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Beyond Anti-syncretism: Gospel, Context and Authority in the New Testament and in Thai Conversions to Christianity

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This chapter uses material from the study of Thai Christians and Thai Buddhist conversions to Christianity, in light of the Apostle Paul's missiological and theological struggles in his own context, to suggest some of the difficulties of distinguishing between contextualization and syncretism and to argue that missionaries need to avoid being overly directive in the attempt to shape the contextualization of local churches. It argues that though the engagement with context necessarily risks a degree of syncretism, yet the danger must be risked, for it is only through the engagement with context that conversions become locally and meaningfully grounded. The chapter also attacks implicitly the notion (also implicit but also motivating much that is done in the name of cross-cultural missions) that Western (especially white North American) evangelicals possess the pure form of the gospel, that North American evangelicalism is non-syncretistic, and that North American evangelicals are therefore in the best position to judge the degree of syncretism embedded in the practices and beliefs of Christians that are ethnically, geographically, economically, or socially different from themselves. The implication of this paper's counter-argument is that in each field of missionary work there needs to be more of a collaborative

and coeval relationship between the foreigners' mission and the local churches, with the gaze of each on the other having more equal weight, and with each (especially the mission) recognizing the need to observe and learn from the other. The alternative would be a continued (and continual) attempt by missions to retrain local churches to their own norms—a model in which the local church is constantly "catching up" because the norms are constantly changing. This arrangement, which remains common on many fields today, is not only anthropologically indefensible, but demonstrably unbiblical.

We will begin with the biblical argument for the inappropriateness of training converts to the missionaries' own culture, and then will provide some examples demonstrating on practical grounds why it is difficult for missionaries to appoint themselves the ultimate arbiters distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable in local churches, especially in those churches that have potential to develop strong (self-aware) local leadership, though for churches to remain in fellowship across cultures there must also be some acknowledgement of consensus and of the theological tradition around which the creativity revolves. Attempts to quell this creativity in the interest of orthodoxy or a battle against "syncretism" (something of which only cultural "others" ever appear to be guilty) merely perpetuate power imbalances between church and mission, without necessarily leading converts or churches into deeper or more authentic expressions of faith. Nevertheless, we will see, seemingly heterodox understandings drawing on multiple cultural origins can sometimes be an important step in acquiring orthodox understandings of Christian teachings (though it should be noted that these understandings are best formulated by the convert rather than by a minister seeking to clothe the gospel artificially in "cultural relevance").

Consequently, whether foreign ministers attempt culturally sensitive "contextualization" of the gospel, or whether they engage in an overtly anti-syncretistic suspicion of cultural adaptations (it is, of course, possible for the same individual to engage in both stances, depending on time, place, and the issue addressed), it is virtually impossible for these outsiders to predetermine the appropriate biblical response

to the complex issues of ethnic, economic, theological and political identity that emerge in contemporary contexts, including issues of who we are and what we affirm as a "church." Such issues are continually reformulated in the course of interactions between the church and scripture, a dialectic that is conducted with reference to parallel work being done by faithful churches elsewhere, but not necessarily in direct obedience to the representatives of the organization (such as a foreign mission or a more affluent church) that helped with its founding or that helps supplement its current funds and personnel.

In the end, if the expatriate missionary (or organization) retains control of the acculturating processes, not only will he or she violate biblical norms and potentially retard the development of the church, but the missionary's (and therefore the church's) fixation on the foreigners' theological categories and preferences will obscure the recognition and correction of unhealthy power imbalances. This can be true not only where foreign cultural habits and categories are overtly imposed, but also in cases of "contextualization." While a focus on "cultural" issues, in the form of guided "contextualization," might be thought to address the foreignness of the gospel, such a focus can actually function to obscure the operation of power imbalances that, if unchecked, can make the appearance of indigeneity (through the borrowing of local forms) a substitute for the substance of local agency (through the expression of locally creative appropriations of the gospel). Regardless of what it looks like, the result can be a programmatic denial of the very acceptance of multiple cultural sources of authority, and of expressions of church life, that was demonstrated by Paul in the pages of the New Testament.

Spiritual Authority and Cultural Difference in the New Testament

The New Testament record of early Christian mission reveals strong parallels to the situation that prevails on many mission fields today, a situation that is almost naturally reproduced every time one group of people attempts to train another group of people into a shared

set of ideals. In the first generation of Christian mission, it may be remembered, the Apostle Paul was accused of engaging in syncretistic practice. "Syncretism" was not the word used, because today's sense of the concept would not coalesce for another 1,600 years (see Colpe 1987). Nevertheless, it is clear that many of the charges against Paul amount to charges of what today would be called "syncretism." He was considered to be adapting too much, was too permissive and too flexible, and he allowed his Gentile converts to avoid conforming entirely to God's law (Acts 15:1, 5). In addition, his positions may have seemed inconsistent, sometimes forbidding the eating of food that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:19-21), and other times claiming to see nothing wrong with the practice (1 Cor. 8:1-8). As suggested by this latter issue, Paul was highly contextual in his approach to local cultures, undertaking ritual purifications when in Jerusalem (Acts 21:26), yet eating with Gentiles when he was abroad (Acts 16:34; 18:7; Galatians 2:3, 11-14), the latter being (as the New Testament presents it) a violation of then-current expectations that Jews should strictly segregate themselves from Gentiles (Acts 10:27-29; Galatians 2:12-13). Paul even proclaimed outright that he adjusted his behavior to the expectations, or at least practices, of his local audiences (1 Cor. 9:20-21). Paul's practice of mission was therefore highly contextual, not only in his willingness to adapt behaviors to local cultures, but also in terms of the specific political and ethnic contexts shaping both the issues he raised and his written responses to them.

