

The Darwin Studies

Study 3: Religious Purity

Presented at the Meeting of the Uniting Church Northern Synod, September 2004

A dilemma

The Indian Evangelist C.B. Samuel tells a story of an evangelist working in India with a group of intellectually handicapped children. The evangelist was using drama to tell the stories of Jesus. The children responded and soon it became obvious to him that they were attracted to Jesus and soon they wanted to follow Jesus.

So he went to the local church to ask the priest if they could be baptized and become accepted into the church. The priest told him that to become a member of the church one had to go to classes first to learn about what it meant to be a member of the church. Obviously the children were not capable of such instruction so the evangelist went away sad.

The missiologist, Paul Hiebert, has thought about this dilemma. How can a person, who cannot read or write, become a Christian, when so much of our (Western) understanding of conversion and discipleship is dependent on reading the Bible?

Hiebert has written a paper about this using mathematical "Set Theory" as a basis for discussion.

(In my study at the Synod I presented the closed and open sets for discussion and asked for Biblical passages that support each. In place of that discussion, for the sake of this paper, I have here inserted Hiebert's original paper)

THE CATEGORY "CHRISTIAN" IN THE MISSION TASK

PAUL G.. HIEBERT*

Who is a Christian? The question is an old one in mission. Can a non-literate peasant, tired and hungry after a long day's work, become one after learning the gospel only once? And if so, what changes have taken place in his or her beliefs and behaviour?

Before we can answer this question, we must look more closely at the way we form words. "Christian" like many other words in English, refers to a category of people, a category we create in our minds. To be sure, God, who looks at the hearts of people, knows who are his. But as human beings we are limited to categories based on observation and communication. How do we create categories, and how does the way we create them affect our view of mission?

TYPES OF CATEGORIES

Modern studies in mathematics have shown us that we create categories in several ways, each of which has its own structural characteristics. Here we shall look at three of these and see how they affect our view of missions - how we think of conversion, of the church, and of the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions.

Bounded sets

Many of our words in English refer to well-formed or "bounded" sets: "apples", "oranges", "pencils", and "pens", for example. In fact, English, probably borrowing from Greek, uses bounded sets for most of its nouns - the basic building blocks of the language.

What is a bounded set and how does our mind form it? In creating a bounded set our mind puts together things that share common characteristics. "Apples", for example, are objects that are "the usually round, red or yellow, edible fruit of a *rosaceous* tree" (Random House Dictionary).

Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics — that is, they force us to look at things in certain ways. Let us use the category "apples" to illustrate some of these:

The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set. For example, an apple is (1) a kind of "fruit" that is (2) usually round, (3) red or yellow, (4) edible and (5) produced by a *rosaceous* tree. Any fruit that meets these requirements (assuming we have an adequate definition) is an "apple".

The category is defined by a clear boundary. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It cannot be 70% apple and 30% pear. Most of the effort in defining the category is spent on defining and maintaining the boundary. In other words, not only must we say what an “apple” is, we must also clearly differentiate it from “oranges”, “pears”, and other similar objects that are *not* “apples”. Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics. All apples are 100% apple. One is not more apple than another. Either a fruit is an apple or it is not. There may be different sizes, shapes and varieties, but they are all the same in that they are all apples. There is no variation implicit within the structuring of the category.

Bounded sets are essentially static sets. An apple remains an apple whether it is green, ripe or rotten. The only change occurs when an apple ceases to be one (e.g. by being eaten), or when something is turned into an apple. The central question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the category. Once within, no further change can take place in its categorical status.

“Christian” and “church” as bounded sets

What happens to our concepts of “Christian” and “church” if we define them as bounded sets?

We would define them in terms of essential, intrinsic characteristics. Because we cannot see into the hearts of people, we would choose characteristics that we can see or hear, namely tests of orthodoxy (right beliefs defined creedally) or orthopraxy (right behaviour) or both.

We would make a clear distinction between “Christian” and “non-Christian”. There is an excluded middle. Moreover, a great deal of effort would be given to maintaining this distinction for the boundary is critical to the existence of the set. We need carefully defined membership lists in church, and a distancing from those in the world.

We would view all Christians as essentially the same. There may be old experienced Christians and young converts, but in church matters they would have equal say.

