

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 17

Volume 17 • Number 3 • July 1933

Evangelical Review of Theology

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

EDITOR: BRUCE J. NICHOLLS



Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS

who have no Bible, no written language, (which many of them have not), no ministers, no good civil government, nor any of those advantages which we have. Pity, therefore, Humanity, and much more Christianity, call loudly for every possible exertion to introduce the gospel amongst them. [p. 320](#)

Reflections on the Enculturation/Social Justice Issue in Contemporary Mission

Frederick S. Downs

*Reprinted with permission of the American Baptist Historical Society
from The American Baptist Quarterly VIII/4 December 1989*

In this thought-provoking article, the author reflects on the issue of enculturation and/or social justice in the context of Carey and missions today. He argues that Carey sided with Paul against James on this issue. He compares Carey's attack on caste with the protests of the Dalit Movement in India today.

Editor

One of the oldest missiological issues for Christians is the relationship between faith and culture. It was implicit in the James/Paul controversy of the apostolic period. From the perspective of this paper the issue can be described in the terms of varying responses to the question: is there a normative Christian culture? James argued that there was: Palestinian Jewish culture. Therefore it was necessary for anyone desiring to become a Christian first to become a Jew. Paul argued that there was no normative Christian culture. Christianity was a culturally pluralistic faith. At the time Paul's argument prevailed. In the history of Christianity, however, the voice of James has continued to be heard, and there have always been those, perhaps the majority, who have acted on the assumption that there is, in fact, a normative Christian culture into which converts must be initiated.

CAREY ON THE SIDE OF PAUL?

To give an example, among those involved in missionary work in nineteenth-century India there was a heated debate on the subject. One side argued the case of James, the other the position of Paul; and as usual there were the Peters trying to establish a compromise position! In effect the Jameses argued that in order for the people of India to become Christians they must first embrace western culture. [P. 321](#) They had some persuasive arguments; the Jameses always do. The main stumbling block for Indian people who might otherwise wish to become Christian was the traditional culture, particularly the caste system. Caste and traditional Indian culture were so closely related, it was argued, that the only way Christian missions could succeed was by doing everything possible to destroy that culture. The best way to do this, they believed, was through the introduction of English education—or, at least, western education in the vernacular medium. When exposed to the obviously superior western culture, traditional Indian culture would crumble. In the pre-Darwinian days they placed great emphasis upon

western science as an important ally in proving the superiority of western-Christian culture. One of the interesting things about the arguments used by the Jameses was that among those elements in western culture described as superior to Indian culture were the writings of pre-Christian Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle! It was not until the twentieth century that this perception began to change in light of the increasing secularization of western society, two world wars and the replacement of Christian values with materialistic ones. Western materialism is, in fact, a far greater obstacle to the world mission of the Church than other religious traditions have ever been.

Fortunately, there were always missionaries who took the side of Paul. Among them were a number of Baptists. William Carey, the most influential of all Baptist missionaries, strongly opposed those who worked on the assumption that evangelization could take place only after traditional Indian culture had been destroyed. He argued that that culture should be baptized rather than destroyed. He believed that evangelism would suffer if people were taken out of their cultural context and made aliens in their own land. Their culture should be Christianized, not destroyed; and certainly not replaced by the Enlightenment-inspired forms of western culture being promoted by influential persons within the British Indian establishment. One of the most radical expressions of this conviction was Carey's refusal to adopt a practice then common among missionaries, that of renaming converts with so-called 'Christian' names. Sometimes the new names given were Biblical ones, but often they were simply western names like Smith or Brown or Farwell (all names given to early converts in North East India). Carey refused to do this, even when the converts' names included the name of a Hindu deity. The first convert of the Serampore mission was named Krishna Pal. He retained his name after baptism at Carey's insistence despite the criticism of other missionaries. Similarly the Serampore Christians were encouraged to retain [p. 322](#) their traditional dress, including religiously significant apparel such as saffron robes and the sacred thread which identified higher caste Hindus.