In his contribution to the present volume, Presbyterian theologian Nelson Jennings suggests that Paul's Gospel was a "transcultural" or "intercultural" one.[77] I would like to suggest an anthropologically informed clarification of that point. Often when people today use the terms "transnational" or "transcultural," they are assuming a homogenization of culture across conventional social boundaries, usually in the direction of the culture and tastes of the change agents. This assumption of homogenization has been heavily criticized by recent anthropological observers (e.g., Appadurai 1996, Knauft 2002a, Watson 1997), and I would argue in a similar vein that the gospel is transcultural precisely in the sense of embracing or at least tolerating a variety of

styles of practice while conveying a sense of adhering to a common set of truths. The gospel is transcultural not in the sense that it levels cultural boundaries, but rather in the sense that it accepts many of the differences that can be found on the various sides of those boundaries, along with (or despite) the challenges they present to the dissemination of practices that the change agents (i.e., missionaries) might consider core to the faith. As Jennings suggests, the Apostle Paul presents a model for this kind of transcultural approach through his own refusal to train his converts fully into the style of religious behavior into which he himself had been trained as a Jew.

From the hindsight of the perspective of a Christian two thousand years later, it may seem that Paul performed a simple task of de-linking Christian commitment from the observance of Jewish ritual law while still teaching a strong sense of morality. This perspective is strongly encouraged by some of Paul's own rhetoric (e.g., Galatians 34, Ephesians 45, Colossians 23). Yet at the time he wrote it may not have been at all clear to his hearers where the law ended and the essentials of Christian teaching and behavior began. To put it another way, it may not have been immediately clear which of the Old Testament teachings the Gentile followers of Christ were expected to follow, and which of them were to be discarded. The interesting thing is that the decisions on such matters appear to have been made by consensus among the churches, though Paul became one of the strongest voices arguing for that consensus. In other words, Paul's model of "contextualization," to apply a late-twentieth-century word, appears to have been one of bottom-up consensus building (see Vanden Berg, this volume), and there is good reason to believe that the model of teaching and behavior he advocated could have been imbibed from the half-Gentile Christian community at Antioch that sent him on his first missionary journeys (see Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3).

Paul's adjustments were not simply attempts to make the gospel more attractive or relevant to his audiences. Though the Book of Acts clearly shows him making opportunistic adjustments, as in his Mars Hill speech in Athens claiming that he preached allegiance to

the "unknown God" (Acts 17:22-31) or in his claim before the Jewish Council (Sanhedrin) that he was being persecuted because he believed in the Resurrection (Acts 23:6-9), in his own writings he claims that no amount of adjusting can obscure the strangeness of his message for his audiences— "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:22-23, TNIV).[78] Thus, despite his oratorical skills and his patently obvious ability to connect with diverse audiences, Paul's method—particularly his contextualizing attitudes—cannot be viewed simply as adjustments of message to audience in hopes of attracting more converts. I suggest his method was rooted in something deeper, something that has equally deep implications for the way cross-cultural missions should be conducted today.

Rather than being a conscious attempt to bend the message to local expectations by borrowing bits and pieces of local cultures, I suggest that Paul's practice of cross-cultural tolerance and engagement was a natural outgrowth of his practice of coevalness with those among whom he worked. Many evangelical missionaries today take with them what some have called a "neocolonial" or an "imperialist" attitude, an attitude rooted not only in theological certainty but also in the fact that many of the missionary-sending countries today are relatively affluent technologically and materially, a condition that can fuel a lingering cultural triumphalism. Missionaries have to contend as well with the reality-distorting effects of ethnic difference and with the often-innate assumptions—assumptions built into their very upbringing as Americans or Europeans or relatively affluent Asians of Singapore or Korea—that economic difference is rooted in ethnic and culture difference, and that the different levels of economic affluence are indicators of other kinds of social and cultural "failure." All of this in turn makes it difficult to value the contributions and perspectives of those who are on the receiving end of the missionary enterprise. One need not even be relatively affluent to develop such attitudes, for if anthropologists are right in suggesting ethnocentrism as a cultural universal (consider how many native ethnonyms are simply linguistically different ways to call oneself "the

people"), then cultural imperialism accompanies all sorts of mission, unless conscious steps are taken to counter its effects.

Somehow, Paul seems to have found ways around this problem, at least compared to some of his missionizing fellow Christians. He developed, as I say, an attitude of coevalness, of treating those among whom he worked as equals regardless of cultural background. His work also demonstrated a multiculturally tolerant attitude that brought him into conflict with others in the leadership of the nascent Christian community, both in Jerusalem and in urban centers throughout the eastern Roman Empire. It was an attitude that made him relatively quick to pursue a missionary enterprise focused on the more receptive Gentiles. Unlike Peter, who required a divine vision to become open to the possibility of witness to non-Jews, Paul pursued the Gentile audience whenever he saw an opening—though without ever abandoning the opportunity or desire to preach to Jews as well. Paul's ambivalent status as messenger to both Jew and Greek is richly evident throughout the New Testament record. For example, it was in the midst of his initial missionary journey that Paul first declared that he felt called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-48). Yet on his second missionary journey we read that when arriving in a new town he would still make his first contacts at a synagogue or other Jewish place of prayer (Acts 16:13, 16; 17:1-3, 16-17; 18:1-4). Clearly, he sought a multiethnic audience, yet he was never willing to abandon his Jewish identity. Conversely, though he normally sought converts first among the Jews, he was never willing to abandon his tolerance of Gentile cultural and ritual difference in order to ingratiate himself to the Jews. Though he himself was Jewish by birth, by training, and by personal ritual preference, he maintained this bicultural stance all the way up to his arrest in Jerusalem, which he appears to have visited—against the advice of his friends—as a fulfillment of a personal desire to carry out a pilgrimage that would have him there by the day of Pentecost, the annual festival feast day (known among Jews as Shavuot) that drew Jews from throughout the world to gather in Jerusalem (read Acts 20:16, 23 with ref. to Acts 2:5 and the "Pentecost" and "Shavu'ot" entries in Bowker 1997). Thus, Paul's relatively open

stance to the Gentiles was carried out despite his continued strong personal identification as a Jew.

