

## THE BIBLICAL BASE FROM WHICH ADJUSTMENTS ARE MADE

Donald A. McGavran

Dr. Tippett's chapter breaks the subject open in a splendid way. He makes perfectly clear, first, that as the Christian religion spreads from one culture to another, it must correctly adjust to each; and second, that such adjustments have their limits. He has pointed out that incorrect adjustments are frequently made. Christopaganism frequently results. He has given some examples of appalling syncretism. All this raises questions such as the following. What adjustments are correctly made? What are illegitimate? Where does honoring the culture become dishonoring Christ? Where shall we draw the line? What is the base from which adjustments are made?

### THE PURE FAITH

Dr. Tippett repeatedly speaks of a "pure faith" and an "essential gospel." He believes that the goal is an "indigenous Christianity." He assumes that what Christianity says in regard to life after death ought to have replaced the pagan concepts of the old Indian culture. He points out that prohibitions concerning mixing pagan religions with that revealed by God in the Old and New Testaments are "one of the basic themes of the Bible. The People of God are to be the people of One God who will not tolerate any polytheism or syncretism."

I presume that such a concept of the Christian faith is shared by my colleagues in this symposium. But if these chapters are to speak to the enormous confusion which marks our day in regard to Christianity and cultures, each of us will have to attempt a more definitive statement of what constitutes a pure faith, an essential gospel and "the uncontaminated core." I shall devote the first part of this chapter to carrying further what Dr. Tippett has begun so well and attempt to define more exactly what "the pure faith" is.

At the outset, let me point out that such a faith has underlain Christianity down through the ages. Each church has formed a clear concept of what that faith is, and has defended it against all comers. Indeed, some concept of "the faith once for all delivered" (Jude 3) has generally been a chief cause for the expansion of the Church on new ground. Men turn from old faiths to new faiths because of what they conceive the new faith to be. Their first understandings of what Christianity means are often biblically inadequate, but nevertheless powerfully convincing to those becoming Christian. If the first formulations affirm belief in the Bible as God's Word, the only sacred Book, then the new church gradually is taught all things whatsoever Christ has commanded. The Bible brings the church to sounder and sounder formulations of the faith.

#### Who Determines Pure Faith?

The ultimate authority which determines the pure faith (which I shall also call "the core" and "essential Christianity") has been conceived in three main ways.

(1) For Roman Catholics, the Church has been ultimate authority. It rested on tradition and the inspired and inerrant Bible, which included the apocryphal books, interpreted by the hierarchy and voiced ultimately by the Pope in council.

(2) For Protestants, the ultimate authority has theoretically been the Bible alone, the canonical books, but practically--since the Bible is a very extensive record from which many things can be proved--the ultimate authority has been the Bible plus the great creeds, plus the practices of each empirical fathering church. By "church" I mean an association of like-minded congregations. These usually constitute themselves into a denomination--sometimes large and impressive, sometimes small and weak. As through missions or directly, empirical churches establish congregations, they tend to rule that the faith once for all delivered to the saints includes essential biblical Christianity as formulated by their written or unwritten creeds, plus those of their practices which can readily be carried over into the daughter congregations. It is at this last point that missiological error occurs.

(3) Some Christians today (both Roman Catholic and Protestant, both Latfricasians and Euricans),<sup>1</sup> seeking to free Christianity from all "western cultural accretions," advocate that the ultimate authority which determines the essential core of the faith is neither the Pope nor the Bible but the direct experience of "Christ." Provided that is there, they seem to say, Christian faith is there and must be encouraged to clothe itself in cultural forms natural to its adherents. Christ can operate in any culture. Christ within will express Himself in culturally relevant ways. We ought not tell new converts what to do. We should trust that the indwelling Christ, with or without the Bible, will lead new Christians into all truth. Furthermore, Christ may use some element of their culture to reveal new truth, not in the Bible, but particularly needed by them. To me, this position is unacceptable. It dismisses God's revelation which comes to us in and through the Bible, and depends entirely too heavily on "inner light" and human reason.