We would stress evangelism as the major task of mission, and define it as bringing people into the category. Once in, there would be essentially (required by the structure of the category) nothing more for them to change. Growth is not an essential part of the set.

Let us return for a moment to the non-literate peasant hearing the gospel for the first time. What does it mean for him or her to become a “Christian”? If we think of “Christian” as a bounded set, we must decide what are the definitive characteristics that set a Christian apart from a non-Christian. If we use beliefs as the criteria and reduce these to so simple a set that we can say the villager has truly become a Christian (has acquired *all* the beliefs necessary to become one), or if we use a minimum change in behaviour, are we not in danger of settling for cheap grace? On the other hand, if we raise the standards high, are we not choosing a costly grace that will keep the peasant out of the church? Is it possible then for a peasant to become a Christian in one hour, or even in one lifetime?

Can it be that our problem with who is a Christian has to do with the way we define the category?

Centred sets

A second way of forming concepts is to use extrinsic rather than intrinsic characteristics to group things in terms of how they relate to other things, rather than to what they are in and of themselves. For our use we will refer to extrinsic or relational sets as “centred sets”.

A centred set has the following characteristics:

It is created by defining a centre, and the relationship of things to that centre. Some things may be far from the centre, but they are related to or moving *towards* the centre; therefore, they are part of the centred set. On the other hand, some objects may be near the centre but are moving *away* from it, so they are not a part of the set. The set is made up of all things related to or moving towards the centre.

While the centred set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and those moving out. There is an excluded middle. An object either belongs to the set or it does not. However, the set focuses upon the *centre* and the boundary emerges when the centre.

While the centred set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and those moving out. There is an excluded middle. An object either belongs to the set or it does not. However, the set focuses upon the *centre* and the boundary emerges when the centre and the relationships or movements of the objects have been defined. When the centre and relationships to the centre are stressed the boundary automatically falls

into place.

Centred sets reflect variation within a category. While there is a clear boundary, within the set there is variation in nearness to the centre. Some things are near to it, and others far from it, although all are moving towards it. There is no simple uniformity within the set.

Centred sets are dynamic sets. Two types of movement are essential parts of their structure. First, it is possible to change direction — to turn from moving away to moving towards the centre, from being outside to being inside the set. Second, things may move closer to or away from the centre even though they remain headed towards or related to the centre (cf the old term “back-sliding”).

Illustrations of centred sets are less obvious in English. A technical example is the term “electrons” that refers to atomic particles attracted by a positive magnetic pole. Other examples are kinship terms. “Children” are related to a common parent, and, in polygynous societies, “co-wives” are related to a single husband.

“Christian” and “church” as centred sets

How would the concept “Christian” look if we were to define it as a centred set?

A Christian would be defined in terms of a relationship to a centre —in terms of who is her or his God. The critical question is one of allegiance and worship. A Christian is one for whom Jesus Christ is both Lord and God. In other words, he or she is a follower of Christ. From the nature of the centred set, it is clear that there are those who are near the centre, but are headed away, namely the Pharisees. On the other hand, there are those at a distance who know little about Christ but are his disciples.

There is a clear division between Christians and non-Christians, but less stress would be placed on maintaining the boundary and more on reaffirming the centre in order to preserve the category. There would be less need to play the “boundary games” that often emerge in human institutions.

There would be a recognition of variation among Christians. Some are seen as closer to Christ in their knowledge and maturity, others with little knowledge and a need to grow. This recognition of variation in maturity and growth avoids the dilemma of choosing between cheap or costly grace. Growth after conversion is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a Christian, and discipleship the other half of salvation.

Two important dynamics would be recognized. First there is conversion, or turning towards a new God. Second, there would be maturation, or the movement towards that new God in knowledge and obedience.

Returning to the village peasants, they could become a Christian with a minimum knowledge so long as they make Christ the Lord of their lives. But then nurture and growth also become central concerns in the mission task.

Fuzzy sets

As Zaide (1965), Cohen (1966) and others have pointed out, there is a third type of category, namely "fuzzy set". Unlike bounded and centred sets, both of which are well-formed (have clear edges), fuzzy sets have no sharp boundaries. Rather there are degrees of inclusion within them. Things may be a quarter, a half or two-thirds inside the set. For example, a mountain merges into the plains without a clear boundary, and red into orange. Using well-defined sets Americans can divide people into "whites" and "blacks" and so on. In fuzzy-set terms there is a range between blacks and whites with many who have varying numbers of black and white ancestors. In fuzzy-set terms, there is no sharp boundary between races.