One can only speculate on the formative roots of Paul's seemingly natural multicultural approach to mission. Perhaps it is rooted in his childhood in the Gentile-majority city of Tarsus. Perhaps it was shaped as well by his commercial efforts as a traveling tent-maker merchant, an enterprise that surely required a degree of personal and cultural adaptability, and that certainly would have entailed a greater degree of cross-cultural exposure than was the case with the Galilean fisherman (Peter) and the carpenter's son (James) who led the Christian community in Jerusalem. Even his commissioning for missionary journeys came from a cosmopolitan context, as he departed not from Jerusalem but from the half-Jewish, half-Gentile Christian community of Antioch (Acts 11:19-26; 13:1-3), a community that may already have been well on the way to working through the complexities of law, grace and multicultural tolerance that would later be expressed in Paul's writings.

Paul's cosmopolitan stance as a missionary might be expected to surprise us, because immediately prior to his conversion he had been playing the role of point man for a violently fundamentalistic and theocratic form of Judaism to which he was so committed that he has been described in Acts 9:1 as "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" (KJV) toward the proto-Christian subcommunity of the Jewish nation.[79] His was an other-destroying (or "other-suppressing") commitment that parallels perfectly the aspect of modern-day fundamentalisms (or at least their most visible fringe elements) that most frightens many of their observers and victims.[80] It appears, however, that this violent, hyperlegalistic phase in Paul's life was actually but a brief aberration in his larger personal story, being perhaps a by-product of his recent religious education in the city of Jerusalem. It therefore parallels the radicalization that some Muslim students today experience when studying in Saudi Arabia or at Taliban camps, or that West Africans or Singaporeans might experience when studying at the Bible institutes established by some North American Christian movements.[81] Or perhaps this anti-Christian stridency was an expression of Paul's own personal character, being

a person who, once he had reached certainty on a matter, pursued his convictions whole-heartedly, expected others to conform, and refused to listen to advice even to the point of harm to self.[82] In his role as pioneer missionary, however, Paul appeared to apply much of this energy in the promotion of a kind of transcultural tolerance within the Christian community.

Paul opposed requiring converts to adhere to the signs of the Old Jewish covenant, which included the requirement of circumcision and adherence to rules governing diet and various matters pertaining to purity and danger.[83] In their place, he argued a perspective asserting that the covenant has been extended through Christ to all who believe and who show the fruit of the spirit in their allegiances, attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Romans 4: 9-11; Galatians 2:15-5:26; Ephesians 2:11-22; 5:1-20). These latter ideals are presented not as culturally distinctive rules, in the way that the Jewish law set its practitioners apart as a special people. Rather, the morality championed by Paul was felt to be a set of ideals that were universally applicable in their ability to keep people blameless. As he notes: "The fruit of the spirit is . . . Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23, emphasis added). The adherence to Jewish laws of commensality, where, at the time, some Jews held themselves apart from Gentiles, not eating with them and not entering their homes, apparently for fear of contamination, were laws that firmly marked the boundaries of the Jewish community as exclusively set apart. Paul opposed these laws for the sake of a public demonstration of the universality of the Christian message and also as an expression of his perception of the church as a transcultural collection of followers of Christ: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:28-29).

There was a limit to Paul's transculturalism, as, for example, he was strict on several matters of sexual behavior. His opposition to homosexual practices is well known (Rom. 1:18-32); he was opposed to mother-son incest (1 Cor. 5:1);[84] he advocated celibacy but only if a person was

capable of it (1 Cor. 7:25-38); he called for monogamy (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6); he was opposed to sex outside of marriage (whether premarital or extramarital);and he apparently called on women to be voluntarily subordinate to their husbands (Eph. 5:21-33). He apparently considered these rules to be universally valid, regardless of local norms.

On many other matters, however, he waffled shamelessly. In the same letter, for example, he argued both that women should keep silent in church (1 Cor. 14:33-35) and that they should keep their heads covered when prophesying (the latter is, of course, a speaking role) (1 Cor. 11:5).[85] Similarly, in the same letter he rules both that Christians can eat food that had been offered to idols (1 Cor. 10:25-29), that they should not (1 Cor. 8:1-13). In these and other matters his approach seems highly contextual, adjusting to both rhetorical and cultural settings. As for the rules of the Jewish law (rather than the supposedly universal fruits of the spirit to which the converts were to conform), Paul argued in the books of Acts and Galatians against applying those rules to Gentiles (e.g., Acts 15:1-2; Gal. 5:2-4). And though the council of Jerusalem ruled in Acts 15 that the Gentile converts were required to conform to only a subset of the Jewish laws—not eating meat that had been offered to idols, not eating blood, not eating things that had been strangled, and avoiding sex outside of marriage (Acts 15:29)—it is not clear that Paul considered even this advice binding, as he does not repeat the list anywhere in his writings, and even argues in favor of eating food that has been offered to idols, a matter the "Jerusalem Council's" letter had precisely forbidden (1 Cor. 10:25-29; compare Acts 15:20, 29).

For Paul, Christian distinctiveness was rooted not in these behaviors but in cognitive matters, particularly those distinctives that many evangelicals today would consider matters of faith or of the heart, such as the kind of exclusive allegiance to Christ that was already giving rise to martyrdom. It is easy to assume that Paul's choices are correct because, after all, they are preserved in the New Testament and the New Testament is inerrant and that should be enough to settle the question.[86] However, to get a sense of the dynamics of the time it should be remembered that our perception of the events, issues and strategies recorded in the

New Testament is informed by hindsight and by the perspective of the Greeks who became Paul's converts. After all, the selection of the New Testament canon was made by those who had been the fruit of Paul's ministry. By the time the New Testament canon of today was established, an event that did not occur until the late 300s A.D., the integration of Christianity and Greek culture was already well underway, and today that integration is so much a part of our understanding of New Testament Christianity that it is hard to imagine things ever being any other way. In my view, this process of selecting and agreeing on the canon was as important and Spirit-guided as the composition of the New Testament text itself, and it is not by accident that the New Testament canon was set in its current form about the same time as the church composed the historic creeds (Apostolic, Nicene, Athanasian, etc.).[87]

Yet from the perspective of the first Christian communities in Jerusalem, Paul's missionary methods must have seemed a dangerous flirtation with syncretism. From the perspective of today, Paul's method was a divinely inspired abandonment of the nonessential (circumcision, ritual, dietary rules, festival observances, etc.) in the service of the core of the gospel. It is clear, however, that at the time there were many Christians who did not share that view. From their perspective, Paul was abandoning essential elements of God's requirements for his people, due to a questionable overeagerness to win a larger confessional community. From today's perspective, Paul was engaging in contextualization, at most, and for most New Testament readers today the points of cultural adaptation are not apparent at all. But from the perspective of the so-called Judaizers of Paul's day, Paul was encouraging outright syncretism.