At least those of the ecumenical missionary tradition ('main line' is an awkward expression, especially in the contemporary drug culture!) have now come down firmly on the side of Paul, and Carey. They recognize that there is no single Christian culture, and that the Christian faith has been and must be incarnated in many different cultures. When this enculturation does not take place the church is not likely to be vital or to make a significant contribution to the life of the society of which it is a part.

There is a problem, however. Its extreme form, what might be described as ultra-Paulinism, has tended to see culture as sacred. Instead of one normative culture being sacralized, all cultures, particularly the Third World cultures, are made sacrosanct. Christianity must be poured into the traditional cultural molds, in no way altering or challenging them. Needless to say this undermines a prophetic role. In fact there are always elements in any culture, including those out of which the missionaries themselves have come, which apparently are not reconcilable with the gospel. But is it possible to affirm a culture while denying important aspects of it? There are two dimensions of the cultural contexts within which missionaries in the Third World work that have been called into question. One is the religious. How does one perceive the relationship between Christianity and other faith systems? One could write a very long paper on that subject alone. Some have seen the relationship as one of substitution: the new faith for the old. Others have viewed it as a matter of fulfilling the best in the old through the new, a dialogical enrichment.

THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

But I would like to concentrate on the second problematic dimension: the social. From the time of their arrival on the scene missionaries have called into question certain social practices of the indigenous culture on the grounds that they were irreconcilable with the gospel. I am not simply talking about puritanical missionaries insisting that women should be dressed in accordance with western concepts of decency. Even that question is not as simple as it seems, as we will see below. What I have in mind are practices like those which William Carey, the great advocate of enculturation, sought to have abolished in India: the burning of widows alive on the funeral pyres of their husbands (*sati*), the killing of female infants, or caste untouchability. **P. 323**

While very few people, including the ultra-Paulinists, would want to say that Christians should not have attempted to have such social practices abolished, an important question remains. Are cultures wholes that will be destroyed if any important element within them is removed? Is enculturation irreconcilable with social reform, let alone radical social transformation? This is particularly a problem for persons of the ecumenical tradition. Ironically, those who have been most insistent on affirming value in Third World cultures are also those with the strongest commitment to social justice. In any event, there is no way that the problem of social change can be avoided. It cannot be avoided by announcing, as some do, that we will simply concern ourselves with preaching the 'pure' gospel, and not confuse matters by referring to social issues. Historically, certainly in India, when the gospel has been preached, social change takes place whether or not the preachers intended it to happen.

Let me illustrate this in relation to the question of women's dress that I introduced above. In southwestern India, Anglican and English Congregational missionaries began working among a people called the Nadars. The Nadar women did not wear any clothing above their waists. Shocked, the missionaries devised a simple blouse for converts. They were surprised at how quickly the idea caught on and how even Hindu Nadar women began wearing the blouses. They were also pleased when large numbers of Nadars began to become Christian. But bewilderment followed when they found themselves in the midst of a full-fledged crisis. Nadar women were being attacked in the streets and the upper garments forcefully removed. The Nadar men counterattacked and riots followed.

About this time the missionaries finally realized what was really happening. It had nothing to do with female modesty. The Nadars had always had their own standards of decency, they were simply not the same as those of the missionaries. What in fact was going on was a social revolution. In that part of India the higher castes prohibited lower caste women from wearing upper garments. Only those of high social status could do so. Thus when the missionaries put blouses on the Nadar women it was understood to be a revolutionary affirmation of their human dignity and equality. The gospel was perceived to have liberated them from social degradation, even though that had not been the explicit intention of those who preached it to them.