All cultures seem to use all these ways of creating categories, but each seems to focus on one or another as the basis for building its view of the world. American culture places a premium on clear, well-bounded sets: on well-defined roads with curbs and marked lanes, well-edged lawns with no weeds or flowers in the grass, with sharp lines separating paint from glass in the windows, and with fixed prices. Other cultures such as the Indian culture appear to organize the world more in fuzzy-set terms: with roads having no clear edges, music characterized by glides

and few fixed prices.

Fuzzy sets have the following characteristics:

They may be defined either in terms of what things are intrinsically or how things relate to some external centre or reference point. There are, in fact, two types of fuzzy sets that parallel the two types of well-defined sets. For our purposes here we will lump them together.

The boundary of the categories is fuzzy. There are degrees of inclusion within the set. Things may be 30%, or 55% or 90% within the category

Because of the fuzzy boundary, a thing may belong to two or more sets at the same time. A paint may be the mixture of three different pigments, or a person one quarter black and three quarters white. There is, therefore, no excluded middle in fuzzy-set algebra or fuzzy-set logic. Rather than a sharply divided “either-or” world, there are continuums that run from one form to another.

As with well-formed sets, inclusion in a fuzzy set may involve either a change in the intrinsic characteristics of things, or a change in the direction of their movement depending upon which of the two types of fuzzy sets one is forming. But characteristic of all fuzzy sets is that the change may take place in steps. There need be no single complete transformation. An apple becomes “ripe” by degrees, and night creeps up by stages.

“Christian” and “church” as fuzzy sets

If we were to define Christians and the church in fuzzy-set terms we would find the following:

A Christian would be defined either in terms of beliefs and/or practices, or in terms of a relationship to Christ, depending upon which of the two types of fuzzy set we are using.

In either case there would be no sharp boundary between Christian and non-Christian. It would be possible for people to think of themselves as a quarter, half or two-thirds Christians.

Consequently there would be no clear membership lists in churches.

People could belong to two or more religions at the same time. They might participate in both

Hindu and Christian services, or combine Buddhism and Confucianism in responding to the needs of life. They would be less likely to understand or accept the exclusive claims of any one religion.

Conversion to Christianity in fuzzy-set terms might not be a decisive event. It could also be a gradual movement from outside to in. based on a series of small decisions

SETS AND THE MISSION TASK

Who then are the real Christians? And can a peasant become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once? In answering these questions, it is clear that we must first clarify what we mean by the word "Christian" whether we are defining it in bounded, centred or fuzzy-set terms. If we do not make clear what type of category we are using, we will often talk past one another and our disagreements will arise out of unexamined presuppositions and deep linguistic structures rather than out of theological differences.

A centred set approach seems to correspond most closely with the Hebraic view of reality found in the Bible. In the Old Testament the central issue is the worship of and obedience to YHWH. The Israelites had to learn the hard lesson *that they were to have no other gods* (Ex. 34: 14; Lev. 26:1 ; Is. 44 8; I Kings 18: 39, etc.). In the New Testament, although Peter, James, John and the others may have heard about Jesus before they became disciples, Jesus did not ask them to pass a theological test before inviting them to follow him. Faith is defined not so much in terms of knowledge, although some of that must be present, but in terms of obedience. Eugene Nida writes (1981:16),

From the biblical viewpoint ...truth is not an abstract definition of reality or being but is essentially right thinking about moral behaviour, and wisdom is not intellectual capacity to formulate philosophical questions and provide cogent systems but rather the ability to decide moral and human issues with justice.

The key question in a centred-set approach to Christianity' is who is your God? And God is

defined as the one whom you worship and obey.

A centred-set approach, however, creates some problems for westerners who are used to thinking primarily in bounded-set terms. How, for example, does one deal with church membership lists, and with a recognition of differences of maturity in the power structures of the church'?

A bounded-set approach creates a well-ordered world with few ambiguities, but it has its implicit dangers. It can lead to an over-emphasis on defining orthodoxy in terms of a body of beliefs or practices, while overlooking the basic relational nature of the gospel. The Good News of salvation is first the restoration of fellowship between sinners and a holy God. This approach, because it focuses on characteristics intrinsic to the Christians themselves, too easily loses sight of the centre. The church, then, is in danger of becoming (as Durkheim put it) a group of people who look to their corporate body rather than to a transcendent God, and who replace worship with fellowship.