It is from this perspective that Paul's transcultural practice becomes relevant to contemporary discussions of mission and contextualization. From the perspective of historical theological hindsight, at least as the matters are normally discussed in churches today, the distinction between syncretism and contextualization can seem to be a simple matter of applying principles (unalterable core of the gospel versus the peripheral cultural matters that can be considered negotiable) in terms of which in-field decisions can be made. If one can just be sure what the

"core" is, one can work to ensure that the Christianity practiced in the field stays pure despite the variations. The problem with this approach is indicated by that very sentence. Just as in the time of Paul, decisions about syncretism and contextualization are made in the context of webs of unequal power relations. On many mission fields today judgments about syncretism, contextualization, and the ideal "look" of the church are being made by people who, like Peter, James and the Judaizers, tend naturally to stand for faithfulness to the traditions of the churches that sent them to the field. Paul represents, by contrast, a model for coevalness with the local church, even in the earliest stage of mission, putting churches very early into the hands of people who had not been trained into his own culture and way of thinking, and allowing decisions about the future of local churches to arise in dialogue with those locals who had seen value in his message. Not only was this pragmatically necessary—in a time preceding modern communications no other method of rapid missionary spread was possible—but it also de-linked local church life from the tyranny (and, some would argue, the theological de-skilling) that arises from overattachment to the missionary's home base. While many fear that syncretism naturally arises from too little teaching direction in the field, in fact the example of the New Testament suggests that the lighter directive hand is the one that leads to the stronger, truer church. Furthermore, practical experience suggests that attempts to be overly directional, or top-down, in guiding contextualization can backfire, producing forms of adaptation that are not actually locally meaningful and that may be locally offensive. At the same time, contextualization from the bottom up—like the "contextualization from the ground" cited by Vanden Berg in this volume—may result in hybrid forms that, while locally effective and though employed in the service of conversion to orthodox forms of Protestant Christianity, draw from a range of symbolic sources that could raise questions in the minds of some purists. But the risk this entails is a risk that must be taken.

Definitions of Syncretism

Before we explore these considerations further, we need to consider some of the definitions of syncretism that have been used by scholars and by evangelical practitioners of mission. The term has been used in a wide variety of senses, many of them pejorative. In its most basic form, syncretism involves cultural or religious processes that draw on more than one source of inspiration. Stated thusly, the term is evaluatively neutral, being merely descriptive of processes that happen naturally all the time. What makes the notion pejorative is the assumption that these blends, hybrids or contextualizations represent deviations from cultural or religious templates that would have been "pure" were it not for these developments.

In the 1950s and 1960s, anthropologists studying the religions of so-called peasant societies of the third world contributed to these assumptions. Particularly influential was Robert Redfield's concept of the interactions between "great" and "little" traditions (Redfield 1960). The "great tradition" approximated the "pure" in that it represented the tradition of the scholars and the court centers, while the "little tradition" designated the various traditions practiced by the rest of the people, many of which deviated significantly from the "pure" tradition of the center. As applied in Southeast Asia, for example, the "great/little tradition" model resulted in analyses of religious forms and practices largely in terms of the degree of their conformity to or deviance from a center that was thought to be purer or more normative. In the study of Thailand, for example, we have Kirsch's analysis of "Thai religious complexity," which distinguishes among the supposed influences of Buddhism, brahmanical religion and indigenous animism (Kirsch 1977). In the study of Burma, where the dominant religion was also Buddhist, Melford Spiro's widely read Buddhism and Society (1970), which was pointedly subtitled A Great Tradition and Its Burmese Vicissitudes, began with an account of supposedly original doctrinal teachings, discussed "shifts" in some of their conceptions, and only then proceeded to discuss aspects of Buddhism as it is actually lived, including the use of magic, merit making

merit transfer, and so on, all of which had been challenged by some scholars and modern practitioners as deviations from the pure form of doctrinal Buddhism. A little earlier, on the basis of fieldwork in Java, in present-day Indonesia, a then-young anthropologist named Clifford Geertz published a study of The Religion of Java (1960) that influenced a generation of scholars with its delineation of three types of nominally Muslim religion, only one of which was overtly orthodox, and each of which was linked to particular strata of society.

All the above analyses suggested that there was a degree of syncretism in the appropriation of the "great traditions" in each of these particular localities, and they suggested that the syncretistic deviations were especially strong among the less elite classes. Beyond that, however, there was little agreement on syncretism's essential nature. As we will see in greater detail in the next section, some suggested a full blending of religious influences, others described a blending in which one tradition was dominant yet in which there were borrowings from other traditions, and others suggested that syncretism involved an incomplete blending.[88] More recently, it has become common to note that religions and cultures are always in flux (e.g., Hobsbawm and Ranger 1987; Meyer and Geschiere 1999; Stewart and Shaw 1994), that there is in practice no such thing as a "pure" religion or culture (the traditions are themselves grounded in culturally and historically contingent blends), and that accusations of syncretism and impurity are rhetorical moves in the ongoing process of cultural self-definition and boundary maintenance (Shaw and Stewart 1994; Meyer and Geschiere 1999).