The largest of the mass movements to take place in India was that among the tribal peoples of Chota Nagpur in the second half of the nineteenth century. The tribals had been exploited by outsiders to such an extent that they were in danger of losing all their land. In that culture **p. 324** the people's identity was closely related to the land much as the identity of Jews is related to the land of Israel. Thus the people were not only becoming impoverished landless labourers, they were also losing their human identity. At this point Christian missionaries, first Lutherans and then Roman Catholics, began to help them. They advised them on their legal rights and led an agitation to preserve and even restore their land. The gospel made the people human once again. The hill tribes of North East India had a similar understanding of what happened as the result of the preaching of the gospel. Some years ago I met one of the first converts from a village in that region. He was

a very old man, illiterate and uneducated, but mentally very alert. Through an interpreter I talked with him about what it had been like in the old days. I then asked him a question: 'What did the coming of Christianity mean to your people?' His answer was simple: 'Before we knew Christ we were animals; now we are humans.'

The point is that irrespective of the consciousness or intention of the person proclaiming it, the gospel has social implications and very often brings about social change. I have presented only an illustrative fragment of the large body of evidence supporting this hypothesis. None of the mass movements to Christianity that have taken place in that country can be understood apart from the dynamics of social change. Yet it is strange that this reality is often completely overlooked or depreciated both among those engaged in missionary work and among Third World Christians themselves. This creates a dangerous situation, because when an important aspect of reality is ignored it tends to exert an uncontrolled influence. When the social implications of the gospel are not recognized, the social tends to become secularized if not paganized.

There is a tendency among Christians in India, for instance, to see their faith as relating almost exclusively to so-called spiritual matters, i.e., the transcendent dimension. Salvation is getting to heaven. The Kingdom of God is understood to mean the heavenly kingdom. It has nothing to do with this earth. And yet these same Christians are aware that there are serious social problems in their churches. The continuance of behaviour based upon caste attitudes brought with them from Hinduism into the church is one of the most serious. Church affairs are disrupted by conflicts among groups with different caste backgrounds, conflicts which are often taken to the secular courts for resolution. Large amounts of money are spent in litigation that could have been used in the exercise of mission, and the unity of the church is broken, seriously compromising its witness in the process. Nearly all Indian Christians will say that such behaviour is inappropriate even [p. 325](#) while they practise it. There is a kind of schizophrenia among the Christians that is gradually sapping the vitality of the church.

The reason for this situation is that Christians do not understand that the gospel relates both to the transcendent and social dimensions of life. Christians in India thus do not understand that the gospel has liberated them from caste and that continuing to practise it is not simply an unfortunate example of human weakness but is a serious denial of the gospel itself. Interestingly enough, members of other faith communities often understand this better than Christians do. When confronted with the claims of Christ they will time and time again cite the social sins of the Christians as their reason for rejecting those claims.

Given this situation a number of Third World Christians are beginning to turn to theologies that emphasize the social dynamics of the gospel. The best known are probably the liberation theologies of Latin America. This is not simply an academic exercise for them, nor is it the result of biblical proof-testing. The very people from among whom the churches of the Third World have drawn most of their members during the past one hundred and fifty years are now being approached by advocates of other ideologies. The most potent of these claimants for their allegiance and commitment are the Marxists. This is because the Marxists speak forcefully and relevantly about the social injustices of which these people are the victims. It is not difficult to point out that the Marxists are as one-sided in their approach as the pious Christians. In their emphasis upon the social they completely ignore the potency of the transcendent. They also ignore the significant contributions the Christian mission has made to social liberation. While that is true, for an increasingly large number of people the ideology which promises liberation from the social hell in which they now live will be preferable to one which prioritizes deliverance from an anticipated transcendent hell.

