

33

Mission to Animists

Robert and Anne Thiessen

The story of witness to animists is both glorious and tragic. Animists have responded more quickly than other major religious groups to the gospel and launched the most extensive church planting movements of history. On the other hand, churches among animists can sink into the most distressing syncretism and dependence. How do we reach out to people who are so different from ourselves?

My wife and I have worked for over twenty years among an animistic group in Guerrero, a state in southern Mexico. To this day the Mixtecs in our adopted village, Yuvinani, make their way up the mountainside every June 25th in a long procession guided by shamans, Catholic catechists, and the town's loud brass band. At the rain god's altar, drinking heavily, they worship, sacrificing a chicken or turkey, doing divination using mirrors, and speaking to the dead. They hope to manipulate the capricious spiritual powers centered at that altar to act in their favor, all the while considering themselves faithful Catholics.

Yet in this small village, twenty-five years ago, one man, Felipe, a returning migrant worker who had converted through hearing people singing evangelical choruses sung



Robert and Anne Thiessen are missionaries serving with MB Mission among the Mixtec indigenous group of southern Mexico since 1992. Their work includes church planting and mentoring other missionaries among the indigenous. Anne has lived among two different indigenous people groups of Honduras. Anne has studied International Development at Wheaton College and Robert served a three-year apprenticeship in church planting in Honduras. They are members of St. Ann's Community Church, an MB church in Ontario, Canada.

in Spanish, a language he hardly understood, began to speak of Jesus. He claimed Jesus brought joy and forgiveness and healing. On the testimony of this one man, many of the village turned to Christ and formed the first church in this unreached ethnic group of fifty thousand people. The group experienced transformations you would read about in Acts 2: healings, changes in their economy and their relationships. Two leaders were martyred for their faith within the year.

Over the next twenty years, the church in this small town weakened and fragmented into three congregations. Although we were able to help them value their language in prayer, we had little input into many of the early decisions they had made about church. They used Spanish instead of their own Indian indigenous tongue for worship and teaching Scripture, depending on the public reading of an antiquated Spanish version of the Bible that required translation for them to understand. They imitated the practices of the Latin church in the nearest market town for leadership, prayer, doctrine, and music. Until recently, they had stopped reaching out with the gospel to other unreached Mixtec towns around them.

Many churches from animist backgrounds have a similar story, its causes tracing back to the way the church was established, adopting the externals of the culture of the missionary without allowing the gospel to indwell and transform on its own. Roland Allen, an Anglican missionary in China, writing in the early twentieth century, describes unfavorably the pleasure of Western Christians, who when worshipping in foreign countries, found everything--the liturgy, seating, music, instrumentation, leadership--so familiar.¹ Unfortunately, the culture of the West is so different and so dominant that such wholesale adoption of this culture can stunt the growth of local leadership and creativity for years to come.

Often, the missionary's first instinct when faced with the challenge of reaching animists is to change their culture, which amplifies the problem. So much of mission history has been about attempts to change "them," and less about how "we" also need God to change us and our culture. So let us look at the difficulties of witnessing to animists, but let us look also at our own baggage.

What is an Animist?

By popular definition,

Animism (from Latin *anima* "soul, life") is the religious worldview that natural physical entities—including animals, plants, and often even inanimate objects or phenomena—possess a spiritual essence. Specifically, animism describes the religion of indigenous tribal peoples, especially prior to the development of civilization and organized religion.²

Two things derive from this definition and our experience: One, animists believe that the “spiritual essence” needs to be moved to do things in people’s favor, or to not do things against them, and two, their identity and survival is found in fitting into the group and is expressed in terms of relationship.