As for the classic analyses done by people like Kirsch, Spiro Geertz, it has now become common to argue that the so-called "great traditions" that constituted the starting point of their analyses were of suspect authenticity, being relatively recently constructed as a response to the rationalizing influences (or at least evaluative schemas) of Western missionaries, educators and colonial officials (for critiques of the Buddhist construct, which some now call Protestant Buddhism," see Tambiah 1984; Gombrich 1988; for critiques of Geertz's analysis, see Asad 1983, 1985, 1993; Varisco 2005; Woodward 1989). In this context,

the continued value of the term "syncretism" is open to question. Indeed, by the early 1990s many anthropologists had abandoned the word in favor of other terms (see Bastian 2001; Shaw and Stewart 1994), and those who did use it preferred to avoid labeling particular forms as syncretistic, focusing instead on analyzing the concept as a rhetorical tool by which people differentiated themselves from others.

However, in evangelical Christian circles, the term "syncretism" remains in lively use as a cautionary label. Here it also retains the classic notion of a "pure" tradition avoiding impure accretions from elsewhere. Most evangelicals would ascribe to what The Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions calls the traditional negative definition of syncretism: "the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements" (Moreau 2000:924). Hiebert, Shaw and Tiénou describe syncretism as "combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the gospel loses its integrity and message" (1999:177). The wording of this definition is important, for since at least the 1980s evangelicals have been open to embracing localizing theological and practical adaptations (called "contextualization") while continuing to be concerned about avoiding syncretism. "Contextualization" became a term denoting positive forms of adaptation, while "syncretism" remained a catch-all term for adaptations that were considered negative. The question now was not how to avoid adaptation (though it is doubtful that even the most doctrinaire church or mission was ever entirely against adaptation), but how to avoid such a high degree of adaptation that Christianity became unrecognizable or unacceptably diluted. As Harvie Conn put it, "How can the missionary aim for cultural contextualization and avoid theological syncretism?" (1984:12). Conn suggested that the tension inherent in this question was unavoidable, for a wholesale refusal to adapt could itself bring about a kind of syncretism, as the refusal to adjust would ensure that Christianity was conveyed in "foreign forms" that "cannot adapt to changing meanings and often become unchristian in the process" (1984:189; also see Kraft 1980:294–296).

More recently, Hiebert et al. have made a similar distinction, expressing concern about "syncretism that threatens the heart of the gospel" (1999:173) while advocating the fostering of "a vibrant [localized] Christianity that is rooted in the gospel" (1999:178). The means of accomplishing this "critical contextualization" (1999:174) involves evaluating "old beliefs and practices in the light of biblical truth" while remembering that "our aim is not to destroy folk religions and to replace them with formal Christianity" (1999:178). This approach involves learning "to preach the gospel in ways that are understood by the people, and respond to needs without compromising the church's prophetic call," working out answers to local challenges "in the context of local beliefs and practices," with the attitude that these answers can "constantly be reformulated as times and cultures change" (1999:179). Toward this end, churches need to be taught "how to do theology and how to do contextualization in their own contexts. Only as churches take this task upon themselves will they become mature and learn to live as Christians in their particular socio-cultural contexts" (1999:179). Here the three authors appear to be arguing for a kind of coevalness, saying that contextualization is most effective, and most likely to result in enduring forms that represent a faithful Christianity, only when the contextualization process is spearheaded by the locals rather than by the missionary.

Types of Syncretism

The tricky thing about contextualization managed by missionaries, and also of judgments of syncretism made by people whose primary orientations are outside the local context, is that syncretism, even in the sense used by evangelicals, denotes a wide range of phenomena.

There are at least four types of syncretism that evangelicals tend to find unacceptable. The first might be called blending, in which two religious traditions merge, or in which a newly invented tradition draws on more than one pre-existing tradition. A classic example of blending is the case of the Chamula of southern Mexico, who, according to Gary H. Gossen, blended Catholicism with the pre-Catholic Mayan religion,

for example merging the person of the risen Christ with that of the traditional sun deity (Gossen 1979).

A second type of syncretism might be called complementary. This is a blending not at the level of religious systems as wholes but at the level of the individual practitioners, who may participate in a variety of religious systems simultaneously, employing each of the systems for different aspects of life and thought. The classic example of this is the coexistence of the Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian systems in traditional China (in Japan we could add Shinto to the mix), a mixing in which for some practitioners the various systems have complementary functions.

A third type might be called layering. In this type, which was once a common way of conceptualizing the Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia, Buddhism occupies the top layer, while underneath it exists a variety of magical practices and spirit beliefs. While this interwoven complex is not always accepted as fully Buddhist (at least not by rationalist, modernist Buddhists), it finds its meaning within a web of cognitive structures that are informed by Buddhism (see Kirsch 1967; Tambiah 1970). For example, just like anybody else in Thai Buddhist society, the spirits that speak through mediums are thought to owe their current place in the cosmos to the law of karma, the Buddhist principle of the cause-and-effect interplay of action and its fruits.

A fourth type of syncretism might be called pick-and-choose. In this type, which was common in North America at the turn of the twenty-first century, individuals draw on bits and pieces of a variety of systems, integrating the pieces as they see fit. A person might sit in Zen Buddhist meditation, read the Bhagavad Gita (a Hindu source), derive inspiration from the poems of Rumi (a Sufi Muslim saint), and admire the Christian mystics, while also practicing visualization techniques and perhaps dabbling in Wicca. One of the most engaging examples of this kind of individualized integration appears in the classic sociological study Habits of the Heart, in which a woman named Sheila, when asked what her religion was, named it after herself—"Sheilaism" (Bellah et al. 1985:221).[89]

Now most evangelicals wish to avoid all four types of syncretism. Instead of blending, they wish to promote distinctiveness. Instead of complementarity, they wish for Christianity to supply the entire religious field. Instead of layering, they wish for Christianity to command all levels of thought and experience, both the level of abstract ideas and the level of daily life and practice. And instead of promoting a "pick-and-choose" approach to religion, they wish for Christ to be the all-in-all, and for the Bible as taught by the churches to be the sole source of faith and practice. The problem is in knowing how to be sure that this is happening, and, more important, deciding who should take the lead in formulating the adaptations. Furthermore, could it be that, just as in the time of Paul, a certain amount of "impurity" must be tolerated in order for the church to be properly rooted in Christ? Not only is it possible; I suggest it is unavoidable.

