

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 13

Volume 13 • Number 2 • July 1989

Evangelical Review of Theology



WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission [p. 195](#)

numbers of mainstream social scientists recognize the need to do justice to all three.³² Consequently, given both the textual-interpretive traditions and the value-concerns Christians have to draw on, it would be both sad and ironic if evangelicals failed to offer leadership at this time of paradigm questioning in the social sciences.

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Evangelicals and Human Action Systems

Charles Corwin

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This article, written by someone with vast experience in Asian societies, attempts to answer the question, 'How should the evangelical church in non-Christian societies relate to those human action systems?' and is a complement to the preceding article. The answer given is very clear: namely, that the Asian church will grow to the extent she first disciples her members in all four kinds of human action—adaptive, social, cultural, goal-attaining. By doing this, she both supplies a model for the secular society and also trains her own members for fruitful ministry in society.

Editor

Peer out from the window of an Asian church sanctuary any morning of the week. You will observe Asian society in microcosm. Walking slowly in modest sari, tugging a pre-schooler with her right hand while balancing a basket of bananas on her head with the left, a young mother makes her way to the weekly bazaar. 'Ah! That spot is ideal. Many passers-by. Sell all the bananas by noon and you will have time to return home for another load.' One basketful sold will bring in enough rupees to exchange for today's needed food. A second basketful sold will mean she can help her aging parents. A third sold will add to tuition savings for the child commencing primary school next year. But the police officer waves her on. That spot is government property. She moves to a shady spot under a banyan tree by the road, rearranges the bananas temptingly in the basket, looks pleadingly to passers-by. This will be a good day if she can somehow meet her family's expectations.

Why is the above a microcosm of Asian society? According to the human action systems model of sociologist Talcott Parsons, this woman was performing four functions necessary for survival in any society. First, she was attempting to *adapt* to the environment by (a) producing and selling bananas, (b) doing this as efficiently as possible:

³² Examples from psychology include: Kenneth J. Gergen, *Towards Transformation in Social Knowledge* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982); Rom Harre, David Clarke & Nicola De Carlo, *Motives and Mechanisms: An Introduction to the Psychology of Action* (New York: Methuen, 1985); Donald Polkinghorne, *Methodology for the Human Sciences* (Albany: State University of New York Press); Peter Reason and John Rowan (eds.), *Human Inquiry: A Sourcebook of New Paradigm Research* (New York: Wiley, 1981).

walking to the nearest bazaar, sitting in the shade. Second, she was *maintaining the cultural pattern* of her society by (a) dressing in modest sari, (b) accommodating to the festive occasion of the weekly bazaar. p. 265 Third, she was *integrated* into her society by (a) fulfilling the role expectations of her family as mother and provider, (b) obeying the police officer, (c) satisfying the physiological needs of her family in a lawful manner—selling bananas. Fourth, her personality was striving toward the *attainment of goals*—helping her parents and saving for her child’s education.

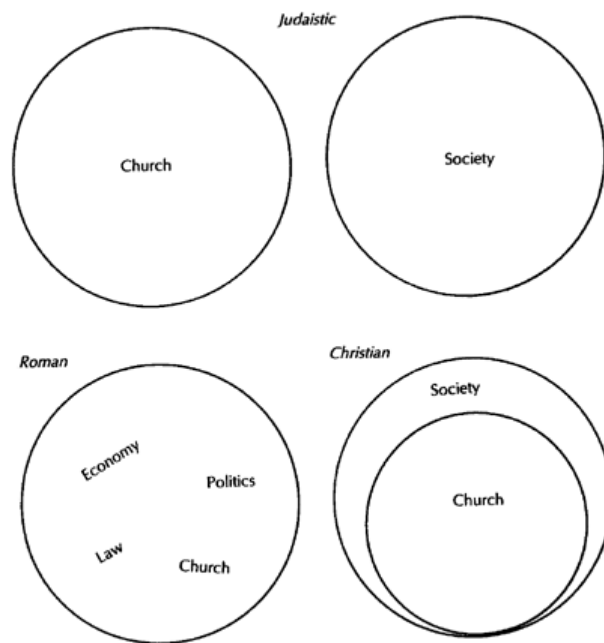
When groups of individuals like the woman above live together within geographical proximity and in such a way as to extend their relationships beyond the life of one generation, you have a *society*. To distinguish one society from another, we use adjectives to describe its critical features, such as ‘industrial society’ or ‘agrarian society’. But societies don’t do anything. It’s the people in them who do. When actions of groups of people become similar in nature to the actions of that one woman, in a more formally predictable manner, they are called the *subsystems* of a society. To sustain itself, the group must somehow relate to the environment in an *adaptive* sense. This involves not only sustaining the behavioural organisms of the group but also adapting to the ‘ultimate reality’ environment—discovering some kind of logical model by which the mind of the group can cope with life’s contradictions. To achieve pattern-maintenance and stimulate pattern change, the *cultural subsystems* must work. To integrate the different parts of a society into a coordinated whole, the *social subsystem* must operate. To achieve goals which gratify the members of a society, the *personalities* of the group must devise plans for action leading toward those goals without violating the social norms or cultural values.

