

# EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

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## Evangelical Review of Theology

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obedience of faith*

So the evangelistic message to the neo-pagans must show that, according to the Old and New Testament, the people of God are the people on the way to the great fulfilment, the people who have a wonderful future to look forward to, a messianic people which does not despair about the state of the world because it knows that this world is in the hands of the God who says: 'I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save' ([Isaiah 46:4](#)).

In closing I would make two remarks. The first is that evangelization of Europe's neo-pagans is so urgent, so difficult that it ought to have the highest priority among the tasks of the church. How many of our theologians are working in this field? How many pastors? Far too few. What courses concerning neopaganism are given in our theological faculties and in our lay training institutes?

My second remark is that we are now in a situation in which for many Europeans, especially the younger ones, a meeting with the gospel comes as a new discovery. They thought they knew it, but they find that it is vastly more relevant than they thought. Let us hope that in a Europe which has become mission territory, the churches may become in the best sense 'younger' churches.

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**The late Dr. Visser 'T. Hooft, formerly General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, delivered this address to the West European Consultation on Evangelism sponsored by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in Frankfurt-Main, Germany, September 1977. p. 348**

# **The Gospel as Truth in a Secular Society**

## **The Three Levels of Mission in New Zealand**

**Harold Turner**

*Printed with permission from New Vision New Zealand, Bruce Patrick ed., (Auckland, New Vision New Zealand, 1993) pp. 61–68.*

*The author explores the importance of the surface cultures of individual behaviour and social customs and the deep culture of foundation truths and the interaction between them for evangelism in New Zealand society. He illustrates his thesis from the rise and fall of Marxism.*

Editor

Christian missions have been part of New Zealand's history in the modern period, initially as missions to the Maori people. After these missions became Maori churches, crosscultural concern was redirected into foreign missions. New Zealand personnel eventually served in every continent of the world. For a small country we have a notable record. Besides denominational mission agencies, the list of independent missionary societies or local representatives of overseas societies runs into many scores.

## HOLISTIC OVERSEAS MISSIONS

In most of this overseas work there has been a holistic approach in the sense that the gospel was addressed to all three levels of human existence: the individual personal, the public social, and the deeper cultural. Such a comprehensive approach was demanded by the nature of the local situation. Missionaries had to start at the first level, with sole converts or small groups. They also had to address the second level: social systems and the structures of marriage, the place of women, the treatment of disease, pay-back revenge, and many other areas demanding reform in the direction of God's kingdom.

Beyond these two levels missionaries [p. 349](#) had to address the basic culture itself. Language is the first expression of the basic culture. The local language was learned, given written form, and used for translating the Scriptures. This study was extended by the use of anthropology to help reach the very roots of a people's life. Missionaries were pioneers in the development of the modern sciences of linguistics and anthropology. They then brought the gospel to bear on the roots of the culture. They were engaged in what I am calling 'deep mission'.

## LEARNING FROM OUR MISSIONARIES

The holistic approach we have learned abroad in other societies and cultures offers a radical critique of what we have been doing in New Zealand. Here the evangelism of the 'evangelical' and the more recent 'charismatic' constituencies has been focused on level 1, the individual, as its chief emphasis. Christian bookstores concentrate on this and on the nurture of the personal religious life. The more 'liberal' constituency, especially in the mainline churches, is much more involved in the reform of social systems and structures, level 2 of our existence, especially through its focus on issues such as rights, ecology, peace, feminism, etc. For some two decades evangelicals have shown increasing concern for social transformation. Brian Hathaway's *Beyond Renewal, The Kingdom of God* provides striking evidence of this.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless there continues to be a degree of polarization between the individual and the social emphases within our Christian community, polarization that has been less evident on overseas mission fields.

While our missionaries overseas study world-views and the basic assumptions of tribal and other cultures, level 3, in order to bring a biblical critique to bear at this level, concern in New Zealand to bring the gospel to bear on the very roots of our culture has been almost totally absent. There are various reasons for this.