FROM CAREY TO DALIT THEOLOGY

In India today many people familiar with theological developments believe that in the near future the most potent ideological force will be that of something called Dalit Theology. Dalit is the name that is being used for India's most oppressed social groups, what used to be called the outcastes or untouchables. Previous efforts to create a genuinely Indian Christian theology have tended to ignore the fact that some 80% of the Christians of that country come from a Dalit background. Theologies that have attempted to build upon the philosophical Hindu **P. 326** culture of the Brahmins and higher castes have not found acceptance among the ordinary Christians. The people seem to prefer a conservative western theology to that. The Brahmins represent their oppressors. There are several explanations that may be given for the Brahmin-culture approach to theologizing in India. First, is the fact that it was mainly Brahmin converts who were doing it. Though their numbers are very small, their influence is disproportionate because they have often been the best educated, a class of people used to the reflective process. Another reason for using the Brahmin cultural categories is perhaps an unconscious attempt to make Christian theologians more respectable among the Indian intelligentsia.

The Dalit theology will not be an Indian version of Latin American Liberation theology which utilizes a Marxist analytical framework. Many of those involved in the Dalit movement believe that Marxism has betrayed the Dalits by becoming the ideology of the middle class, of the landed castes rather than of the landless Dalits, the poorest of the poor in India. At present there is a strong Dalit movement developing in India without any commitment to an existing religious or ideological option. There is real concern among Christians involved in this movement that a theology must be developed that provides a basis for Christian participation, but does not do so by separating Christian Dalits from those related to other religious communities. There is considerable anxiety on this score in part because Christians lost a similar opportunity some fifty years ago. At that time there was a strong movement of Dalits (then called the Depressed Classes) under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkhar. Dr. Ambedkhar became convinced that there was no future for his people under Hinduism because the caste system was so inextricably connected with it. He began looking for options. Christianity was among them. In the end he rejected that option because as Christians the Dalits would become divided—divided along denominational and caste lines. The unity which provided the people with their political strength would be lost. In due course Ambedkhar led his people into Buddhism.

Serious questions can be asked about whether movements to Christianity of such a coldly calculated sort would be legitimate, but that is not the point I am making here. The point is that Christians must bring to their exercise of mission an understanding of salvation in Christ that is relevant to the contexts in which the people live to whom they proclaim it. The context of those who are doing the proclaiming is irrelevant. For large portions of the world, the largest part, the context is conflict and injustice. Unless the church proclaims a liberating word in this situation people will listen to other voices. **p. 327**

But it is not simply a matter of missiological strategy. One thing that the new movements in the Third World have made quite clear is that affluent Christians have unconsciously tended to read out of the gospels the radical social critique that is found there. Hence we can learn from Third World Christians, now the majority of Christians, that we must not only be relevant to context, but true to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The Great Commission points us to the world, not out of it.

ENCULTURATION OR SOCIAL CHANGE

This brings us back to the questions with which we began. Is there not a fundamental difference between those who begin with the concept of incarnation and emphasize enculturation as essential to the relevance of the gospel, and those who begin with the concept of liberation and emphasize a prophetic critique of culture to the extent that culture provides the ideology for oppressive social systems? There certainly is tension between advocates of these two points of view in India. The former wish to retain for Christianity the values of the spiritual riches that have been developed in India from ancient times; the latter see any attempt to promote such enculturation as irrelevant at best, and downright dangerous at worse. The coincidence of the demonology of fundamentalists and radicals is interesting. For the former, non-western faith and culture systems are snares of Satan; for the latter they are the opiate used by the ruling classes to perpetuate oppressive systems.

Do we have to make a choice between enculturation and commitment to social justice? Some think that we do and perhaps they are right. But people like Carey didn't think so. They believed that Christianizing a culture did not mean leaving it as it had been. Certain elements in the Indian culture of his day were not compatible with the gospel in Carey's view. One of them was caste exclusiveness. Thus while converts could keep caste names and dress, they could not practice caste exclusiveness in their relations with each other. He insisted that all should eat together on social occasions as well as at Holy Communion (something not done in some churches in India at that time), and he encouraged inter-caste marriage. Thus, in the communion service following the baptism of a Brahmin named Krishna Prasad, he took the cup after Krishna Pal had drunk from it (single communion cups were used by Baptists then, a very powerful symbol in India where inter-caste dining was and even today is thought by the orthodox to be polluting) from the hands of Krishna Pal who came [p. 328](#) from a lower caste background. Later on Prasad married the daughter of Pal.