The question I am raising in this article is, ‘How should the evangelical church in non-Christian societies relate to those human action systems?’ What about the church in Asia at this hour? While Asian societies are in ferment and turmoil during the modernization process, is the church to remain ensconced in her cultural and religious sphere? Does the church’s task of bringing the woman and her child into the Kingdom of God preclude involvement in the economic, political and societal subsystems of society? The pendulum of thinking within evangelical circles has swung from social aloofness during the later nineteenth century to social concern of the early p. 266 twentieth century, back to social aloofness in the fifties,¹ then back to social concern during the restless sixties, and now with the strong stress upon church growth, back to social aloofness. But if it can be demonstrated that a sanctified balance in carrying out the cultural mandate while fulfilling the evangelistic mandate will in fact ensure the most solid kind of church growth, the goal of this study will be reached. Sociologists like Max Weber and Talcott Parsons concluded that there is something about Christianity which makes it uniquely suited for assisting societies during the modernization process, especially in the sector we would least expect—enhancing the adaptive capacities of developing societies. As long as the church remained distinct from secular society while developing her own socio-cultural components, she became a great innovative force upon the society in which she found herself. Let’s look closer at this ‘distinct yet innovative’ concept suggested by Parsons and how this tension or ‘balance’ (in that sense i am using the word) was kept by the early church and is presently being kept by Khasi Christians of North East India, whom I visited early in 1978.

¹ The U.S. government, for example, bolstered adaptive subsystems around the world after World War II. So the U.S. evangelical church rightfully concentrated on its cultural sphere—evangelism. Today that situation no longer prevails. The U.S. government is devoting to adaptive subsystems of developing societies a small percentage of the aid she was giving after World War II.

THE HISTORIC CHURCH AND SECULAR SOCIETY

When the Apostle Paul wrote to communities of Christians living throughout the Roman Empire, he clearly distinguished their spheres of existence. These communities were simultaneously in Christ and in Corinth, in Ephesus, in Philippi. By doing this Paul acknowledged what the early Christians already knew and were experiencing. They were in the world but not of it. They were a social system within a society, a kingdom within a kingdom, a sub-culture within a larger culture. With this emphasis Paul broke with two extreme positions. The first was the 'people of God' concept within Judaism. This concept said that an individual could only be a Jew as a total social personality. Jews had no dealings as a people with the Samaritans, the Romans or the Greeks. The other extreme position was that implicitly taught within the Roman Empire—the civil religion concept. This concept held that one's religion or religious activity was part of the over-all cultural subsystem, forming values and articulating norms for society. These values and norms enabled the state to function smoothly. They provided the motivational orientations for individuals as citizens of the state. The civil religion concept rendered *all things* to Caesar, including one's religious devotion. The Christian church, however, became an 'associational religious group, independent of any ascriptive community, either ethnic or territorial. Its focus was specifically religious, P.267 the salvation of the individual soul ... but one could be both a Christian and an Athenian or Roman on the level of societal participation, a member of both the Church and an ethnic-territorial community'.² A diagram of the three positions—the Judaistic, the Roman and the Christian would appear something like this:



p. 268

From the different metaphors employed by Jesus to describe the Christian's relation to the world (e.g. salt, light, investor, builder), from the teaching of Paul, from the many accounts of the early church's stance before civil authorities, we learn that the church, though a subculture within a plurality of sub-cultures in society, nevertheless has a responsibility to the society in which it finds itself. The first responsibility is redemptive and reconciliatory. After a brief time of prayer for receiving the divine enablement, a little

² Talcott Parsons, *The System of Modern Societies* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1971) pp. 30–31.

band of Christians moves out from the church sanctuary to conduct open air meetings during the weekly bazaar. Let's assume the Christians will be able to buy several bananas from the woman under the banyan tree. They will intersect her world at the *adaptive* or economic level. But as they sing songs and testify, they will intersect her *cultural* world, describing in new symbols and style how she can become cognitively re-oriented to ultimate reality in a way that will be more satisfying and fulfilling than she has hitherto experienced. If they become her advocates, asking the traffic officer not to enforce the antiquated law, they will intersect her world at the *social* level. And finally, if one of the band is a teacher at the local primary school, that Christian will intersect the woman's world at the *goal-attainment* level. *The thesis of this article is that the Christian church in Asia can grow best in Asian society if she first disciplines her members so that they excel in all four kinds of human action—adaptive, social, cultural, goal-attainment. By doing this she will provide a model for secular society by her corporate life while equipping and sending forth her members with capabilities to improve the quality of life of that society.*