## SURFACE CULTURE AS SOCIAL CUSTOMS

First, we operate with a surface view of culture, the popular view that limits culture to our various traditions: foods, clothing, housing, entertainment and parties, music, art styles, greetings, births, marriages and funerals, anniversaries, etc. I call this surface or expressive culture. It is equivalent to social customs rather than to any deeper basic worldview. 'Cultural presentations' consist of music, drama, dance, costumes, foods, ways of greeting, all of which are interesting to others and contribute to the self-identity of groups. These presentations may reflect the original root culture only little or not at all. To that extent they restrict the basic meaning of culture to social customs. So we come to believe, to quote from an Auckland mayor's publicity, that 'all challenges of a cultural nature can be resolved by fostering understanding, communication and working together

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Hathaway, *Beyond Renewal, The Kingdom of God*, (Milton Keynes, UK: Word, 1990).

with a love for all in our community'. This [p.350](#) is superficial, but Christians fall for it like everyone else.

To illustrate further, consider the very distinctive 'cultures' of the English, the Welsh, the Scots and the Irish within the one society and nation of the United Kingdom. Here in New Zealand these surface culture variations of Britain survive and are consciously nurtured. To these have been added surface cultures of Dalmatia, the Netherlands, Greece and many others. These people are however all Europeans. Beneath level 2 variations of social custom they are Europeans who share a common deeper-level, level 3, European tradition and worldview. The two levels are quite different.

From the Maori viewpoint they are all 'Pakeha' (foreigner). Pakeha is primarily a cultural term rather than a racial one. New Zealanders will become even more conscious of our common surface culture when we see the impact of the current immigration of quite different Asian cultures, and understand what lies below the surface cultural variations of Taiwanese, Japanese, Indians and others. An Asian worldview has fundamental oppositions to the European worldview. This is a new and urgent question to which governments seem to be irresponsibly indifferent. How can these worldviews combine if there is a basic incompatibility between them? We just do not know what we are doing at these foundational levels of human life.

## DEEP CULTURE AS FOUNDATION TRUTH

The same word 'culture' can refer to social customs, i.e. 'surface culture' (level 2, the social level of our lives), or to the basic axioms and convictions by which people live, i.e. our 'deep' or 'foundational culture' (level 3, the deeper level). Like the foundations of a building the third level is often hidden. At some points there may be the closest interconnection between these two levels. It is remarkable how at other points they may be separated.

A classic example of this is found in the Scriptures. Israel emerged from a background of tribal cultures and religions where rituals and festivals were linked with the fertility of crops and herds, with lambing and harvest festivals, and with pagan fertility rites. Remarkably, outward forms, the visible social customs, were retained and given new meaning that derived from the new biblical worldview. The feasts of Weeks, of Tabernacles and of Passover commemorated the specific acts of God within their history rather than the timeless fertility powers of nature. Israel's surface culture now carried a new meaning.

A similar process occurred in the early Jewish church. In Acts chapter 15 we read of the history-making decision not to impose on Gentile converts in other cultures even such a basic Jewish cultural requirement as circumcision. The requirement was removed, as it were, from level 3 to a position within the more surface culture of level 2, a fairly radical change for Jewish Christians. The same process occurred again when rabbits and eggs of pagan Europe's ancient fertility rites were given new historical meanings within the Christian context of Easter.

There is no necessary connection [p.351](#) between the surface culture of social customs and the deep cultural forces that ultimately control our lives. For instance, we will not necessarily deal with the basics of Maori culture at the level of marae protocol, nor with the roots of Japanese culture by learning how to visit a Japanese home for a meal, important though these and all similar customs are. In identifying the ambiguities of this word 'culture', we relocate these more surface aspects of cultures to the area of the social. This places them among the concerns of the Christian social reformer who seeks a Christian life-style in these matters. There is much to be done here. What is a Christian

wedding or funeral, a Christian style in furnishings or dress? Some styles are plainly un-Christian, and evangelism must certainly take account of this level of our existence. So I am not depreciating the importance of change or reform at this level. But we do not reach understanding of the culture of any people when we seek it only at the surface level of social custom, by learning only to be polite to one another, or attending one another's festivals.

### **The Analogy of Marxism**

In illustration consider the history of Marxism. If Marx had been content to operate at our level 1, he might have left no more than a coterie of like-minded radical thinkers or at best a kind of Marxist Church. Such groups were founded in the 19th century in the name of humanism or secularism.

Or Marx might have been merely a radical social reformer, operating at our level 2, a social activist concerned with child labour, boy chimney sweeps, sweated seamstresses, or conditions in prisons or factories. He would have joined the band of similar and honoured social reformers who effected some improvement in these areas. But he would not have changed the face of the world in the next eighty years.

