity and seek to promote and protect it.

We know the vast majority of India will never join the church, for it is primarily of one caste group and of foreign character. Is this Jesu bhakta phenomenon a way that can enable

people to remain rooted both in their culture/society and in Jesus Christ? Might this expression of the faith be one that can permeate the land?

Are there similar movements in other societies that need to be encouraged and guided? I know of one in Hawaii ([www.alohakeakua.org](http://www.alohakeakua.org)). Clearly, only such movements that are properly grounded and effectively rooted in the soil will bear much fruit. **IJFM**