The church has never been a society in the strictest sense, in that her members have continued in the world as artisans, workers, professionals to meet their adaptive needs. Neither has the church maintained a law-enforcement system to sustain its norms. But she has been a sub-culture, with her own system of beliefs, system of expressive symbols (such as her liturgy), and system of values. But as the individual Christian is shaped by these cultural components, as he internalizes the church's system of beliefs and values, he becomes a change-agent in society, a transformer of culture. This is not an option. The church must always assume a prophet's role in culture, transcending it every minute of time while contending with it to precipitate a crisis of culture. This is what Parsons meant: to the degree the church maintained a consistent differentiation from the social systems with which she was inter-dependent, she became an effective innovative force in the development of the total socio-economic system. As Tillich remarked, secular society, like Pilate, is continually asking the [p. 269](#) question, 'What is truth?' but incapable of accepting the church's answer. For if it did it would cease being a secular society. But the church must be equipped and ready to answer that question in every generation. Part of that equipping involves training its members for interaction with all four of those components of societal action. To the extent she has done this, the church has grown and society has been enriched.

For example, in order to *adapt* to his environment, the Apostle Paul maintained his companions and himself by making tents. In his adaptation to that part of his environment called 'ultimate reality' Paul had to restructure his thinking after encountering Christ. History, Judaism, his own inner struggles had to make sense. This they did after he developed his own Pauline theology as articulated in Romans and Galatians. Second, as much as he conscientiously could, Paul tried to uphold the *cultural values* of the Jewish community to which he belonged. Though charged with flouting Jewish custom, he carefully avoided doing this ([Acts 24:11, 12; 25:8](#)). In fact, he took the stance in court that he was merely maintaining the pattern subscribed to by all good Jews—believing everything that is in accordance with the Law and the Prophets ([Acts 24:14](#)). Third, Paul was integrated into Roman society by observing Roman law. During the series of trials in Acts, he asserted that he had not acted contrary to Roman law ([Acts 25:8](#)), that he was a Roman citizen in full standing. Regarding *goal-attainment*, we see Paul's personality developing plans for evangelizing the then known world, out in concentric circles from Jerusalem to Illyricum on the west coast of Greece.

When Paul and the early Christians impinged on society, they were considered threats to society along those four components of societal action. First they affected *adaptive processes* or economies of those societies as the fortune-tellers and silversmiths attested

([Acts 16:19; 19:25](#)). In the area of *culture* Paul was seen as a threat by both secular and religious leaders. Wherever he went there arose ‘no small disturbances concerning the Way’ ([Acts 19:23](#)). They were, in the eyes of their accusers, ‘upsetting the whole world’. Certain of these charges were true: ‘gods made with hands are no gods at all’ is the message society was getting from Paul. So Paul’s accusers attacked him in the cultural sphere. However, to get a conviction they had to press their attack in the *social* sphere, laying charges against him before civil magistrates. The civil magistrates were at a loss to try Paul’s case, for cultural matters were beyond their pale. However, as Gallio, Festus and Agrippa testified, Paul was not upsetting Roman laws or norms. Paul believed he was fully integrated into Roman society and consistently [p. 270](#) preferred to be tried in civil courts rather than religious. But because of their *overall goals*—securing the good favour of Nero in their provincial governorships—the procurators were desirous of doing the Jews a favour, so held Paul in custody ([Acts 24:27](#)). Hence we see Paul’s evangelistic activities affecting all four components of secular societal action.

Moving into the modern period, we notice that to the degree the church kept herself in tension between being in the world and not of it, she became an innovative force in the total socio-economic systems of modern societies. Parsons makes this telling point in discussing the pre-modern foundations of modern societies. He says:

Christian culture—including its secular components—was able to maintain clearer and more consistent differentiation from the social systems with which it was interdependent than either of its forebears (Hebrew and Greek cultures) had been. Because of such differentiation from society, Christian culture came to serve as a more effective innovative force in the development of the total sociocultural system than had any other cultural complex that had yet evolved.³

For example, in the *integrative process* the church became a model for societies by integrating people into her fellowship regardless of ethnic or territorial background. This egalitarian tendency of the church in non-egalitarian societies has on occasion caught the attention of social reformers seeking for indigenous models. Let me cite one case. Japanese Minyusha historians of the Meiji era (1868–1911) began fulminating against diehard oligarchs in power trying their best to suppress democratic pressures mounting from below. One such historian, Takekoshi Yosaburo, writing in the 1890s, discovered in the fledgling Japanese church just the model needed for Japanese society:

The society which Takekoshi saw beginning to emerge out of the destruction of the old order was the ‘popular society’ ... It was basically an egalitarian society, where no one enjoyed special privileges, where all enjoyed the same rights, and where membership in society was open to all on an equal basis. The old Japan had been divided into ‘artificial classes’, based on exclusiveness, heredity, and tradition, but all this had been overthrown by the Restoration and the post-Restoration reforms. The new Japan was becoming a pluralistic society made up of voluntary associations, in which leaders were chosen on the basis of talent and ability, in which all members enjoyed the same rights and obligations, and in which all members cooperated because they joined as a matter of free [p. 271](#) choice. (*Takekoshi even went so far as to suggest that the basic social paradigm was a church organization.*) [italics mine]⁴

³ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁴ Peter Duus, ‘Whig History, Japanese Style: The Minyusha Historians and the Meiji Restoration’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, May 1974, p. 428.

In the *adaptive-upgrading* process the church also served as a model, for a person could be both a medical doctor or seller of purple while functioning as a lay-evangelist or deaconess in the church. Within the church itself there was a process of *value-generalization*, so that all the detailed laws of Judaism could be subsumed under the general law of love. Thus *pattern-maintenance* became easier; what mattered was not an external rite but a new life-style. Secular states influenced by the Protestant church within them began to generalize their norms, narrowing them down to the prohibition to exploit others as a mental set, not detailed laws. England led the world in this process when she gave full citizen's rights to her religious dissenters.

Much of what Parsons is saying about the relation of the Christian church to the development of modern societies came dramatically alive for me when I visited a so-called 'people's movement to Christ' among the Khasi tribal peoples of northeast India during January 1978. Welsh Presbyterian missionaries arrived in this area in 1840. While preaching the gospel to these primitive people they also directed their activities along all four components of human action—adaptive, cultural, social, goal-attainment. Churches were built, hospitals erected, schools established, the language reduced to writing. The Rev. Thomas Jones is called 'the father of Khasi Literature' and is credited with 'laying down the basis for modern Khasi literature'.⁵ Today over half of the million Khasi people of Meghalaya State are professing Christians. In the capital, Shillong, large Presbyterian churches can be seen everywhere. Adjacent these churches are their own church-staffed primary, secondary and tertiary schools. A large number of the top government posts, including those of the two members of the Parliament in Delhi, are filled by Khasi Christians. The agrarian Khasi are not a wealthy people, but there are no beggars. The literacy rate is higher than that of much of India. Thus the momentum of this people's movement has been sustained.

The Khasi scholar Dr. Hamlet Bareh, in his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of Gauhati, Assam, in 1967, included a poem written by an unnamed Khasi. It reveals how the Rev. John p. 272 Roberts (d. 1908) demonstrated Parson's 'distinct yet innovative' balance.

In Memoriam

Teacher revered, I come to strew
Thy mouldered grave with broken flowers
Which once were gathered neath thy bowers
In days serene of long ago.

Oh soul profound, of mould divine
With sage-like mien in every breath
How could thy voice be choked in death
And we left orphaned to repine?

For this our land, the ancient home
Of Ignorance and sin and shame,
Unknown in records past of fame,
Was graced and honoured by thy tomb.

Nor could thy life and toil severe
For Khasi's weal be spent in vain;

⁵ Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People* (doctoral dissertation published privately; Naba Mudran Private Ltd., 1967) p. 398.

For they in God's own presence reign
His call to sacrifice who hear.

Nay stilled for once in death's embrace
Thy voice yet lives in pious hearts,
'Midst torches bright of science and arts
Our much-loved Khasi which emblaze.

The model-preacher in our land,
Whose words did burn with Gospel's fire;
Prepared to quench the devil's pyre,
The founder of the Prophets' Band.

Oh father, who can fill thy place—
For, like some tall proud cedar's fall
Thy death—a shocking, sudden call
Had left a vacant, empty space.

And yet, thou art alive—e'en now
Thy spirit still pervades our land
Where people met in holy band
God's wondrous ways and love to know.

Wherever men are held spelt-bound
By Khasi youth who, at thy feet
Had found the Gospel manna sweet
Thy echoes there do still resound. p. 273

Roberts:—Still rings that grand dear name
Which once had cheered us in our way,
Nor can oblivion's baleful sway
While Khasi last, eclipse the fame.

Bareh says, 'In admiration and affection of John Roberts, the verses reflect the deep sense of gratitude of a Khasi man to the missionaries for the part they played in furthering education and for undertaking a selfless job for the dissemination of learning and more for harbingering the Light of the World to shine in the dark.'⁶

We cannot over-simplify the main task of the church into 'church-growth'. The Acts model and the historic church demonstrate that Christian involvement with the secular world reveals the relevance of the Gospel and becomes preparatory for the evangelistic thrust.

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⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 439–440.