A fuzzy-set approach raises even more serious theological and missiological problems How does one deal with religions such as Hinduism based on fuzzy sets that deny our claims of the uniqueness of Christianity? The Bible makes a clear distinction between the children of God and the children of darkness (Josh. 24: 15; Luke 16:13; Col. 1:21-22; and 1 John), and to Christ as the Saviour. If we contextualize the gospel into fuzzy-set terms, have we not lost an essential part of the gospel?

On the other hand, we must recognize that from the human point of view we often see "through a glass darkly". God, who sees the hearts, knows who are his. But we, who must depend upon verbal statements and behavioural changes, often see the boundary as fuzzy. There are those who are clearly followers of Jesus, and those who reject him. But there are many in the church whose commitment is not all that clear. It may be for this reason that we are cautioned about passing judgements (Matt. 7:1 1 Cor, 4: 5).

Ultimately the question of whether we should use the terms "Christian" and "church" as

bounded, centred or fuzzy' sets must be decided on theological, not linguistic grounds. But an awareness of how we form categories can make explicit what we too often leave implicit and unexamined, and clarify our discussions.

REFERENCES

- COHEN. P. J. and R. HERSH. "Non-Cantorian Set Theory" *Scientific American*. 217:104-106. 1967.
- KAUFMAN N, A. *Introduction to the Theory of Fuzzy Subsets*. New York: Academic Press. 1975.
- NIDA, EUGENE. *Meaning Across Cultures*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books. 1981.
- ZADEH L A. "Fuzzy Sets." *Information and Control*. 8:338-353. 1965.

*Paul U. Hiebert is professor of missions and anthropology at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, USA.

In the study on Exclusion and Embrace, Volf adopts a centred set model.

There are two injunctions which persistently surface in the Bible. One is to have no strange gods; the other is to love strangers. The two injunctions are interrelated: one should love strangers in the name of the one triune God, who loves strangers... To be a Christian does not mean to close oneself off in one's own identity and advance oneself in an exemplary way toward what one is not. It means rather to be centred on this God – the God of the other – and participate in God's advance toward where God and God's reign is not yet.

In other words, he saying that to become a Christian is not to get an image in our head of what a Christian look likes and try to act accordingly, to become more like that image. Rather, it means

focusing on God, who is the God of the other, and to move with God. Because in the centred set, the centre is not static – God is moving in the world. We are to discern the activity of God in our neighbour and the world and to participate with God in that activity.

I am not saying that we must choose one model or the other, that one model is right and the other wrong. We live with both. Both provide different insights.

Two Biblical Paradigms

Mengler's Hill, The Joshua paradigm

On Mengler's Hill which overlooks the Barossa valley in South Australia there is a monument to the early Lutheran pioneers. These were refugees, fleeing religious persecution in Germany. When they found this beautiful valley, now known the world over for its wines, how could they not give thanks to God! The plaque on the monument reads: "The LORD has given us this land. (Joshua 2:9)

In his book *Reconciliation – Searching for Australia's Soul*, Lutheran pastor and theologian Dr Norm Habel writes:

The German settlers quoted a text from the Hebrew Scriptures, justifying the conquest of Canaan by force, to thank God for the rich land they turned into vineyards. These settlers did not fully realise that their coming was a conquest; the local Aboriginal Australians clearly did...What it must have been like to be dispossessed by invaders who claimed to worship a loving God and 'love their neighbours as themselves' is hard even to imagine.

The Joshua paradigm is etched into the Jewish and Western Christian mind. No matter whether we recognise and acknowledge the havoc caused by colonialism, which ripped the riches out of distant countries in the name of God, King and Country, that overwhelmingly male propensity to overcome and conquer, it seems that even in our most reflective moments we come back to this default setting...to win, to take over, to possess by force.

The Joshua paradigm is the frame of reference for much of what we see in global political action

today, say, in the USA.

There it is, in the Scriptures, inherent to the Exodus story, at the heart of Jewish identity.