It is not always easy to know where to draw the line, however. Is monogamy a Christian or simply a western cultural norm? What should be done if a person with several spouses wishes to become a Christian? If one takes the view, as many missionaries have and do, that polygamy is incompatible with Christianity what happens to the wives of a convert? If he must choose one wife and put aside the others, what will happen to them in their cultural context? In some cultures rejected wives become either slaves or prostitutes, neither option compatible with Christian values as most of us understand them.

It is not always easy for us to know where the values of our culture end and the values of the gospel of Jesus Christ begin. But it is necessary to make the effort. If you alienate people from their culture you destroy their identity and very often their sense of self-worth. This will never lead to the establishment of a strong, witnessing church. At the same time the church will become the victim of its culture (this can be well documented in this country) if it is unprepared to see the gospel as in one sense a liberator from cultural bondage. What is self-affirming and therefore humanizing in a culture and what is oppressive? How is it possible to affirm the one and root out the other? What, for that matter, *is* culture? Is it a fixed entity, a whole that will be brought down if any part of it is denied? Is it static or dynamic?

Part of the reason why there seems to be conflict between the enculturators and the liberators is a static understanding of culture that both seem to hold. Culture is defined by the past, by its roots in time and in certain conceptual horizons. Hence the one hesitates to change anything and the other rejects everything as oppressive. In fact culture is a living reality, constantly changing. Its horizons are fluid and not static. Culture like a living organism can be declared clinically dead when change no longer takes place in it. Perhaps

the important question is not whether or not change, even radical change, can take place without destroying a culture and consequently dehumanizing those who had it as their own. Perhaps the important question is how the change takes place. If it is forced on a people from outside, intentionally or unintentionally, it is likely to be destructive of human values. However, if it takes place from inside, as something embraced and promoted by the people themselves as both necessary and desirable, it is likely to strengthen, not weaken, a culture. This is the role that Christianity has played in its best moments. It brings God as revealed in Jesus Christ within a culture, helping people to see a new liberating, changing possibility for them.

Dr. Frederick S. Downs is Head of the Department of Church History at the United Theological College, Bangalore, India. [p. 329](#)

Baptists and the Transformation of Culture: A Case Study from the Career of William Carey

John D. W. Watts

Published with permission, Review and Expositor, No. 1, 1992

The interaction between cultures which is involved in the very acts of mission may be presumed to affect the cultures of both the sending and the receiving countries. It certainly has an effect on the missionary and the missionary family. The extent to which missionaries consciously involve themselves in the support and development of the culture in which the mission work is done, of course, varies. Many missionaries have held themselves apart from the cultures in which they worked, sometimes taking on the attitude of the occupying powers, where the work is done in a colony. Sometimes missionaries have used their preaching to teach the inferiority of 'heathen' cultures while magnifying their own home culture as synonymous with 'Christian' values. But a few, like William Carey and his colleagues at Serampore, West Bengal, involved themselves in the revival of a native culture and left a lasting contribution to the culture they served in addition to the churches they founded.

The monuments and testimonies to the contribution that Carey made to Bengali culture and education are impressive even today. This article grows out of my brief stay of three years as professor in the theology department of Serampore College, 1972-75. The cordial welcome and hospitality accorded me and my family at Serampore have left a lasting impression. An even deeper impression was left by the experience of walking on the ground of the college campus and surrounding areas, hallowed as the place where the Serampore trio, Carey, Ward and Marshman, laboured so productively. This article represents another enduring impression from those years, supported by many conversations with Indian people, Christian and Hindu alike, who spoke in reverent tones of what Carey had done for India and for Bengal particularly.