Ascribing a spiritual essence to physical entities appears to be a fallen human instinct, as Paul describes in Romans 1, and I believe it is the default worldview into which we constantly lapse. For example, I recently saw in an airline magazine an advertisement for an expensive gold “guardian” angel on a chain. Even for those within the church, the ease with which daily devotionals turn into a talisman for garnering God’s protection indicates this propensity. When we refer to Muslims or Christians as “folk-Muslims” or “folk-Christians,” we mean they are mostly animists. But the classic animist is also indigenous and tribal, making him especially susceptible to the dominant culture that envelops him. Here are some quick comparisons:

Animist Worldview

- Without direct revelation from God and his purposeful intervention in history, animists ascribe spiritual power to what they see. Time is cyclical, without ultimate purpose. Nature is a fixed sum, a limited good.
- Spiritual beings are amoral, sometimes good, and often malevolent.³ The community survives by manipulating these capricious spiritual powers through rituals and traditions that do not have to be rational, and are passed down through experience and orally through stories.
- Individuals standing out and breaking with tradition threaten the survival of the entire community.
- With no strong separation between the spiritual and the physical, the supernatural pervades life.
- Allegiance to God requires a power encounter with the spiritual powers who have governed all aspects of community life.

Western Worldview

- Western thought, influenced by divine revelation, takes for granted a God (if he exists) that is just and good and purposeful, making time linear and progress possible. Creation reflects a God of order.
- Though culturally we relegate God to the role of distant “clockmaker,” our worldview enables great achievements in engineering, art, medicine, and learning, all of which we pass on through formal education.
- God’s revelation of Himself to individuals enables a strong sense of “self” and the ability to analyze, classify and act independently.
- The spiritual is suspect and is greatly separated from the physical.
- Allegiance to God requires intellectual assent by the individual.

Of course we can't lump all animists together. Like Westerners, they can be educated or illiterate, poor or wealthy, democratic or despotic, peaceful or warring, huge groups of ten million or tiny pockets of ten members. But our worldviews separate us, and so in describing them here, we should remember we are doing something animists rarely do. They hardly know they are such a rarefied creature since they have never labeled their worldview and are not as obsessed with classifying everything, analyzing it, and then pronouncing upon it. On the other hand, their worldview gives them insights we often lack: they intuit the nearness of God, the influence of evil spirits, the power of prayer, our dependence on nature, and our need for community.

Jacob Loewen tells this story about the faith of Wounaan (indigenous Panamanian) believers praying for healing:

I began to realize that they were appreciating something about the gospel narrative that I could not, or at least did not, to the same degree as they... When the pastor's wife came down with fever (Choco: fever-spirits), I suggested the laying on of hands and prayer. When she suffered a relapse next day, I noticed the Choco Christians praying for her again, but this time without me. My cautious inquiry as to why I was not included brought the ego-deflating answer, "Because you don't believe..." Since they had been so very conscious of the evil spirit forces as non-Christians, these new converts were now equally conscious of the Spirit of God.⁴

Ethnocentrism

In past generations, even among anthropologists, different peoples were evaluated on scales of primitive to civilized, or from pre-logical to logical. It was only at the very beginning of the twentieth century that Franz Boaz, the father of modern anthropology, saw that approach as "ethnocentric and arrogant" and moved away from such pejorative assumptions. He introduced the neutral term "culture..."⁵

While anthropologists may have moved towards neutral analysis, at a popular level, a deeply "ethnocentric and arrogant" attitude persists. I still remember vividly my conversation with an older Presbyterian pastor, a Latin Mexican, about the indigenous people that lived in the mountains above Acapulco, where we worked at the time. He had two categories for the mountain dwellers, "civilized" and "uncivilized," which he explained meant those who spoke Spanish, and those "*Indios*," who by his standards, didn't even have a real language. Ask a Mexican what differentiates Spanish from indigenous languages and he will likely say, "The Indians speak dialects—they

do not have formal languages.” Even when missionaries encourage new believers to express their faith in their own way, the dominant culture often dismisses the effort.

The Latin pastor who first visited Yuvinani (before our time there) after the conversion of the village did help establish the first church and point the Mixtecs toward Christ and his Word, but he also brought in much Western influence. He did not interact with the village elders but focused on individual believers. He quickly took over leadership of the group, becoming the specialist in the new religion and introducing the practices of his own Latin denomination. He taught doctrine as a set of propositions, in Spanish, that the Mixtecs needed to learn. He urged them to stop participating fully in village affairs. As a result the Mixtec believers distanced themselves from their community and their language and looked to leaders who could teach doctrine in Spanish. Thus, although they had risked their lives for their newfound faith and experienced its power in healing and character, they felt little qualified to take it to others.