Joshua 6:20 -27

So the priests blew the trumpets. As soon as the men heard it they gave a loud shout and the walls collapsed. Then all the army went straight up the hill into the city and captured it. With their swords they killed everyone in the city, men and women, young and old. They also killed the cattle, sheep and donkeys. (They find and spare Rahab the prostitute and her family...). Then they set fire to the city and burnt it to the ground, along with everything in it, except the things made of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, which they took and put in the LORD'S treasury.

Then Joshua curses the place:

Anyone who tries to rebuild the city of Jericho will be under the LORD'S curse.

This "curse" is in the minds of the congregation who listened to Jesus in the Luke 4 passage. What did it mean to be a widow in Zarapeth or a Syrian with leprosy? They were cursed! No wonder the congregation got angry with Jesus inferring that God loved *them!*

At the heart of Joshua paradigm thinking is a dualism – good and evil, blessing or curse, salvation or damnation. At the end of the book, Joshua gives his people a choice – either this, or that. (Joshua 25:15 – 28)

The either/or paradigm runs as a thread through Scripture.

An alternative tradition – Sarah's tomb.

But Dr Norm Habel points out that there is an alternative tradition to do with ownership and land – a little story hidden away from the superhighway of the Exodus tradition.

Context: Abraham and his wife Sarah were Babylonians (today, Iraqis) and worshipped the indigenous gods of Babylon. (Joshua 24:2). They left their home country to live in Canaan (today, southern Israel or Palestine). We are told that in Canaan, Abraham worshipped the local

cannanite God, El Elyon, the Creator God of the land, and was welcomed by Melchizadek, the indigenous priest. (Genesis 14 17- 22)

Genesis 23

1 Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. 2 She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her.

3 Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. [1] He said, 4 "I am an alien and a stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead."

5 The Hittites replied to Abraham, 6 "Sir, listen to us. You are a mighty prince among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our tombs. None of us will refuse you his tomb for burying your dead."

7 Then Abraham rose and bowed down before the people of the land, the Hittites. 8 He said to them, "If you are willing to let me bury my dead, then listen to me and intercede with Ephron son of Zohar on my behalf 9 so he will sell me the cave of Machpelah, which belongs to him and is at the end of his field. Ask him to sell it to me for the full price as a burial site among you."

10 Ephron the Hittite was sitting among his people and he replied to Abraham in the hearing of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of his city. 11 "No, my lord," he said. "Listen to me; I give [2] you the field, and I give [3] you the cave that is in it. I give [4] it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead."

12 Again Abraham bowed down before the people of the land 13 and he said to Ephron in their hearing, "Listen to me, if you will. I will pay the price of the field. Accept it from me so I can bury my dead there."

14 Ephron answered Abraham, 15 "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth four hundred shekels [5] of silver, but what is that between me and you? Bury your dead."

16 Abraham agreed to Ephron's terms and weighed out for him the price he had named in the hearing of the Hittites: four hundred shekels of silver, according to the weight current among the merchants.

17 So Ephron's field in Machpelah near Mamre-both the field and the cave in it, and all

the trees within the borders of the field-was deeded 18 to Abraham as his property in the presence of all the Hittites who had come to the gate of the city. 19 Afterward Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave in the field of Machpelah near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. 20 So the field and the cave in it were deeded to Abraham by the Hittites as a burial site.

v 5,6 We note the respect the locals had for Abraham. They are willing to provide the best of graves for free.

7 -10 “bows” – mutual respect. (not the Joshua paradigm) “if you are willing...please ask...full price...in your presence (transparency)

10-11 He is offered a freeby for the second time

12,13 Again, “bowed...so that everyone could hear (transparency)...ask...please...

14,15 Third offer! This is like Asian culture where one must ask several times before the “real” answer is given.

16 Abraham pays – note transparency again and scrupulous ethics of measurement.

18 The result of all this respect – recognition.

The Abrahamic tradition is marked by respect, ethical practice and mutuality.

So here are two Biblical paradigms that reflect contradictory attitudes to land.

I suggest that again, it is not for us to pick one OR the other. But rather we must allow these stories to sit with us, side by side and to move into the future respecting them and each other, not to try to make them “fit” but to have their own lives with us.

Conclusion

In these three studies I have tried to share some of my own struggles over the last few years and some of the theological tools which have helped me grow in my understanding of these situations and of my God. If you have found anything helpful to you in your struggles in your situations I am thankful. I have benefited by being among you.