I shall maintain that the faith once for all delivered to the saints, for which Christians must contend, is to be known strictly from the Bible. I hold that all later understandings and formulations, such as the great creeds, while useful, are not inspired documents. They should be learned by leaders of new churches, for each creed is based on thorough study of the Bible and speaks to the universal human condition, though voiced in the culture of one particular period and people.

I shall affirm that the practices of the fathering church or mission should be used, or not used, according to circumstances. Frequently such practices are both biblical and practical. Then they ought to be used. Sometimes they are heavily characteristic of the alien culture of a distant church and impractical--then they should be discarded. Wearing shoes into village churches in India is a case in point.

Granted that difficulties dog the steps of anyone who tries to describe accurately the pure faith, the task must nevertheless be undertaken.

#### The Bible Affirms the Pure Faith

Such a faith is clearly recognized by the New Testament. The Epistle to Jude says: "I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3 RSV). The Apostle Paul declared, "I delivered to you as of the first importance that which I also received" (I Corinthians 15:3). The New Testament frequently refers to "faithful words" worthy of all acceptance. These carried the essential gospel. As men placed their faith on Jesus, were baptized and formed into Christian churches,

they were known as "followers of the Way" and became different from other men. They believed a common gospel and were stamped with a common stamp and indwelt by the Same Holy Spirit. The faith once for all delivered was inextricably bound up with Jesus Christ, both the historical Jesus and the Christ of experience. It was He who proclaimed "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no man comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). In like vein, the first Epistle of John declared "He who has the Son has life, and he who has not the Son of God has not life" (5:11, 12). The Logos who was in the beginning with God, through whom everything was made that has been made, "became flesh and dwelt among us. . . the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:14, 17). Paul writes that all men of all tribes and cultures have sinned. God put forth Jesus Christ as propitiation for sin, and forgiveness is available only through faith in him.

#### God Has Revealed the Pure Faith

This faith once for all delivered, this pure gospel, this source of grace and truth is known only through the words revealed by God, written by inspired men and recorded in the canonical books of the Bible. This pure gospel was not perceived by men so much as it was revealed by God. Men guided by the light of reason alone did not calculate that a crucified Lord who bore our sins would be a rather convincing Savior and consequently perceive and proclaim God's love in the cross. No! God himself put Jesus Christ forward as a propitiation for our sins. God "spoke through" the authors of the New Testament those wonderful words--which could never have been conceived in any human culture. God commanded Christians to proclaim them to all men and persuade as many as possible to put their faith in Jesus Christ.

I am emphasizing the point that "the pure faith and essential gospel" Dr. Tippett has mentioned and we all take for granted was made known by God. The missionary does not take his own culture-bound invention to other lands. He is an ambassador taking the message of the King. That is its overwhelming importance. It is God's message.

Someone has said that the word "God" should be banned from intelligent discourse, because today it has come to mean so many different things. The word "God" is an expletive, a process, the ground of being, the personification of a value system, a cunning invention to control the masses, an impersonal force, an unknowable prime mover and the God who chose to reveal himself in and through the Bible. I use the word "God" to mean exclusively the Triune God, the only God there is, who created the vast and enormously complex universes without us and within us, God who speaks and acts throughout the Bible, God as he manifested himself to men in the historical Jesus and continues to manifest himself in the Christ of experience.

#### Man Sent to Discover Some Things

I have been emphasizing that God revealed the faith once for all delivered. Man did not invent, discover or perceive it. To be sure, man can discover some kinds of truth. Man is, in fact, the great discoverer. God made him that way and purposed for him to discover much truth. God gave him "dominion over all the earth" (Genesis 1:26)--dominion over a real world. What we see about us is not maya jal or illusion, but a real world about which the truth can be discovered. For example, the development of human knowledge limped along for tens of thousands of years without an effective way to record and transmit discovered truth, until

about four thousand years ago in the turquoise mines of the Sinai peninsula men discovered that written marks could be used for sounds. Suddenly an alphabet was born. From that one alphabet all the alphabets on earth have gradually been fashioned. Few discoveries have been of greater moment and none are basically more simple. One sound can be represented by one written symbol! Man is a great discoverer.