Syncretism and Contextualization – An Overlap

Another of the difficulties with the effort to combat syncretism while promoting contextualization is that the two spheres overlap. The relationship between the two processes can be conceived as follows:
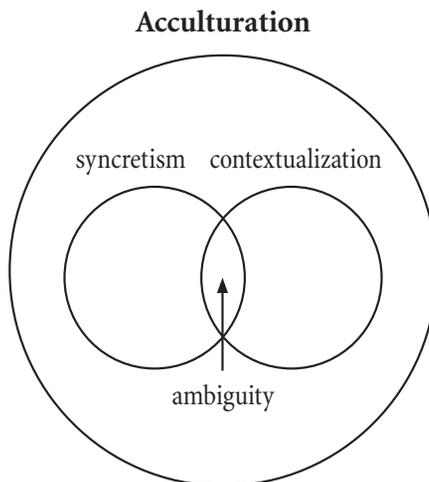
Acculturation

Figure 1

Here we follow the conventional notion of syncretism and contextualization as subtypes of acculturation, with the former being opposed by the evangelical churches (or missions) and latter being favored. The boundary between (unacceptable) syncretism and (acceptable) contextualization is not clear-cut, as there is a great deal of overlapping material. Indeed, if I were able to ask the readers of this chapter (as I once did a group of evangelical college students) to classify a particular range of adaptive responses to cross-cultural religious contact, there would likely be a variety of judgments as to which is syncretistic and which is not. Consequently, when drawing up rules of cross-cultural faith and practice (for those who think in such a fashion), attempts to rule out all syncretism threaten to rule out along with it much of the acculturative creativity that makes for a vibrantly localizing church. Much of the discussion in recent evangelical missions publications such as the Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ) and the International Journal of Frontier Missions (IJFM) revolves around how to combat the former without doing the latter, and the issue will probably never be resolved.

Unfortunately, efforts by missionaries to solve the problem by guiding the process of acculturation or by doing the adaptive work on behalf of the local congregations can sometimes be counterproductive, despite the seemingly laudable goal of cultural adaptation. Sometimes church and mission leaders actively encourage specific adaptations in hopes of making Christianity more locally relevant, providing it a less foreign appearance, or enabling it to provide emotionally salient equivalents to local observances that the church has forbidden. One example of these deliberate adaptations was when Catholic ecclesiastics in Thailand decided in the 1970s and 1980s to refer to their churches as wats, appropriating the term that is used for Thai Buddhist temples. They also adapted (or permitted adaptation of) some local ritual forms, such as allowing the use of the Thai-style wai (hands raised, palms together) in place of the Western curtsy, and (as a more controversial move) suggesting that the Buddha was a kind of pre-New Testament prophet (for details, see Cohen 1991:127–129; 1995:37, 42–44). Another

example of this kind of adaptation was when, somewhat controversially, a Protestant missionary invented in the late 1970s a Christianized version of the traditional Thai suu khwan ceremony, settling a parishioner's mind by tying a string around her wrist while praying for healing. (In the traditional ceremony, the officiant would also have called for a return and rebinding of her unsettled inner spirits.)[90] Yet other cases included hymnology and artistic performances adapted to the local idiom, such as the performances sponsored by the Christian Communication Institute at Payap University (Chiangmai) that has presented Christian themes in the format and style of the Thai likay folk theater. Other adaptive efforts include the widely acclaimed book Water Buffalo Theology, by the Japanese Protestant missionary Kosuke Koyama (1974), which some Caucasians perceived as a proto-model of an indigenous theology for the Thai church.

As has just been suggested, these deliberate adaptive moves did not always work as intended. For example, when the Catholic Church in Thailand attempted dialogue with Thai Buddhism by suggesting that the Buddha was a pre-Christian prophet, they provoked complaints that the move was "a plot to undermine Buddhism" (Sobhon-Ganabhorn 1984). Attempts to adapt Protestant drama and hymnology have drawn raves from some Thai Christians, but others (mostly urban young people) complain that the artistic traditions used are old-fashioned. As for Water Buffalo Theology, it has been almost universally ignored by the Thai churches (see Swanson 2002).[91] Moreover, the fastest-growing churches in Thailand include some Pentecostal denominations that make no overt concessions to local styles of religiosity, leading some of their leaders to suggest that overt adaptation is not needed, though in fact a great deal of subterranean adaptation goes on continually in these settings, as discussed in Zehner (2003, 2005) and as outlined later in the present chapter.

The reason acculturation is important, I suggest, is not because it is the key to more rapid evangelization (it often is not), but because it is an essential aspect of the process of rooting Christianity in local lives. It is also an important part of the process of righting the power imbalances

that still exist between Western missions and local churches. Recognizing the importance of acculturative processes and allowing them to flourish requires missionaries and mission-sending bodies to take on the roles of observers and listeners rather than just the roles conventionally associated with directive leadership. That in turn entails risking the occasional bit of syncretism (or seeming syncretism) alongside the more comfortable aspects of acculturation. It also involves recognizing that many of the most important aspects of acculturation may arise from the Christian subcommunity itself rather than from the direct instigation of mission leaders.[92]

For this reason, it is important to introduce an additional distinction on top of the ones just mentioned. That is the distinction between "planned" and "natural" hybridities, the former being deliberate acculturation (or syncretism) introduced from above, the latter being hybrid processes developed from below.

The cases just discussed might be considered instances of "planned acculturation." There is nothing wrong with these efforts. Indeed, a communicator who makes no adaptation to the audience is likely to be a non-communicator, ineffective at persuading and teaching. So it is appropriate that cross-cultural communicators and strategists should draw on local ways of thought and that they should address local issues, just as they would at home. However, equally important is the "natural acculturation" that wells up despite or alongside the formal or deliberate initiatives of churches and missions. In fact, the two kinds of acculturation overlap. Effective planned acculturation draws interactively on processes that arise from below—Vanden Berg's "grounded contextualization." By the same token, the process of natural acculturation is influenced by things preached by people held to be authoritative. Overall, however, the usefulness of the distinction should be to encourage a greater openness to information from below, to more meaningful innovations by locals, and to stories told in unexpected fashion by sources other than the teaching elite of the churches and missions.