Historical Observations

The history of Western expansion and missions among animists tells a similar story. Obviously God has brought much redemption through Western missions in all spheres of life. Spiritual and family life has certainly improved. Life expectancy and education continue to increase. The economy has grown, and arts and leisure never contemplated before have become possible. Arguably, even governments have benefited from Western thought. And the church among the “two-thirds world” has grown larger than its counterpart in the West.⁶ Missions have served animists well, but the church among animists has not always been healthy or indigenous.

The ideal of a healthy, indigenous church, called the “three self” church by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson⁷ in the mid-nineteenth century (self-leading, self-funding, and self-reproducing), was dealt a deathblow by the Student Volunteer Movement (which relied heavily on Western learning) in the following century. The idea that new believers in non-Western areas could respond to the gospel in ways that reflected their culture, doing their own jobs of leading, training, supporting and extending the Kingdom, was replaced by the idea that Westerners were leading these cultures into the advancements of the twentieth century, advancements which relied on formal education. The Western assumption that people need, individually, to read the printed Scripture to forge a strong, private relationship with God was never recognized as a product of a particular culture. This blindness led missionaries to dismiss local leaders that would have been well qualified by Paul’s standards. Western missionaries stepped in to fill the gap, stunting the young church’s indigeneity.

Dependency, then, characterized churches started by Western missionaries throughout the world. “Rice Christians,” a dismal byword today referring to people who convert only to receive a handout, summarizes much of Western efforts. Dependency on Western rituals, finances, training methods, structure and leadership became the norm. Even now, after some fifty years of having identified this weakness, we find too few churches that clearly demonstrate creative and financial distance from their parent churches. As a result we find animist background churches often struggling to reproduce across cultural lines to the unreached that surround them or to extend even among their own people.

Jesus and Mission to Animists

Surely this is not the fruit Jesus intended for our labor. He gives direct advice to missionaries twice. Once, he instructs his evangelists to take nothing and to stay in the home of peace (Luke 10:5-7). The second time he warns cross-cultural workers, “Yes, how terrible it will be for you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. For you cross land and sea to make one convert, and then you turn him into twice the son of hell as you yourselves are” (Matthew 23:15, NLT). Both Jesus’ instructions and his warning can help us serve animist communities more effectively.

Let us return to the dominant characteristics of animists. First: *the “spiritual essence” needs to be moved to do things in people’s favor, or to not do things against them.* Animists have survived centuries by conforming to certain practices and patterns, but it is important to realize that these are “unreasoned,” or without a rational explanation. One does them simply because the “spiritual essence” requires them.

Intentionally or not, the missionary also presents a way of responding to the divine, though now it is the One True God. At the very least, he seeks mental assent (what the West calls belief) and models some form of prayer and study. He may use written materials, portions of Scripture or studies, perhaps in a trade language such as Spanish. He may challenge moral behavior and implement social reform. Perhaps he even arranges meetings, establishing Western patterns of leadership, forms, and content.

For meetings, the missionary introduces baptism and requirements for who can officiate and who can participate (Is there a catechism? A standard moral behavior? Some visible change?). He introduces a form of Eucharist, again with a set of requirements. He starts regular meetings with set components: Will people sit or stand? What is the order of service? What language will be used? Who officiates? How long is the prayer, and how is it paced? The list goes on and on, involving every aspect of what they do, and each new practice becomes law.

Very little of it has to make sense. The gods have always had intermediaries, experts that guided them into right practice. And this new God and his intermediary are so much better than anything they've seen before. So, for example, if the missionary claps during a song, the Mixtecs will clap, even if this is not the way their culture shows approbation. If the missionary only ordains men who can read Spanish, they'll do the same. Although the Mixtecs traditionally elect a rotating board of elders for town leadership, the churches now adopt the Western single-pastor style. Whatever is observable, physical and outward, the animists will imitate and turn into tradition that cannot be broken, just as they have done for centuries.