In the world of sense, it appears that God sent man to discover. There in the world of sense, Man discovered factual truth. God may indeed have said, "In the world of sense, I shall not reveal. You, my creatures, are sent to find out." In the world of ultimate questions, however, God apparently has said, "Here you are incapable of discovering ultimate truth. Even when I disclose it to you, in your wickedness you stifle the truth, you refuse to honor me, and hence all your thinking has ended in futility (Romans 1:18-21). I speak to you wherever you are, but your mortality, transiency and fallen nature are such that despite my efforts, you misunderstand me. You speculate, but your religious thinking, together with a little that is sublime, contains much that is foolish, and some that is gross. So I shall progressively reveal truth to a chosen race and culminate my revelation in One Sinless Incarnation who will usher in a new age."

Christians are well aware that unbelievers find it incredible that God (who created the innumerable galaxies of the universe and, no doubt, other universes besides this and who formed man in his own image and endowed him with tremendous powers of thought and self consciousness) should have made his definitive revelation to a tiny tribe in an inconsiderable country through a peasant carpenter. Christians agree that this is very strange, but believe that that is exactly what happened. They are willing to bet their lives on it. That is what makes them Christians.

I have taken time to develop this point, because as Christianity spreads from culture to culture, where we draw the line depends very greatly on whether what I have said truly portrays the nature of the pure essence of the gospel. I have been maintaining that the essential faith is something given, revealed, locked up in the Bible, not to be discerned outside the Bible, inextricably bound up with Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures.

We must, of course, state this truth accurately. I, therefore, explain what it does not mean and then what it does. The faith once for all delivered is not exactly my faith or your faith. It is not a systematic theology, not an organization, not a man-made creed, not the way my church does it or your church does it. Rather, it is that central essential revelation of God's nature and of his will for man which impregnates every one of the 66 canonical books and streams from the risen and reigning Lord, who acts in ways in harmony with those so faithfully recorded in the Bible.

#### The Core of the Pure Faith Defined

This essential core of the Christian religion is broadly and briefly definable. Anything which damages this core is forbidden syncretism. Anything which leaves this core intact is permissible adjustment. To be sure, different churches will draw the lines in slightly different places, but the outlines of the faith once for all delivered to the saints will be clearly visible. As each denomination draws its fine line, the multitude of fine lines will together make one wide line clearly identifying the pure faith. I now attempt a very brief definition of this, trusting that my readers will not rush off to sharpen sectarian scalpels,

but will themselves frame brief definitions. As they do so, I am confident that their pictures will reinforce mine.

(1) The core of the Christian religion is belief in and allegiance to the Triune God only. Christians cannot worship God and mammon, or God and Baal. "You shall have no other gods before me." "There is no other name. . . given among men by which we must be saved"(Acts 4:12).

(2) The core of the Christian religion is belief in the Bible as the only inspired Word of God, the infallible rule of faith and practice. The only certain knowledge which man has of the Triune God is that which he has chosen to reveal in the Bible and in Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures.

(3) The core of the Christian religion consists of those great central facts, commands, ordinances and doctrines which are so clearly set forth in the Bible. Provided this three-fold core is faithfully communicated and honored, almost any custom, belief, symbol or configuration can be adopted into Christian worship, conduct and daily life.