Syncretism in the Journey to Faithfulness.

I would argue that syncretism and contextualization are separate concepts, rather than a continuum. Therefore, the trick is how to preserve purity (in the spiritual sense) without stanching creativity. Whenever syncretism and contextualization are considered to be discrete points along a single continuum (rather than as overlapping sets of points within a larger set of acculturative phenomena), the creative re-clothing of Christian life and thought in terms of different local cultures and concepts can itself seem suspectly syncretistic.[93] However, Paul's example suggests that the process of re-clothing Christian faith and practice in the forms of local cultures can be an expression of Christological faithfulness, paralleling the case of Christ taking on our own form in carrying out his salvific mission. The concerns we today label "syncretism" are entirely separate from the question of degrees of adaptation, having especially to do with the issue of where loyalties lie relative to competing sources of religious authority. Even this distinction is overstated, for in the conceptually and experientially messy process of conversion from one religious tradition to another, the process of coming to Christ can itself be grounded in a combination of Christian and non-Christian conceptions and motives.

A few examples from my interviews with Thai Buddhist converts to evangelical Christianity illustrate this point.[94] In describing their journey to Christianity, many Thai Buddhist converts grounded their decisions in considerations that, at least initially, drew on Buddhist concepts. One convert told of going to Buddhist temples as a child, seeing the afterworld punishments depicted on the temple walls, and finding herself motivated to seek a way to escape.[95] Another told of how attempts as a faithful Buddhist to obtain heaven through rigorous self-discipline had simply made him more aware of his failings, making heaven seem ever farther away. He, too, wanted a shortcut, and felt he found it in Christ.[96]

A particularly arresting example of conceptual overlap comes from the story of a young woman who experienced a significant dream as part of her conversion process. This person had already been in extended dialogue with Christians as she worked through a series of life crises. In the midst of one of these crises, when she was suffering a life-threatening fever, she dreamed she was beside a lake and being pulled under by an unseen spirit. She called out for help and was rescued by a person dressed in glowing white clothes. The person took her by the hand, told her to "go back, my child," and told her that when she was in trouble she should think of him. When she awoke, the fever was gone. A few days later she was telling her experience to some Christians, when she noticed a picture of Jesus on the wall and identified it as the person she had seen in her dream.

What is most interesting about this last example, however, is not the story itself but its overlap with the experience and perceptions of the storyteller's parents, who had been sitting by her bedside when the dream happened. According to the convert, the parents had noticed her disturbed sleep. When she awoke and told them what had happened, they said that maybe a phrajao had come to help her. For the convert, this response helped validate her further exploration of Christianity. However, her parents probably did not actually say "phrajao," as she reported to me. Rather, they are likely to have said the similar word "jao." At the time, the term "phrajao" was used almost exclusively for the king of the land (short for phrajao phaen din) or for the Buddha (short for phra phuttajao). When used in reference to a spiritual being, it referred almost exclusively to the Christian God, and never to any other spiritual being. Even then, it was normally only Christians who used the term in this sense of a supreme spiritual being who is not constrained by the laws of karma and who stands above the world of sense-experience. The closest equivalent in the local context (in this case, the northern city of Chiangmai, though the interview was collected in Bangkok) was the notion of the jao, a familiar spirit who may guard a place, protect a family, or speak through a medium. When the parents said a jao had come to help, they were suggesting that a powerful spiritual being had

indeed come in the dream. The daughter's assumption that the jao might be Jesus did not directly contradict her parents' suggestion, yet it also went beyond that suggestion by eventually grounding her in a tradition—evangelical Christianity—that taught adherents to avoid relations with local jao on the grounds that Jesus was fundamentally different from them. Yet without the dream, and without the prior notion of jao (powerful spirits and their relations with humans), there may never have been a commitment to phrajao (the Christian God, understood in evangelical Christian fashion).

Yet another instance comes from a young woman who had converted to Christianity but later became unfaithful in her church attendance. After a while she developed a mysterious stomach illness that did not respond to medical care. Her mother, who was not a Christian, suggested that God may be calling her daughter to faithfulness and that the problem would go away if the daughter would begin attending church more regularly. The daughter took her mother's advice, began attending church regularly, and the problem indeed went away. By the time I interviewed her she was attending Bible school in hopes of entering formal church ministry. What is interesting, though, is that in the mother's mind this "God calling me back" story had some features that differed from the typical North American Christian conceptions. You see, the mother was an active medium, and one of the ways that spirits (jao) establish their claim on mediums is through mysterious abdominal or mental illnesses that do not respond to normal treatment but which go away if the medium becomes willing to enter the spirit's service through trance (for further discussion, see the examples in Morris 2000). Here, again, we have a confusion or overlap between local and Christian conceptions in ways that led to adoption of a version of Christianity that eschewed the very concepts that made the journey possible.

Confusions and overlaps like these are common in conversion stories. They were particularly apparent, even to the storyteller, in the account told by a young woman who had initially claimed to have converted in the course of a vision experience. This woman had had a long friendship with a persistently witnessing Christian classmate,

and was secretly becoming interested in Christianity. The friend had suggested that if she wanted to know if God was real, then she should pray and God would give her assurance. This suggestion overlapped with conceptions developed in her prior involvements in a popular Buddhist meditation movement. That particular movement encouraged meditators to expect visions of spiritual realities such as the Buddhist heavens or the meditator's own past lives. Consequently, instead of simply praying for assurance, she prayed for a vision of God, and a vision was what she felt she had gotten. As she was falling asleep that night, she heard a voice calling her name, and as she heard it she felt overwhelmed with emotion: "The instant I heard that voice, I felt that I was a sinner, unworthy for that voice to be calling . . . for that voice to be giving me love and warmth. . . . I had never heard a voice like that before. I had never received a feeling like that before." She was instantly convinced that Jesus was real and alive. "The moment I thought this, it made me feel that I had received release. It was like there was joy and happiness welling up unexpectedly."