Following the advice of Jesus to his evangelists (Luke 9:1-6) will help us avoid this pitfall. "Take nothing with you." Jesus told his disciples to go in the same way he came to us, incarnationally, carrying nothing, remaining dependent on the hospitality and resources of the community. We should approach animist communities in this same spirit, learning their worldview and respecting their modes of transportation, their technology, their methods of education, their economy and social structure, and especially their language. We can test every method we use--for evangelism, for prayer, for meeting and teaching--to make sure it is immediately recognizable and immediately reproducible within this culture. We want the gospel to be incarnated in the culture.

When the gospel fails to become incarnate in a new culture, but rather arrives from a position of power, we run the risk of syncretism (where the external forms of one religion are assigned meaning from another) or at the very least, its lesser cousin, legalism. The Spanish conquistadors forced Christian conversion en masse, which resulted in syncretism where the indigenous peoples' Catholic feast days (the *fiestas patronales*) are often but thinly disguised worship of pre-Columbian deities. Obviously our evangelism does not use physical coercion, but to the extent that it imposes an outside culture on indigenous groups, it results in rigid legalism, and it is against this sin that Christ warns: "You turn him into twice a son of hell." For example, the Mixtec church, responding to an outside Latin pastor's teaching, for a time labeled as adulterous those married by the community elders but not by Mexican law. To avoid arriving in a new culture from a dangerous position of power, we can obey Christ's words, "Take nothing with you."

Now, we add the second characteristic of animists: *identity is found in fitting into the group and is expressed in terms of relationship*. Despite the fact that animist communities tend to make decisions as a group, when a traditional missionary appears on the scene and witnesses to animists, he tends to approach individuals. In most cases new converts have had to disassociate themselves from the patterns and

forms of their own culture, and often even distance themselves from their families and friends. What had defined them till this point they now reject, and they are, as the Mixtecs call them, “untethered goats.” They are desperate to take on a new identity and belong to a new family, and the new group of likewise dislocated believers with its foreign leader provides both. New Christians in fledgling churches feel driven to practice and defend the inexplicable outward practices of another culture’s religion twice as fervently as the missionary himself, since his new identity derives from them.

To avoid this pitfall Christ taught his evangelists to “stay in a home of peace.” The home of peace, headed by a man or a woman, connects people in the community and unites it. Christ’s command to approach the peacemakers of the community and rely on their hospitality recognizes the need to work within the entire community and acknowledge its de facto leaders. We have found many times that doors have opened to us for evangelism when we recognized town leadership. Our friend, Nicolas, our man of peace among Mixtec migrant laborers whom he had brought under contract to work in Culiacan, opened up his community to us after we went to him first with our mission. Ironically, he never converted, but his heart changed toward us when we recognized his responsibility within the group. As he explained to us, “No one respects us, not even our children who have gone off to study or work. We have lost our *to’o*, our dignity.” By working with heads of household and approaching town elders and other people of peace, we can ameliorate the division of the community when people come to Christ. By applying Christ’s counsel to “stay in the home of peace,” we honor community.

If we are sensitive to how leaders function within a society, we will be more effective in encouraging the new leaders of the church. For the last number of years most missionaries have been aware of the need to start indigenous churches, and they understand the need for local leadership. So they spend a lot of energy trying to make this happen but sometimes ineffectively. They encourage a local man, or if they are fortunate, a few, to “step up” and take more and more responsibility. However, if the missionary has taken over leadership (the still very normal practice of acting as the temporary pastor) rather than recognizing local leaders, he can get increasingly frustrated when this process seems to go so slowly, and the men seem so unwilling. He doesn’t realize he has made it difficult for them to step up because none of them believe they can replace the “expert.” He has based leadership on qualities that he as a Westerner possesses, but which animists may not.