Furthermore, if a church faithfully transmits the first two parts of the core, a degree of elasticity in regard to part 3 can be tolerated. Great elasticity in regard to part 3 cannot be tolerated. No change in a central fact, ordinance or doctrine is acceptable which negates or damages points 1 and 2. However, even substantial changes in doctrines, made in accordance with the biblical revelation, Christ's teaching and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have been acceptable. For example, the Friends' Church--on the ground that the Bible's clear teaching emphasizes inward not outward things--observes neither the Lord's Supper nor baptism. Most other churches feel that the Friends are mistaken in their conviction, but (seeing their unqualified acceptance of Jesus Christ as God and Savior and of the Bible as the authoritative inspired rule of faith and practice) count them as validly Christian. Indeed, provided a church is sound on points 1 and 2, the common practice in the latter half of the twentieth century among most churches is to rate it as validly Christian. The degree of elasticity permitted in forming the great central doctrines varies from denomination to denomination. Some allow a great deal. Some allow very little.

I hold rather precise doctrinal beliefs. I subscribe to the Fuller Seminary statement of faith--and hold it without mental reservation or evasive inner interpretation which says the words but means something else. I commend it. I am confident that the doctrines it sets forth express the clear teaching of the Bible. They are parts of the core of biblical truth, to alter which in order to agree with some other system is unacceptable syncretism. Nevertheless should any church make changes in some of these doctrines--in my statement of faith--and make them in order to be truer to the Bible and more loyal to the Lord, I might call the changes mistakes; I would not call them syncretism.

### THREE FAMOUS ADJUSTMENTS

With the biblical foundations of "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" beginning to come into view, let us observe what adjusting it to cultures has meant in the life of the Church or her missions. I shall present three illustrations, the first from the modern Eurican world. I choose it because the process of making adjustments is substantially the same in every continent and every age. Ethnotheology is constantly being formulated in all cultures, in all ethne. When it is correctly formulated, the church accepts it as valid. When incorrectly, the church rejects that ethnotheology as heresy. We err when we

describe adjustments solely as they take place among animists or polytheists. God has made of one blood all ethne who dwell on the face of the earth, so that what the church ought to do in regard to Eurican cultures will be normative for her as she turns to cultures across the seas. Something very like that is what churches ought to do in Latfricasia.

### Secularism

For illustration one, I use an adjustment which Christianity is currently making to the secular culture, about which everyone in this room has perforce thought deeply. The greatest adjustments which Christianity is making today are to contemporary cultures and philosophies in Eurica, not to those of Stone Age tribes in Irian. Avalanches of scientific facts, unparalleled development of historical and critical thinking, vast new discoveries concerning the age of the solar system, staggering implications of the atomic furnaces which fuel the stars, the awesome power of gravity which may produce "black holes," and the tremendous increase of knowledge about the thousands of ingenious and sensible manners of life which men have fashioned to fit the various environments and circumstances in which they have had to live--all these and many more have created the secular cultures of contemporary man. Secular, self-sufficient man believes that he has come of age and outgrown the notion of a Creator. He confidently proclaims that there is no God "out there." No god exists other than the rather remarkable process by which inanimate matter has become conscious of itself and of the universe about it which wheels through vast spaces quite oblivious of the speck which is human consciousness.

This modern culture, which I am sketching so hastily and inadequately, has many facets. One, it gives birth to a conviction that life is meaningless. That is well described by Camus. He believes that life, though utterly absurd, must be lived with style and faced with courage. Another facet is the way the media steadily portray all new discoveries of science as if they happened by themselves. The media never suggest, for example, that God created man on planet earth and may have created millions of other earths with millions of other races of beings made in the image of God to praise and glorify their Creator.

Another facet is that some philosopher-theologians believe a radically new form of Christianity must be created. Traditional Christianity (creed, cultus, organization and customs) is outworn. Since such philosopher-theologians believe the personal God revealed in the Bible is utterly incredible to contemporary men, the new form they propose is substantially humanism. Paul Tillich, John T. Robinson, the authors of the "God is Dead" way of thought, and many more are well-intentioned men trying to adjust Christianity to twentieth century culture. Their followers defend them on the ground that Christianity must adjust to each culture it enters and must be made credible to the men of that culture. If it be objected that this involves radically changing Christianity, they reply that it is better to change Christianity so that the old forms continue on filled with new meaning, than to have men gradually turn from Christianity to other religions and ideologies.