On one level, this person had done exactly what her friend had suggested, asking for and receiving proof of God's reality. However, the manner in which she requested and received this proof is of ambiguous provenance. Stories of visions of Jesus and of divine voices can be encountered in most evangelical communities; after all, such a vision figured in the Apostle Paul's conversion. But such experiences are rare (regardless of cultural background) and are not likely to be incorporated directly in conversion appeals. If the Christian friend was following Thai evangelical convention, then instead of suggesting that the prospective convert ask for a vision, she was probably saying that those who open their hearts to God will gradually and naturally develop the conviction that Christianity is true.

The young woman's quest for a vision (which was only half answered, as she "heard" and "felt" but never "saw") is likely to have come from her prior involvement in the Wat Phra Dhammakaya Buddhist meditation movement. This movement encouraged the cultivation of guided visions as part of its meditation technique and taught that these visions were

actual glimpses of the Buddha nature within. It also taught that more advanced meditators could obtain visions of the heavens and their past lives (see Zehner 1990). It was but a short step from the woman's involvement in this movement to her expecting a vision of Jesus. She was not the first Dhammakaya member I encountered who expected such results from Christian practice. However, her use of this experience cut two ways, grounding her conversion in the habitus acquired in a non-Christian movement, while also grounding it in a direct experience of the divine that she understood in Christian terms.

Conclusion

A question that naturally arises is what to do about these stories where the acquisition of faithful Christianity (indeed, all four were studying for ministry when I interviewed them) was grounded in conceptions of non-Christian origin and in understandings grounded in non-Christian cosmologies. Not a single convert seemed to find this problematic, as the stories had a naturalness grounded in experience, such that they seemed to have happened the only way that was possible and sensible. For the pastors and laypeople who helped facilitate the conversions, the stories may have seemed a bit more problematic, for there seemed a reluctance particularly to take at face value the claim of some of these people to have converted in private. In the case of the fourth convert, for example, the local pastor reportedly not only led her in a new prayer of conversion, but he also attempted to precede that prayer with a clearer explanation of Christianity, not that the explanation had any effect on her understanding. For all intents and purposes, she had still "met Christ" and responded to him directly in the vision, not in the subsequent conversation with the pastor.

It is important to emphasize that in these cases the local churches' dealings with this local material take it into account without necessarily incorporating it. The local churches are contextual in that they converse in the local experiential and cultural idioms. Indeed, in the conversion stories I collected future church leaders were telling conversion stories

that were directly grounded in those idioms. Yet, even as they were incorporating local conceptions in this sense (i.e., being naturally contextualizing), most of the Christians I encountered in Thailand were also maintaining an anti-syncretistic stance. By this I mean that they felt Christian beliefs and practices were conceptually and practically distinct from those of the surrounding culture. While the practical blurring of jao and phrajao may have facilitated conversion, for example, the distinction between the two was tremendously important to most practicing Christians—thus the dreamer's mis-remembrance of her parents' words as "phrajao" (God) and not "jao" (local spirit).

This simultaneous grounding in and standing apart from local cultural conceptions is a complex one that is being reproduced in multiple Christian communities across multiple cultures, often with little or no contributions from foreign missionaries (see, e.g., Engelke 2004; Knauft 2002b; Meyer 1996; Robbins 2003a, 2004b).[97] Not only are the foreign missionaries often peripheral to or absent from these processes (both in the cited examples and in the stories of most of the Thai converts I interviewed), but they are probably necessarily so. As in Paul's day, it does not matter what the people in "Jerusalem" think. In most of the world today, evangelism is being conducted primarily by local people and who have little interaction with or supervision by missionaries.

Thus, the question of what to do about contextualization and syncretism is not one of what the missionary must to do to shape the church. It is, rather, the more complicated and less self-empowering question that faced the "Judaizers" of Paul's day—not "what are the forms we should use when evangelizing," but "what stance will we take toward the results of evangelism." The Judaizers of Paul's day essentially wanted a second conversion, the first a conversion to Christ and the second a conversion to the way the Judaizers practiced Christianity. There is a strong temptation to do the same today, continually trying to reconvert the Christians of less affluent societies to the forms that Christianity and churches have in the world's culturally and economically dominant countries. This work of double conversion can never be completed, since

the culturally dominant churches are themselves constantly changing, and each change renews the urge to "purify" the practices of culturally different others. The example of Paul suggests that this double-conversion should not be done, neither at the beginning of faith acquisition nor later. He suggests that the call to faithfulness can be managed best by adapting to the converts rather than by calling converts to emulate the sponsoring mission. The Thai examples suggest, furthermore, that to a certain degree the embedding in local contexts is an essential part of the conversion process, and that this embedding goes deeper than the experimentation with forms of churches, clothing, music, and worship that is the usual stuff of contextualization talk. I do not mean to suggest that there should be no standards at all, for Paul clearly communicated a powerful set of nonnegotiables, and in the Thai examples cited above the converts were responding to a form of Christianity whose agents were clear that it had fairly strict expectations for personal belief and practice.

What I am addressing is not the faithfulness of Christianity, but rather the role of foreign missionaries in the ongoing negotiation of that faithfulness. I argue that we need to continually rededicate ourselves to such examples as Saint Gregory the Illuminator (who founded the Armenian church), of Hudson Taylor (who pioneered adaptation to the lifestyles of the Chinese), and of Paul himself, who lived as a Jew when among Jews but lived as a Greek when among Greeks. More importantly, we need to continually remind ourselves of the proposition that the people best equipped to judge local context, even in the earliest days of a church's life, are not the missionaries but the locals, and that the missionary's Christianity is just as much a "local Christianity," having been developed through engagement with particular contexts, as is the Christianity of the receiving churches. As local Christianities continually rearticulate with their local cultures and with the experiences of their recent converts—and as they continue to participate in the ongoing dialogue among multiple local Christianities that collectively makes them "one people in Christ"—their particular models of faithfulness can be expected to continue coevolving. These principles were valid

in the days of Paul and Peter, and they will remain so indefinitely into the future.