

Book Reviews

Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship: Dangerous Syncretism or Necessary Hybridity?, edited by R. Daniel Shaw and William R. Burrows (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), xxiv, 276 pp.

—Reviewed by Dwight P. Baker



Throughout missionary history, and indeed throughout the whole of church history, the issue of control has been prominent. Who or what is authoritative? Is there a standard and, if so, who has rights of administration? On the flip side, this concern has found expression as fear of syncretism. Where do the bounds of permissibility lie? Is someone appointed to patrol those borders? In a world of immense—and sometimes individualized—religious diversity, who is the authoritative arbiter? What rests secure within, and what lies beyond the pale? Or should all fences be torn down and all neighbors be allowed to tramp in?

Efforts to address these issues from a missionary vantage point are not new. Half a century ago, W. A. Visser 't Hooft traced the challenge of syncretism back to the heart of the earliest Christian documents, the New Testament itself—and even earlier. For him the danger of syncretism was far from nonexistent, but it was hardly a matter to lead to timidity. Foremost, he discussed instruments of communication, stating that words, terms, language, forms, concepts, all alike, could be appropriated and made part of Christian understanding and expression as long as one needful criterion was met. The decisive issue was whether or not the “new” elements, concepts, and terms fit within the Christological understanding proclaimed by the apostles. Which system was acknowledged to be in control: the Christocentric understanding of the New Testament or that of some other system from which concepts, terminology, or practices were being appropriated? With that allegiance secure, the followers of Christ could proceed boldly.¹ (By all

means, in conjunction with Visser 't Hooft, do read Lesslie Newbigin's slender volume, *The Finality of Christ*.² It both puts the stakes of the discussion on display and opens up the topic of conversion.)

Indigenity, Contextualization, and Accommodation

The 1950s and 1960s saw articles by William Smalley and others that dealt with the character of the indigenous church published in the journal *Practical Anthropology*. The articles stretched Protestant missionaries, calling attention to their lack of trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to guide “younger” churches. Smalley especially focused on the need for anxious missionaries to surrender “control” and to place their confidence in the capability of the Holy Spirit to lead national and tribal churches in making decisions that were appropriate for their settings and circumstances.³

Discussion of indigenization persisted; a seminal article by Charles Taber appeared in 1978. Titled “The Limits of Indigenization in Theology,” the topic was one he, as president of the American Society of Missiology, had been requested to address. Taber sought to shift the focus from “outer boundaries” of the permissible and instead to emphasize “central norms” or “criteria” for Christian theology. Writing to Western mission leaders and professors, he concluded:

Let us not impose rigid limits on what our brothers and sisters are doing; not only because we do not have the power to enforce our judgments, but because we do not have the right. Let us, for our own blessing, try to understand what they are doing. Let us feel free to ask questions; but let us also be prepared to listen to them tell us where our theology has been wrongly or excessively indigenized. As we do, we will help one another, in the fellowship of the entire Body, to grow into the full stature of Christ.⁴

Not only, contended Taber, do younger churches growing up on the “mission” field have the right to pursue theological construction in ways and directions that differ from those developed over centuries in the Western churches, but Western churches might find profit for their own spiritual life if they were to listen in and to do so with open and receptive hearts.

Discussion of appropriate and inappropriate ways missionaries might accommodate the gospel to the understanding and life settings of their hearers had long preceded

Dwight P. Baker retired as associate director of the Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut, in 2011. He was associate editor of the International Bulletin of Mission Research (2002–15) and has coedited several books, including Serving Jesus with Integrity: Ethics and Accountability in Mission (2010) and People Disrupted: Doing Mission Responsibly among Refugees and Migrants (2018).

What is at stake is the lifting up of forms or elements found in traditional religious practice and incorporating them as objects of Christian concern and components within Christian worship. Can it be done?

widespread missionary interest in the topic of indigenizing the gospel. Inquiries into ways and limits for contextualizing the gospel overlapped with and succeeded discussions about indigenization. Efforts to inculturate the gospel, to create local theologies, and more, followed in line. To the three traditional missionary goals of planting churches that were self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, Paul Hiebert added a fourth, that of self-theologizing.⁵

What Does Hybridity Add?

With so much as lead-up, what new does the topic of hybridity bring to the discussion? How does it differ from the approaches advanced earlier? In the hands of Daniel Shaw and William Burrows, the argument for hybridity shifts the ground significantly. At the same time, it carries forward a line of development that can be seen as implied by positions and arguments expressed under some of those earlier labels, though not necessarily expressly articulated by their proponents.

Before developing that point, a word about the book itself. Dan Shaw has taught at Fuller Theological Seminary's School of Intercultural Studies since 1982. He served with Wycliffe as a Bible translator in Papua New Guinea (PNG), did his anthropological fieldwork there, and also has returned for significant periods of further residence and study. Bill Burrows served for five years as a Divine Word missionary in PNG, teaching theology and laboring as a rural pastor. For twenty years he was managing editor for Orbis Books. Since retirement he has been research professor of missiology at New York Theological Seminary. With deep roots in Papua New Guinea, both editors draw on their experience and acquaintance with the peoples and religious history of the island as a foundation for their conception of hybridity.

