

Beyond Christianity

Lesson 17: Wednesday, April 12, 2006
Ralph D. Winter

W1417

The title of this lesson must not be taken seriously. It is in a sense frivolous, but it was not designed to be provocative.

At no point are we talking about “individual christianity” all the movements we will talk about involve whole families and even communities, and perhaps countries. A biblical faith is not adequately or durably represented in anyone’s “individual christianity.”

But “Churchless Christianity” is the title given to a serious book by Herbert Hoeffler, a senior Missouri-Synod Lutheran theologian who was a professor in a mission field seminary for some years. The book is a report of a scientific statistical sampling of the population of the largest city in Southern India, Chennai, formerly Madras. It is a very concrete witness to the kind of thing we refer to when we speak of “beyond Christianity.”

Dr. Hoeffler’s intention in his book is to describe the surprising existence of a considerable amount of true faith in Jesus Christ *which exists outside* of the somewhat Westernized, church movement in India. That’s where he gets the idea of “churchless,” which we can understand simply to be a movement which is outside of the formal Christian church movement in India. It is not without some kind of fellowship groups.

His sampling techniques were employed within that huge 13 million or so population of greater Chennai.

He found that about three quarters of the population held a higher view of Christ than the average European. The other 25 percent appeared to be serious believers in Jesus Christ. The worship and Bible study of the latter did not show up in the church buildings of that area but was confined largely to homes of extended families. This 25-percent category he called *Churchless Christianity*. Amazingly, this sphere in greater Chennai is two or three times as large as the formally Christian population.

However, it might have been better to have described this phenomenon *Christianity-less churches*, rather than *Churchless Christianity*, because while it is outside of the formal Christian movement it nevertheless manifests itself usually in the form of what we call “House churches.” It simply does not wish to be associated with Western Christianity, and particularly with the mainly Dalit (untouchable) level of society. That is, the millions of people involved in this described phenomenon have faith in Christ but not in a Christianity tied both to the very lowest classes and to Western degradation (that is, nuclear rather than extended families, high divorce rates, pornography, alcoholic debauchery, huge criminal populations, etc.). This is why you could equally say that it is a movement of *Christianity-less house churches*.

These same percentages are not true in other parts of India. In tribal North East India, where the population fig-

ures are far smaller, the Christian population is as high as 75% or even 95%. However, the same kind of a phenomenon, that is, faith and practice unrelated to Western-styled church life, could arise anywhere in India or in the entire globe.

As we explore this global phenomenon it will be a bit of a review of some things we have already said in earlier lessons, but we will look more systematically at this particular type of thing in three periods, the New Testament period, the Reformation period, and the current world period.

The New Testament Period

We have already noted in a previous lesson the extensive changes over the centuries of the outward, "earthen vessel" in which the true riches of faith are contained. We mentioned various stages throughout the Old testament and New Testament and into the period of the Roman Empire when Constantine introduced one of the biggest changes of "earthen vessel." We described most of the earlier changes as diachronic that is, within the same cultural tradition, but changes over time. However, we described the New Testament picture as being a much more radical type of "lateral" change, where the earthen vessel of one culture changes over to a very different culture, and continues to exist simultaneously with the very different cultural vehicle of the source culture.

These *lateral* shifts are the most disconcerting because almost always, those whose faith is carried in the ear-

lier vessel fail to recognize the validity of the faith contained in a contemporary, but different cultural vessel. That is, some of the Jews who believed in Christ could not conceive of Greeks being faithful followers of Christ without switching over to Jewish foods, clothing, language, etc.. So also the Greeks who followed Christ could not conceive of that same faith being truly represented within the Jewish culture, which they thought to be out of date or never adequate, or dead wrong.

Later, Roman Catholics of Mediterranean culture couldn't conceive how the faith could be contained in a vessel of Germanic culture. Let's look at that much studied period.

The Reformation Period

Predictably, those who held the true Biblical faith in the Germanic culture vessel felt that the Mediterranean vessel was invalid and was now to be superceded, and those that held the faith in the Mediterranean vessel thought the Germanic vessel was invalid. This is again parallel to the assumptions of some of the Greek believers that the Jewish vessel was an invalid vehicle of the faith, and vice versa.

Meanwhile, during the Reformation period there were actually many different versions of the faith. There were still lingering traces of the Zoroastrian survivals of Manichaeism in the form of the Cathari believers in southern France, although the Catholics tried their best to exterminate them completely.

There were peasants in Germany

who read the Bible and believed in ways that didn't correspond with either Catholic or Lutheran traditions. An allied phenomenon loosely called the Anabaptist movement was so strong as to be termed, often, the third force of the reformation. Roman Catholic and Anabaptist traditions are continuing to this day with a considerable social split, not just between Catholic and Protestant, but between Protestant and Anabaptist traditions.

The most powerful source of belief in both a faith and a particular earthen vessel is that of the Roman Catholic tradition. That stream, more than any other tradition is the one which successfully extended its language. Latin survived for many centuries and performed the valuable function of a trade language and a scholarly language somewhat the way English is today. It was a beautiful vision and the existence of a common language in much of Europe has been a tremendous benefit. At the same time, this so called, "beautiful vision," which could be called a "uniformitarian concept," broke down permanently with the Reformation.

Curiously, the Eastern Orthodox Church much earlier gave up the idea of everyone within their tradition speaking Greek. Thus it exists as a number of Orthodox traditions, each with its own language. In a certain sense, this was a reformation before the Reformation.