The immense global and practical influence of this one man, Karl Marx, depended on his theories which offered a worldview, an interpretation of history and the meaning of human life. They offered the basic assumptions or axioms of a comprehensive philosophy of existence. They claimed to be true. They invoked the adjective 'scientific' to support their claim. Marxism would win in the end because it was true! Correct theory, i.e. Marxist orthodoxy, was paramount, and the worst enemy would come from within as deviationism or heresy. What Marxism offered was foundational truth which lay at our level 3. On these axioms all else was to be built. Therein lay its strength.

This provides vivid examples of several important principles. First, note the difference between focusing primarily on level 3, rather than on levels 1 or 2. If we focus on levels 1 or 2, the results will be only on those levels. We must also work at level 3. We sorely need to absorb this fact when we talk about evangelism.

Second, note the supreme importance at level 3 not of pragmatic results or of power but of truth. Marxism had practical results and power in plenty, but it was wrong. Its basic view of reality was simply untrue. No achievements in China or elsewhere can mask the final [p. 352](#) consequences of a worldview that does not correspond with the way things are created. What is remarkable is how quickly reality rebelled and exposed the falsity.

And third, the gospel could reach Marxism and critique it only at the fundamental level, level 3. It was not much use picking a moral quarrel with the life-style of individual Marxists, who often put half-hearted Christians to shame. Nor was it very effective to critique Marxist economic and political systems which had usually replaced something worse, often with remarkable achievements. Only the truth of the biblical worldview, and its version of the real structure and goal of human nature and the real forces in history, could be placed over against Marxist axioms. In the end history and reality could wait no longer. With the collapse of Marxism, it is at this third level that the real reconstruction of Eastern Europe must now be sought.

### **DEEP CULTURE AS THE NEW MISSION FRONTIER**

Now at last we come to consider the proper content of level 3 itself. Here we meet a major difficulty, that of bringing to consciousness for critical examination the underlying, axiomatic, unconsciously-assumed convictions that I have called deep or foundational culture. We may get the feel of this unfamiliar realm if we look at the wide variety of terms

used to describe its contents: words like axioms, assumptions, paradigms, viewpoint, mind-set, fiduciary stance, belief-system, worldview, cultural roots. I shall use the general term worldview for the contents of this level. This is the level in need of deep mission which will critique its truth or error, its relation to the biblical worldview, and so its relation to reality itself.

Who among us could describe clearly the underlying assumptions of our lives? Brian Carrell sets out some of the characteristics of modern Western culture that Christians share with those outside the Christian faith, characteristics that make us all so alike as New Zealanders.<sup>2</sup> And who can tell us how far this secular humanist worldview has become the effective working basis in much of our church and personal life? As Brian Carrell puts it, 'a priority must be de-secularizing the Church itself'. Or, in other terms, de-indigenizing the Christian faith within New Zealand before we can think of genuine indigenization. The basic reason why the gospel has so little impact in this country is that it has lost its distinctives by assimilation to the prevailing culture within which we all live. There is no 'us' and 'them'. We are all 'them'.

Let me offer the simplest of examples. The regular Salvation Army advertisement for its holiday facilities at Russell includes the offer of a 'luxury motel'. When the Salvation Army goes up-market and gets into the business of selling luxury, we have to ask whether the gospel or our current consumer-oriented Western culture is in control. For a Christian in a poor world the criterion of luxury is a good guide as to what [p. 353](#) not to buy or do. If the Army should plead that its motel is really quite modest (as well it may be), then it has been caught up in current advertizing exaggeration to the point of untruth! I apologize to the Army for taking this example when more serious and complex illustrations can be found in any of our churches. But the very simplicity and unwitting nature of this example shows how easily we operate with the unconscious assumptions and attitudes of our culture.

Changing hearts and minds at the level of belief systems, to remove distortions and sheer errors: that is the new mission frontier for the gospel of Christ. This gospel brings its own special understanding of the way things really are. At this third level that is the question at every point.

Deep mission at this level is essential if we are to undergird the direct changes in the social order at level 2, and provide the cultural context for more holistic persons at level 1. Indeed, if Christianity is to do more than counsel individuals at the private level, or avoid becoming an increasingly weak and parasitic ally of liberal humanist forces operating mainly at level 2, it must cross this new mission frontier to level 3 and engage with all serious-minded people in a profound re-examination of the very bases of Western culture. This will demand hard thinking, the most relevant form of practical action for Christians in New Zealand today.

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<sup>2</sup> Brian Carrell. *New Vision New Zealand* (Auckland, Vision NZ, 1993) pp. 49–58.