I remember when, in our first year in Yuvinani, the Latin supervisor of the church, Armando, a loving man, insisted, “You should pastor here. The people know so little...” What he meant was that the Mixtecs did not know much Scripture and

had little ability to either read or study it. What he did not yet see was that the Mixtec leaders had already been helping their people to apply Scripture to their lives. They were guiding the church to obey the basic teachings of Christ--to love, to pray, to forgive, to be a body, to give--much more appropriately than many Westerners who were steeped in the Word. It is not necessary to be a Western scholar to serve Christ. It is necessary to love him and obey. As Westerners we must take care not to judge leaders by what they know, when according to Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus, God judges elders by what they do. We should soon leave the church itself to appoint new leaders.

Moving Ahead

So if Western traditions can undermine indigeneity, what do we have to offer? Obviously Christ. His church. His Word. Our love. And the example of our lives. The book of Acts gives us insight. Paul and his fellow apostles entered into Gentile communities with a simple oral witness about Christ: the groundwork laid before his coming (Old Testament background), the deeds of his life, his death, his resurrection. They urged their listeners to respond with repentance, faith in Christ, and baptism, which was seen as an act of God that placed these believers immediately into the church.

Once a church was formed, Paul urged the group to withstand suffering and to act out a simple, loving discipleship. He appointed a local, respected, plural leadership and fully expected the young congregation to carry on the work of leading, teaching, ministering and evangelizing on its own. Paul never stuck around long, nor did he set up rituals or traditions or disciplinary regulations or statutes for these churches. He instructed them through letters, over time, urging them to act faithfully. Roland Allen's theme throughout his seminal book *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* is: Paul never laid down Jewish practice as law, but insisted on the freedom of the Gentiles to follow the Spirit.⁸

One way we can serve believers from animist backgrounds is, like Paul, to first introduce the lordship of Christ and his basic teachings, which are never laws but principles of living that can be immediately understood and applied in any culture. The basic teachings of Christ in the gospels can be presented orally and through the stories of the Old and New Testament. George Patterson, a pioneer of church planting among Hondurans, has summarized them in seven basic principles:

- Repent, believe in Jesus Christ, and be filled with his Spirit.
- Be baptized into his body, and live your new life in the Spirit.
- Love God, your neighbor, those in need, and even your enemy.
- Pray fervently, sincerely, and without ceasing, trusting God for healing and for delivery from the Evil One in all your community.

- Give generously.
- Participate in the body and blood of Christ (the Lord's Supper).
- Make disciples, teaching unbelievers, believers and leaders to obey everything Christ commands.⁹

Upon these seven basic teachings the church is founded. The writers of the New Testament expanded on these gospel teachings, describing obedience in specific circumstances. Thus, the New Testament, focused around the most basic teachings of Christ (Anabaptists refer to this as a focused canon), became our ultimate authority. Too often missionaries, hoping to ease new Christians into obedience, set up requirements and traditions that they deem helpful but that never appear in the teachings of Christ. They do not allow the fledgling church to struggle through its own interpretation of Christ's mandates. The new church obeys the missionary in such matters as church government or methods of evangelism without realizing its own responsibility to apply Christ's mandates to its own culture.

The Great Commission requires us to make disciples who obey everything Christ has commanded. We must show new believers that their first loyalty is to Christ, not to us. We do this by insisting that they find their own ways to repent, to love, to pray, to teach, to be the church together. We walk away from public leadership of their meetings, from positions of authority within their churches, from the establishment of structure or ritual or moral standard. They must clothe, as a community, the teachings of Christ with their own culture. Anabaptists describe this as having a *hermeneutical community*.

The church historically has always recognized three levels of authority:

1. The teachings of Christ and his apostles (the mandates of the New Testament).
2. The practices of the apostles (such as laying on of hands or meeting on Sunday).
3. The traditions of the churches (such as Sunday school or raising hands at conversion).

Obviously the clear teachings of the New Testament are to be obeyed without hesitation. The apostolic practices we find in the New Testament serve as models, especially for new churches, but these cannot be required. Which of us can require a church to "hold all things in common"? At the lowest level of authority we find church tradition, the indispensable glue that holds the community together, but which changes from culture to culture. This is the level of authority which we must discard when we take Christ to new cultures. As beneficial as they have been for our home churches, these familiar practices hold no authority there.

