

Critique of Functional Missionary Anthropology By Enoch Wan

In the last three decades, "missionary anthropology" has "remained synonymous with functionalism done by Christians" (Krass 1979:28). According to functionalism, "culture is not a mere lifeless heap of unrelated parts: it is a system more like a living organism or a complicated operation" (Luzbetak 1970:141). The organismic analogy and organic/equilibrium perspective of functionalism enable the missionary anthropologists to describe and analyze customs and institutions in terms of "the whole system, or the function of any component part of the system" (Mayers & Grunlan 1979:275). They claim that the functional model of holistic view of culture "is the anthropologist's most significant contribution to the missionary endeavor" (Luzbetak 1963:59, cf. Kraft 1979:46).

Christian anthropologists have integrated functionalism into their scholastic study and practical ministry in cross-cultural evangelism, Bible translation and church growth analysis. They have credited functionalism with meeting their needs intellectually and practically. In spite of the many weaknesses of functionalism, they still hold on to functionalism as the only and the best alternative over and above evolutionism, historicalism, diffusionism, Marxism, etc.

However, the general Christian public who are not familiar with the historical development of anthropological theories should be informed of the shortcoming of the functional model of culture.

There are many Christian anthropologists who have boldly attempted to integrate the functional version of anthropology with theology (e.g. ethnotheology or contextualization, Kraft 1979), hermeneutics (e.g. crosscultural hermeneutics, Taber 1978), church growth study (e.g. homogeneous unit principle, McGavran 1970), Bible translation (e.g. dynamic equivalence translation, Kraft 1979:261ff), etc. The many related issues are beyond the scope of this paper except a few points that would highlight the unbiblical nature of the functional model of culture.

The theme of the Bible is salvation by grace in Christ planned and provided by God for sinners. The major focus should be on God's initiative and interaction with man in the various processual contexts of predestination, creation, redemption and/or damnation. Unfortunately the Christian functionalist anthropologists are preoccupied with the abstraction of "the integrated system" and its component parts with "manifest function" and "latent function" meeting the needs of members within the cultural system (Grunlan & Mayers 1979:42-43, Luzbetak 1970:171-179, Kraft 1979:84-91). Instead of delineating the dynamic interaction between God, man, Satan and the world, they have consigned their Christian faith to "functionalism's box 'religion'-a part of culture'." (Krass 1979:29) Their obsession for abstraction of "the integrated system" and their infatuation for organismic analogy of culture have misled them to the conclusion, "the world view lives at the very heart of culture, touching interacting with, and strongly influencing every other aspect of the 'culture'" (Kraft 1979:53 cf. Hiebert 1976:49, Luzbetak 1970:64ff.) Thus Christian conversion is reduced to "one such paradigm shift," i.e. "a new perception of the nature of the work of Christ" (Kraft 1979:5, cf. 30, 259). It is unbiblical to describe "Christian conversion as a paradigm shift, a worldview change," (Kraft 1979:30) for the change of mind is the natural consequence of establishing a new relationship with Christ the Saviour. The functional model of conversion is at variance with Biblical Christianity but in accord with the experience of the modern cultist's conversion of the mind. The synthesis of functional anthropology and theology leaves no room for the Holy Spirit's conviction and conversion of the Christian to a new relationship with God through Christ.

Being blinded by the functional perspective, the Christian functionalists stress the "function" of worldview and faith (cf. Kraft 1979:54-57, Grunlan and Mayers 1979:236-239) in evangelism and conversion. Their teaching contradicts the evangelical doctrine of salvation in light of the trinitarian doxology of Eph. 1:3-14, i.e. the divine decree of God the Father, the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, and the seal of the Holy Spirit regarding the whole being, not just the "mind or worldview." This is "the radical evil and threat to biblical faith posed by modern 'functional' views of Christian doctrine," for "Christian believers do not make salvation happen by their faith" (Scaer 1982:90).

Inheriting the legacy of British functionalism of the 1930's, the functionalist's treatment of "form," "function," and "meaning" is indispensable 'in their' published works (e.g. Kraft 1979:64-102, Grunlan and Mayers 1979:233-245, Luzbetak 1976:135-156, Hiebert 1976:45-60, etc.) This version of the functional model is a simplistic appeal to the common sense of the uninitiated by distinguishing "form" (i.e. the observable parts of culture), "function" (i.e. the meeting of both the system's need of integration and persistence and the members' many needs such as food, shelter, etc., Kraft 1979:81-91) and "meaning." The latter is defined as "the totality of subjective associations attached to the form" (Luzbetak 1970:139). In general "the most important function served by every cultural form is to convey 'meaning' to the participants of a culture" (Kraft 1979:15).