The opening chapter by Shaw and the second chapter by Burrows supply the theoretical underpinnings of the volume. These chapters are followed by twelve case studies, contributed by authors spanning the globe. Hailing from Armenia, Costa Rica and Nicaragua, First Nations (Canada), India, Jamaica, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, and the United States, they represent multiple theological and ecclesiological traditions as well. In their diversity they supply vantage points from which to illustrate hybridity "in action," so to speak. To pull

out names and topics almost at random: Yoshiyuki Billy Nishioka reports on a Christian death ritual in Japan; Paul Mantae Kim reflects on making space in the Korean church for a Christian understanding of the Korean ancestral rite; El Baile de La Yegüita examines a Costa Rican folk festival of reconciliation; Chinaka S. DomNwachukwu explores the presence of indigenous Igbo worship in Nigerian churches; Joshua Kurung Daimoi lifts up ancestors as a bridge for understanding Jesus among the Sentani of PNG; and John Sanjeevakumar Gupta writes in the context of India of a house for God to live in. Each of the twelve case studies deals with an aspect of pre-existing worship and ritual which has been lifted up and made, to greater or lesser degree, a facet of local Christian reflection or expression. Here lies the point at which hybridity goes beyond indigeneity (how can local Christian leaders be allowed to take charge of local Christian decisions), contextualization (how should Christianity be shown to address issues and concerns in one or another local context or region), and similar projects. What is at stake is the lifting up of forms or elements found in traditional religious practice and incorporating them as objects of Christian concern and components within Christian worship. Can that be done? Ought it to be done? Can components of traditional religious practices be incorporated within Christian worship and still speak to Visser 't Hooft's concern that mashing together of two religious systems (dangerous syncretism) is to be avoided at all cost?

Part of the answer to that question lies in the nature and scope of common grace. If God's grace manifest in Jesus the Christ and made effective by the Holy Spirit is God's special grace, then common grace is everything else that God does in and for the world. God is not and never has been absent from the world. Common grace is present to all people everywhere, and it bears testimony to God's goodness. Paul, in speaking to the people at Lystra, declared the same, saying that God "has not left God's self without a witness" (Acts 14:17). If traditional religion from time immemorial is or can be, at least in part, a response to God's common grace, then traditional religious concerns and practice—on Christian grounds—cannot simply be written off, summarily and without appeal or further consideration, as being utterly and only darkness, without

I am wary of contextualization as a missionary's open sesame. I have always felt more comfortable with receptor-oriented adaptation: indigenization or contextualization *by* rather than contextualization or adaptation *for*.

any glimmers of light. There might even be something to be learned. That insight can engender humility—an insight that alone is worth much more than the price of the book and the labor of studying it closely.

Conclusion

Accommodation, indigenization, contextualization, and inculturation, when carried out as *missionary* techniques or programs for success, have always seemed to convey a concessionary air. The pejorative whiff of condescension is one reason, I suspect, that each felt like an incomplete step on the way and not a destination. Hence the quest continued for an appropriate way to frame the issue. I am wary of indigenization, contextualization, or any similar gestures conceived of as a technique in Jacque Ellul's sense of the term, that is, as a missionary's open sesame. I have always felt more comfortable with receptor-oriented adaptation: indigenization or contextualization *by* rather than contextualization or adaptation *for*.

In offering itself as the latest addition to this series, the term "hybridity," as noted, takes seriously the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit among all peoples and throughout all history the whole world over. It is grounded in common grace. And grace wherever and however expressed is to be cherished and nurtured, not denied or demeaned. To make the implication explicit: the ground was not utterly barren before the arrival of missionaries (out goes an immense amount of Western Protestant missionary rhetoric of the past two hundred years). Everything was not as dark or as evil as it possibly could have been. That stated, there was and is still plenty of warrant for Christian missionary outreach, but it might wear a different face and have a different cast to its character.

John Pobee has insistently stated for his continent that Africans were not *tabula rasa*, religiously or otherwise, upon the arrival of Western missionaries.⁶ The same is true of peoples in other parts of the world. Could it be that some religious conceptions, concerns, and modes of expression present before the arrival of missionaries could appropriately find their way into those people's ways of thinking about Jesus the Christ and their ways of expressing their worship of him? *Traditional Ritual as Christian Worship* offers a strong case for the affirmative. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *No Other Name: The Choice between Syncretism and Christian Universalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 50–82.

² Lesslie Newbigin, *The Finality of Christ* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1969).

³ See William A. Smalley, *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1978).

⁴ Charles R. Taber, "The Limits of Indigenization in Theology," *Missiology: An International Review*, 6, no. 1 (1978): 53–79, quoted words, pp. 53–54, 77. See also Charles R. Taber, "Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology? Anthropological Comments on the Doing of Theology," *Gospel in Context*, 1, no. 1 (1978): 4–37. (Full disclosure: Charles Taber, who died in 2007, was my wife's older brother.)

⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, "The Fourth Self," in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193–224.

⁶ John Samuel Pobee, *Giving Account of Faith and Hope in Africa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017).