When the gospel first arrived among the Yuvini Mixtecs, it arrived as a simple, oral story of the power and grace of Christ. The teller, Felipe, bore witness with a transformed life: he had stopped drinking. It spread through the family networks of the

village and after one powerful sermon in the town square by Juan, his brother-in-law and first convert, a “Cornelius” that called for “a return to the path of God,” the Spirit brought most of the town to repentance.

In the early days of obedience to the call of Christ, the Yuvinani church spontaneously did amazing things: It called a “board” of respected leaders, following the governmental practices of the town. Serafin, a musician, wrote songs in Mixtec. The believers stopped getting drunk and beating their wives, stopped charging usury on money they lent, stopped “selling” their daughters into marriage for money, and stopped fearing and worshipping spirits. The ritual at the first baptism was to proceed in full native dress down the mountain into the stream below, and in full view of the community on the mountainside above, call out, “Today you are witnesses to my commitment to God.” The Yuvinani church, without outside influence, very quickly took the gospel message and clothed it in Mixtec dress.



Mixtec Baptism

But when a Latin pastor visited and imposed church traditions from the dominant Latin culture, this Mixtec clothing faded away. The songs were forgotten. Preaching was done in Spanish, and the mature leaders who did not read Spanish were replaced by teenagers who did. Fortunately, another Latin pastor, Armando, visited later, and as he was very responsive to indigenous culture, slowly helped reinstate local leaders and Mixtec language in church meetings. It has taken the Yuvinani church twenty years, a full generation, to recover from early influences, but Mixtec prayer and music, teaching and leadership are returning. Now, twenty years later, Yuvinani church members are again preaching the gospel in unreached villages.

Missionary Involvement in Mature Churches

In Yuvinani, the church is only beginning to reproduce. In other fields, we can see what more mature churches coming out of animism look like and learn what role we might play in them. Here again, we apply the supreme missionary model of Christ who left his disciples after only three years, explaining, “It is best for you that I go away... (so that) the Spirit will guide you into all truth.”¹⁰ There is something about our absence, our backing away from a newly-formed congregation that allows the Spirit to lead that congregation into all truth. We may overwhelm the group if we stay, but if we go, the church will be more likely to clothe the gospel in its

own expression and implement Christ's teachings more effectively. Our job is to go backstage at this point. Paul never disassociated from the Gentile churches he started, but he certainly took a back seat after appointing their first leaders. While continuing to disciple the churches through letters, occasional short visits and interaction with their supervisors (Titus, Timothy, Epaphras), Paul trusted the Holy Spirit to work in the congregations while he moved on.

Jacob Loewen saw this principle at work among the Wounaan indigenous people in Panama. After the church's inception, visiting missionaries had limited interaction. They visited Panama only in the summers and did not train the entire group but interacted chiefly with key leaders, especially Aureliano. Nor did they introduce the Bible all at once, or in Spanish. As they helped translate Scripture into the indigenous language, one book a year, they and the leadership allowed the church time to digest new ideas and apply them to their own culture with care.¹¹ Loewen called himself a "fraternal counselor."¹²

In Honduras, where my wife and I were apprenticed into church planting in the same way the Hondurans themselves were, through on-the-job training, our experience was with folk Catholics (syncretistic animists). While most missionaries working among them followed the traditional model, training young men in classrooms to lead churches practically identical to their American counterparts, the work we saw was different. We saw local leaders working through a chain of discipleship in their own villages and churches. The one foreigner involved never pastored a church and rarely preached. He, George Patterson, met with a Honduran team, and the team agreed on plans of action where the Hondurans disciplined other leaders following Paul's example in 2 Timothy 2:2.

The materials they used were developed and printed in-house and were based on a culturally accepted form: the photonovel. They looked cartoonish, and were short, practical, and menu-based, aimed at obedience.¹³ The Honduran leaders involved in these discipleship chains planted several hundred churches, illustrating how a "fraternal counselor" can encourage leaders to disciple others without reliance on formal education.