The ritual of water baptism serves as an apt illustration for the Christian functionalists. It is a "ceremonial, non-material form or custom" having the function of "a rite of initiation and incorporation of new members into the group" with various "meanings to both the group and the initiate" (Kraft 1979:67-68). Any functional-equivalent of the "form" is acceptable as long as it serves the "function" as an initiation rite and maintains the "constant meaning" of "open commitment of the initiate to allegiance both to God through Christ and to that specific group of Christians" (Kraft 1979:68). Bridging the gap between cultural and supracultural, the functionalist is able to explain the conception of the Triune God (or the "meaning" of the supracultural entity) as one in "form" but three in "function" (Kraft 1979:304).

This is the essence of the functionalists' "golden rule" of "dynamic equivalence." It meets the "need" of the success-oriented, utilitarian and pragmatic approach of functionalism. The functionalists are well "conditioned" by the western ethos in search of an all-purpose formula of success, as evidenced by the westerner's infused "felt needs" precipitated by T.V. commercials for all kinds of products. They need to elevate "efficiency" as the "criterion of

evaluation of cultural form and function" (Kraft 1979:90-92). It is thus not surprising to find Kraft endorsing R.D. Winter's suggestion "that a coffin might be a more meaningful initiation form than water (baptism) in contemporary America" as a "functional equivalent" of Christian baptism (Kraft 1979:331). Who knows how frequently a minister should change the "form" of baptism for the sake of "efficiency" and "impact," when the shocking effect of the "coffin" rite of initiation decreases in due time? On the other hand should the Christian church alternate between various kinds of drink and wafer as substance for Holy Communion because familiarity breeds contempt and reduces "impact?"

The "dynamic equivalence" principle serves many "functions" for the Christian functionalists. In addition to the overall criterion of utilitarianist "efficiency" (Kraft 1979:83) it could denote degrees of "fit" in cultural integration, types of "fulfillment in meeting needs (Kraft 1979:92), substitutional "adequacy" ;in functional equivalence in Bible translation and cultural change (Kraft 1979:93), and "impact" in communication (Kraft 1979:160).

The functional model of "form," "function" and "meaning" is indeed attractive. It can be employed and integrated with linguistic and communication theories. For instance, plural noun ("plural morpheme") can take three "forms" ("allomorphs" -/az,/s/,/z/) in the words "roses," "rocks" and "rugs.") The linguistic "form" might vary but the "function" of conveying the "meaning" of plurality is the same ("constant"). Examples of this kind abound in the linguistic study of phonology, morphology, syntax, etc. In the area of communication theory, the study of gesture ("kinesics") reveals that there are different customs or "forms" of greeting (e.g. westerner's kissing or shaking hands, oriental's nodding or bowing, etc.) but they serve the same "function" of greeting and convey the "meaning" of courtesy or intimacy. These two examples are sufficient to show the integration of the anthropological model of functionalism (of "form," "function" and "meaning") in linguistic and communication sciences.

The functional synthesis is very impressive because it "functions" in all aspects of Christian ministry. It is invaluable in evangelism ("dynamic equivalence conversion" of "paradigm shift," Kraft 1979:351 ff), church polity and indigenization ("dynamic equivalence church," Kraft 1979:315ff, and "dynamic equivalence leadership," Kraft 1979:324-327), bibliology ("dynamic equivalence revelation," Kraft 1979:205-213), ethnotheology and contextualization ("dynamic equivalence theologizing," Kraft 1979:291ff), cross-cultural evangelism, ("dynamic equivalence transculturation," Kraft 1979:276ff), Bible translation ("dynamic equivalence translation," Kraft 1979:260ff), and even planned cultural reform ("transforming culture with God," Kraft 1979:345ff, 360ff). However, evaluating these sub-models of functionalism in light of Biblical Christianity is beyond the scope of this paper and might require a book of "404 small-type pages," like Kraft's.

The "function" of the "dynamic equivalence" principle enables the Christian functionalists to synthesize anthropology, linguistic sciences, communication and marketing theories, and theology with the following conclusions: "Culture is communication" horizontally among man (Kraft 1979:65). Nature, Scriptures and Saviour are communication vertically ("General and Special Revelation," and "incarnation") between God and mankind (Kraft 1979:103-260). Evangelism and Bible translation are cross-cultural communication (Kraft 1979:260ff, 312ff). Contextualization therefore is just the process of "deculturalizing" Christianity from the western "cultural form," yet preserving the "message" or "meaning" and finding a "functional equivalence" (Grunlan and Mayers 1979:86-87, 244-245) by appealing to the "felt need" of the receptor (Kraft 1979:153, 164, 196; Luzbetak 1963:287; Grunlan and Mayers 1979:244-245). The pitfalls of this approach are numerous and apparent: It exaggerates the universality of human "need" and the uniformity of the receptor's "felt need." It elevates behavioral sciences above their rightful place at the expense of Biblical theology. It embraces a high view of culture (including the "dynamic equivalence" principle—a product of western scholars) above Scriptures. It endorses an inflated and optimistic view of human nature and man's lust for pleasure (e.g. the "felt need" of "you owe it to yourself. .."). It reduces the Gospel ("the power of God" Romans 1:16) to a man-made way of fulfilling "felt need" by "functional equivalence." Prophetic proclamation of truth is replaced by salesmanship of the sugar-coated Gospel.