But from the Roman Catholic point of view, what I call the "breakdown of the uniformitarian hypothesis" was a great tragedy. Their fears are confirmed

by what Kenneth Scott Latourette has famously called, the "fissiparous tendency" following the Reformation which produced dozens of different versions of the faith, each within its own earthen vessel is to Catholics who continued to hold to the ideal of a single universal church with a single language and single cultural tradition. They did not smile on that ideal breaking up into a thousand pieces.

On the other hand, Catholic missionaries have tried everything. No single generalization about Catholic mission strategy could possibly be valid. Note two extremes. In Peru in 1540 the Jesuits decided it was necessary to whip the Incas to make them go to church and to confession. Sixty years later, in 1600AD Jesuits landing in China were soon capable of shifting gears radically in almost the opposite direction. In Peru they didn't speak the language of the native, in China, they did. In Peru, they didn't wear native clothing, in China, they did. In Peru, they didn't respect the Inca scholars, in China, they respected the Chinese scholars.

In fact, their "accommodation" to the culture was so complete that reports trickled back to the Vatican that they were syncretizing the Christian religion. After 70 years of shipboard communications back and forth the Vatican precipitated a decision of the Emperor of China expelling all Christian missionaries of whatever kind. The sad story of this huge setback is what is called the Chinese Rites Controversy. The decision of the Vatican was against adopting a Chinese vehicle for the faith, even though the bril-

liant Jesuits, at this point in history, felt that they could see very clearly the value and the feasibility of the Gospel messengers dressing like the Mandarins and mastering their classical Chinese literature.

The Current world Situation

Across the centuries, the Pope's decision against Jesuit accomodation, which triggered the Emperor's rejection of all missionaries has been amply restudied. Views still vary, but there is a much more friendly attitude today toward cultural change than that of the Pope in the early 17th century. Of course, it is certainly possible to go too far. Before we leave China, it may be well to note a major movement involving hundreds of thousands of believers in the Bible called the Taiping Movement (called also the Taiping Rebellion). It took over the largest city in China at the time (Nanking) and ruled it very fairly and justly for over a decade. The leaders published parts of the Old Testament. They tried to live by the Bible, but they didn't get everything exactly correct. The leader of the movement called himself "God's Chinese Son" or, that is, the "other son of God" besides Jesus. Some of the missionaries favored the movement thinking that it would eventually turn out all right. Others opposed it as being too far out.

In any event, the Manchu leaders recouped their main city with the help of British, American and French gunboats who together pursued the slaughter of thousands of followers of the Taiping movement. This is all remotely

parallel to the peasants movements of Reformation times whose people were also slaughtered and suppressed.

Today, we find movements that are very similar to the Taiping movement in many parts of the world. In Africa, there are hundreds of denominations that, as in China, have someone who is considered a divine person leading them. Obviously, missionaries are wary of such synchronism. There are probably twice as many movements that are equally different from standard Christianity of the west but which don't have a divine person in their midst. In Africa, all of these so called non-standard versions of Christianity are referred to as African Independent Churches or African initiated Churches. They are often referred to as the AIC's for short. Their adherents number over 50 million in 20,000 "denominations."

Not only is there a spectrum of different opinions on the part of missionaries toward these groups, as is understandable, the groups themselves are even more varied in size and in complexion.

One of the larger of these groups is called the Kimbangu group, originating in what was once the Belgian Congo, today Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Belgian government, which favored the Catholic church, clapped Simon Kimbangu in jail, who languished 38 years before dying in prison. When he went into prison, his followers were very few. At the time he was carried out to be buried, the Belgian Congo very suddenly became an independent country called Zaire

and his jailers speculated that if he had survived long enough to be freed in the Independence movement, he might have been able to recoup some of his followers.

He apparently didn't need to do that because by the time he died and the Congo became independent it turned out that his followers had grown to over one million and are now in the millions. This particular kind of Christianity is, as could be expected, disdained by many missionaries, but tolerated and perhaps respected by others. It is now a member of the World Council of Churches. I think I said once before that Donald McGavran's perspective of these African AIC churches was to simply ask, Did they revere the Bible? He used to say, provocatively, "it doesn't matter what they believe if they are assiduously studying the Bible. Give them time, they'll turn out OK."

In any event, in Africa, where there are less than 400 church traditions established by Western missionaries, the number of believers that don't track with Western Christianity of any sort are practically equal in number and may be growing faster. You might say that our faith is now "out of control."

We've seen the same thing already, as we began this lesson, in the case of India. It may be that in China there is something very parallel as well. Very crudely you can say there are three kinds of Christians in China, the Catholics, the state recognized Protestants, and the so-called house churches of China. The latter, as with the AIC's in

Africa, represent a wide spectrum of groups, and notice that they are by far the largest in number. The Catholics are far fewer than the recognized Protestant church sphere of maybe fifteen million, while the so-called house church movement has been estimated to be anywhere from 60 to 80 million.

In other words, most of the believers in Jesus Christ in Africa, India and China aren't exactly Christians, and whether they are called *churchless christianity*, or *christianity-less churches* they are a very strong and stalwart category. No matter how we look at this phenomenon we have to recognize that most of the Christianity which continues in much of Western culture is falling behind despite the fact that it might be more doctrinally correct. On the other hand, speaking candidly, it must be admitted that of the two billion people in the world who consider themselves "Christians" a fairly large proportion are not at all clear about what they believe and are far less interested in the Bible than those in the non-traditional new spheres, those in the christianity-less spheres. This, to use Archbishop Temple's famous phrase, "is the new fact of our time."