As important as our role of "fraternal counselors" is our role as advocates for animists within the dominant culture. Like Paul who traveled to Jerusalem to defend the right of Gentile churches to live free of Jewish tradition, so the missionary, summoned to councils or conferences, advocates for the right of the new church to dress the gospel in its own language and custom. I was saddened when, even after some protest, the Mexican Mennonite Brethren Church in 2012 wrote into their constitution definitions for the terms "church" and "pastor" that would make it nearly impossible for their Mixtec brethren to ever join them as equals. The need for advocacy for churches of minority groups embedded in dominant cultures is great.

Because as Westerners we come from such a dominant position, our interaction with churches from animist backgrounds has much to do with limiting ourselves, divesting ourselves, and taking on the role of humble servants, according to the Philippians 2 model. After introducing the gospel and recognizing the leadership that God raises up in the infant church, as Paul did in the book of Acts, we should be more and more absent, our primary role being to advocate for the group and to help leaders grow in their obedience to Christ through deeper interaction with Scripture within their own context. The New Testament describes numerous ministries that flow from the seven basic mandates of Christ: ministries such as healing the sick, caring for the poor, strengthening families, training new leaders, and spreading the good news. As outsiders, we can interact with leaders, acting as mirrors (Jacob Loewen's term)¹⁴ to help them recognize the strengths and lapses in their own cultures, and to help them develop these ministries in their own maturing, indigenous churches.

In this interaction, we do not want to become or choose their leaders. We do not want to equate formal education with discipleship. We do not want to construct their buildings or give structure to their unity because when we do, we default to our traditions, not theirs. We want to insist, over and over, that their call is to obey Christ in fervent love, learning what this means through their own interactions with the words of Christ and his apostles. We can trust the Holy Spirit to do this at his own pace.

If God opens the door for us to witness to animists, we do well to start with repentance from our own ethnocentrism and then move into a recognition that animists have something to teach us about community, about the integration of the spiritual and the physical, and about the possibility of simple obedience to Christ without reliance on Western education or practices. Like Paul, we need to tread lightly, be known more for our absence than our presence, more for our reticence to teach than for our instruction, more for our ability to listen than to lead. As Hiebert says, "The goal of incarnational ministry is not that people understand the gospel. It is that they respond to God's invitation and are transformed by his power."¹⁵ Believers coming out of animism are some of the world's most glorious witnesses to this grace.

Notes

- ¹ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: World Dominion Press, 1912), 136.
- ² "Animism," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 4, 2013, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animism>.
- ³ Gailyn Van Rhee, *Communicating Christ in Animist Contexts* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1996), 20

- ⁴ Jacob A. Loewen, *Culture and Human Values: Christian Intervention in Anthropological Perspective* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975), 134.
- ⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An Anthropological Understanding of How People Change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 16.
- ⁶ Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.
- ⁷ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1996), 297, 302, 331f, 450. This source is used since Anderson and Venn's tracts are out of print.
- ⁸ Allen, *Missionary Methods*.
- ⁹ George Patterson and Richard Scoggins, *Church Multiplication Guide* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2002), 22.
- ¹⁰ John 16:7, 13.
- ¹¹ Loewen, *Culture and Human Values*, 13.
- ¹² Ibid, 208.
- ¹³ Patterson called this "obedience-oriented" curriculum.
- ¹⁴ Loewen, *Culture and Human Values*, 208.
- ¹⁵ Paul G. Hiebert and Eloise Hiebert Meneses, *Incarnational Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 373.

Study Questions

1. The author states: "The Western assumption that people need, individually, to read the printed Scripture to forge a strong, private relationship with God was never recognized as a product of a particular culture." Discuss whether reading printed Scripture as a necessary discipline is a product of a particular culture.
2. Can you think of stories to either confirm or dissent from the author's view that "dependency on Western rituals, finances, training methods, structure and leadership became the norm"?
3. Discuss how the seven commands of Christ have been clothed with particularity in your own culture. Can you see how some at least, are cultural?
4. Do you think repentance is a necessary attitude for Western missionaries among animists? Why or why not?