The same instrumental mentality and pragmatic approach of functional anthropology are behind the church growth movement especially the homogeneous unit principle. In his case study on church growth in Chile, O.E. Costas (1981:6) rightly concludes, ". . . numerical and organic growth in themselves do not necessarily mean that a church is indeed growing... church growth is a sign, not an instrument, of mission..." The focus of church growth anthropology and theology should be on God and His saving action and interaction with man. The church, not its growth, is "the instrument by which the mission is furthered or fulfilled" (Costas 1981:6). C.R. Padilla evaluates the homogeneous unit in light of the apostolic teaching and practice and has observed that "it is quite evident that the use of the homogeneous unit principle for church growth has no biblical foundation" (Padilla 1982:29). The greatest danger of functionalist church growth anthropology is found in its "lack of integration with revelation." (McQuiklin 1973-43)

Functionalism is proved to be a dead-end road for Christian anthropology and there is the urgent need to develop a Biblical model of missionary anthropology. The scholarly published works of functional Christian anthropologists have misled and misinformed the Christian community to believe that the functional model is the only one and the best alternative to integrate behavioral sciences and Biblical Christianity. One such viable alternative is the "contextual-interaction" model which will be presented in a second article of this two part series. The warning of theologian Scaer (1982:90) is indeed a far cry from the current situation:

...the Christian is left only with an autonomous functionalism, hanging unsupported in mid-air. Such functionalism is philosophically indefensible for the intellect, emotionally unsatisfying for faith, theologically meaningless, and ultimately doomed to sheer uselessness.

The functionalist's synthesis "constitutes a disservice to both Biblical theology and anthropology." (Henry 1980:164)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Grunlan, Stephen A. and Mayers, Marvin K.
1979 *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Henry, Carl F.H.
1980 "The Cultural Relativizing of Revelation," *Trinity journal*, NS 1980a53-164. Hiebert, Paul G.
1976 "An Introduction to Mission Anthropology," in *Crucial Dimensions in World Evangelization*, Arthur F. Glasser, et. al. (eds.) p.45-88, South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library.
- Luzbetak, Louis J.
1970 *The Church and Cultures, An Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker*. Techny, Ill.: Divine Publications.
- Kraft, Charles I.
1979 *Christianity in Culture, A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Marynoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books
- Krass, Alfred C.
1979 "Contextualization for Today," *Gospel in Context*, 2:3: July 1979:27-30.
- McGavran, Donald
1970 *Understanding Church Growth*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- McQuilkin, J. Robert
1973 *How Biblical Is the Church Growth Movement?* Chicago: Moody.
- Padilla, C. Rene
1982 "The Unity of the Church and the Homogeneous Unit Principle," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 1982:23-30.
- Scaer, David
1982 "Functionalism Fails the Test of Orthodoxy," *Christianity Today*, February, 1982:90.
- Taber, Charles R.
1978 "Is There More Than One Way to Do Theology?" *Gospel in Context*, 1:1: January 1978:4-18.

Dr. Enoch Wan is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Missions at CTC. He served formerly as pastor in New York and Hong Kong as well as instructor at Alliance Bible Seminary in Hong Kong.

HIS dominion

formerly Church Growth: Canada

Volume 8, Number 3 (Apr. 1982)

A bulletin of Canadian Theological College

Psalm 72:8 inspired the naming of our nation at confederation: "He shall have dominion from sea to sea." May Canada increasingly become his dominion, to the praise of his glorious grace.

Views of the writers are not necessarily those of Canadian Theological College.

Published three times each year by the Faculty of Canadian Theological College

Subscription: \$5 per year; \$1.75 per issue
Material may be reproduced if credit is given

Editor: David F. Hartzfeld

Contributing Editors:

Rexford A. Boda, M.Sc., M.Div., President, Canadian Theological College

Albert E. Cramer, Th.D., Vice-President/Dean, Church History

Leslie A. Andrews, D.Min., Christian Education

John V. Dahms, Th.D., New Testament

David F. Hartzfeld, Th.M., Old Testament

Jacob Klassen, M.A., Missions

Samuel J. Stoesz, Th.D., Pastoral Studies

Enoch Wan, Ph.D., Director of Chinese Studies
