

READING REPORT
Constructing Local Theologies
by Robert J. Schreiter
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004)

Thesis: When the Christian Gospel penetrates any culture, it will always pick up accretions of the local culture. The idea that there is a pure form of Christianity anywhere in the world is a myth. Culture always colors the Gospel. We can't help it. We are not even cognizant of the coloration. We are able to see it other cultures, but we are largely blind to it in our own cultural "neighborhood." When missionaries and denominational leaders "look over the fence" at the state of Christianity in another culture, they are often dismayed at the local "dialect" of Christianity. This raises several pregnant, seminal questions: 1) Who has the capacity to objectively evaluate the authenticity of the Christian expression in another culture (or for that matter, in one's own!)? 2) Where is the demarcation between authentic and inauthentic Christian expression? 3) How can the Gospel speak to a local culture without losing its potency of genuineness?

The author's context is Roman Catholic. Although he seeks to address these questions with a genuine "catholicity," he dominantly reflects a Roman Catholic perspective. Thus the reader should expect frequent citations of pronouncements from Vatican II and illustrations involving Mariology.

Vocabulary is crucial to this missional endeavor. Out of the mixing bowl of terms like "inculturation" and "indigenous theology," the author chooses the preferred term, "local theology." One of the most dominant motifs of local theology has been Latin American expressions of liberation theology (this is the most common form of Gospel contextualization today). The comparatively prosperous Western observer struggles with the more militaristic expressions of this, especially when it advocates civil disobedience and use of force against oppressive civil authorities. The reader empathizes with the missionaries as they encounter polygamy. Does one require Christian converts to send all but one of the wives away? What if that dooms those displaced wives and their children to lives of poverty, starvation, or prostitution? How much of one's culture must a convert reject to be authentically Christian? Are there cultural elements of Buddhism that a Christian can continue to embrace? How does the Gospel intersect with Asian ancestor worship—or can it? Can a convert remain sufficiently enculturated so as to not become a pariah to one's friends and family? Further, if the rule are later "relaxed," what does that do to the previous converts who made great sacrifices for their courageous separation from culture as demanded by missionaries and local church leaders?

The author is convinced that there are hints of God in every culture, and it is the missionary's great task to mine the ore of culture to find and exploit these gems. At the same time that the missionary is *bringing* Christ to a culture, he is dedicated to *finding* Christ already in the culture. Nevertheless, it is inevitable and appropriate that the Gospel will bring change to any culture: beheading of one's enemies will need to cease,

as will the exposure of baby girls.

This great task requires an acute ear for listening. It requires disciplined tools for listening. Here the author delves into theories and models of communication and proposes a new approach called *semiotics*—the study of signs, i.e., the signage of verbal and non-verbal messages.

Interpretation: To the reader uninitiated to the nuances of acculturation issues and the arcane concepts of semiotics and other cultural assessment approaches, much of the material in this book is arcane. The average reader will feel lost in the middle of this book, grappling with quotations from unfamiliar scholars and esoteric vocabulary. Yet, in these thickets of incomprehensibility, there are glimpses of practical and attainable insight. One does emerge from this book with a deeper appreciation of the challenge of local theology. Indeed, one is compelled to reflect more deeply on one's own grasp of the Gospel. One empathizes with the hurdle every missionary confronts in seeking to not dilute the meaning of the Gospel and yet retain every possible vestige of culture. One feels the tension between *timelessness* and *timeliness*. One appreciates the swing of the pendulum *between cultural romanticism and paternalism*.

I resonate with the author's treatment of contributions of tradition. He insists that "tradition" is not a dirty word. At its best, tradition supplies three great benefits to human community: 1) resources for identify, 2) a system for cohesion and continuity, and 3) resources for incorporating new data and change. (page 105) The development of traditions is somewhat serendipitous. They cannot be manufactured; they arise. There is usually an unexpectedness, an unpredictability, to how and when traditions are birthed. That is a helpful insight to church leaders. As we grapple more and more with the desirability and process of change, these insights must be respected. The author also wisely notes that "[a] tradition that is not celebrated is a tradition that is dying." (109) That is a powerful insight for a church leader. If we possess a valued tradition, we had better be intentional about putting the spotlight on it and celebrating it. Otherwise, we will probably lose it by default.

I believe the author is right when he states that popular religion has far more power than the preacher. (pages 130-131) A preacher can preach and counsel his heart out to virtually no effect if he is calling his listeners away from the tenets of popular religion. Can they even be called "listeners"? Can they really "hear" him? If popular religion is comfortable with token giving, what hope is there for a preacher seeking to teach his people to tithe? My Haitian pastor friend laments that his converts ask him to pray for their sick, but their next contact is with the local witch doctor for a healing amulet. They want to dualistically cover all their bases. How does the preacher combat such dualism? Regarding syncretism, this book prompted me to think more deeply about the authenticity of the Gospel in my own church. To what degree have Western values so permeated our Christianity that we have unconsciously crafted a popular religion that is something other than the "real thing"?

There is a disturbing lack of treatment in this book of the Gospel/culture advances within

evangelical missions. When the author does broaden his perspective beyond the Roman Catholic context, he usually reflects liberal Protestantism, e.g., The World Council of Churches (page 3). This book would merit by inclusion of more evangelical experiences and insights.

Application: In 2005, I was invited to come and preach in a Haitian church in Port-au-Prince. A missionary served as my translator, which, in itself, was frustrating enough to me, but I discovered that a translator may be able to translate words, but he really cannot translate relevance from one culture to another. I was deeply humbled by this experience. I felt that I had utterly failed to communicate relevantly. I am experienced in communicating to my own Pacific Northwest suburban cultures and work very hard at integrating Gospel content in culturally relevant terms. I was brutally confronted with the discovery that yesterday's Snohomish county sermon does not translate easily into tomorrow's Haitian church service. I will never do that again. The people would have been much better served that day to hear from one of their own Haitian preachers. It would take me years of in-country enculturation to even get close to effective communication with these dear folks. I have not yet had the time to "hear" what their problems and fears are. I have no local illustrations. My metaphors and idioms don't work there.

After reading this book, I understand much better what went wrong on that Haitian Sunday. To communicate the Gospel well to another culture requires much listening time, and it also requires the conscious use of wise tools for accurate listening. It is frightening to realize that one can think one is effectively listening, when in fact one may be unconsciously reshaping the messages according to one's own cultural wiring. It is significant that I have several times used the word "unconsciously" in this book review. It takes hard, intentional, strategic work to be conscious about this process of "listening."

As I work toward posturing myself for a season of life doing theological training in overseas schools, I am confronted with my need to develop my tools for listening, for wise contextualizing my Gospel teaching, and for finding the balance between my "tradition" and the pure, unadulterated Gospel of Jesus Christ. I know I won't get it perfect. But I want to get it as close as I can!

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