That the adjustments I refer to sound reasonable to many modern Christians and fit the humanistic mood of contemporary man is beyond debate. Tillich is quoted with approval in ten thousand pulpits weekly--though his adjustment is less and less convincing to Christians. Honest to God has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and been translated into many languages. Those adjustments to

contemporary Eurican culture--those ethnotheologies--were devised by Christians to commend Christianity to today's secularists and to our American Christopagan peers. Whether they actually do so is another matter.

If this skillfully wrought tissue of thought--this adjustment to culture--imperils the faith which God has once for all delivered, it has gone too far; it is syncretism. It should be rejected by intelligent Christians on the grounds that instead of revelation judging culture, in such adjustments the culture has weighed revelation, found it wanting and moulded it into a syncretistic form agreeable to modern man.

When, in adjusting to culture, Christianity becomes unlike itself, takes on the color and genius of another religion and loses its soul, then its power to save is destroyed. Perhaps it does not even attract others. If it attracts them, they belong to its churches but do not meet Christ and are not transformed. When the Roman Catholic Church calls the great industrial areas of France "mission territories" it is saying that in them, while infants are still baptized in Catholic churches and grow up counting themselves in a vague way Catholic, the bulk of the population has really ceased to be Christian. Large sections of Protestant countries are in a similar position. Christianity in such cases has become a culture religion. It has become so closely identified with the culture, it has adjusted so largely and uncritically to the culture, that it has ceased to exist as powerful transforming religion. Culture churches on occasion repeat the words of the Bible like "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (II Corinthians 5:17 RSV), but the reality of being a new creation is unknown to them.

Churches on new ground and on old ground must adjust to cultures, but neither uncritically nor stupidly. Christianity must remain itself. In Eurica today, the pure faith must not be contaminated by secularism. It must speak to secularists, yes. It must use their language and thought forms, yes. It must seek their company and converse with them, yes. It must appreciate the good it finds secularists doing, yes. But it must not become secularism or humanism. Secularism Christianity must reject, for that whole system is built on the conviction that God does not exist or at least does not matter and that the Bible and other god-talk are strictly irrelevant to the good life.

The Bible says it tersely. Christians are to be in but not of the world. Missiology must emphasize both parts of that beautiful sentence. Christians are to be in each culture of the world. That is important. Christians are not to be of any culture in the world. That also is most important.

Under some circumstances missiology should emphasize adjusting to cultures, estimating them highly, avoiding an arrogant ethnocentric posture to the effect that our culture, just because it is ours, is better than your culture. In these circumstances, missiology rightly stresses that missionaries should learn languages thoroughly, identify with the people to whom they go and help converts continue all their good cultural practices.

Under other circumstances, however, when the Christian faith is being so changed by adjustments that it ceases to be Christian, ceases to bring men to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, ceases to believe in biblical truth, loses contact with the living God and begins to live life as if there were no revelation in the Bible, missiology must emphasize preserving the faith once for all delivered to the saints. Missiology must make sure that as Christianity spreads from culture to culture, it is "the pure gospel" which is believed and transmitted, and the

inspired authoritative Word of God written, which is given and received.

### Deism

For illustration two, I turn back a couple of centuries to the deistic culture which swept Europe and America after the discovery of the unchangeable laws which seemed to govern all of life. Mathematics, physics, chemistry, geology and astronomy, all were shown to be ruled by immutable laws. Knowing these laws gave man more control over nature than any amount of prayer or incantation. As it spread, deistic culture did not ban God, it simply assigned to him the role of a far-off original Maker of the Laws. Laws, not God, were seen to govern the universe and everything in it. Any intervention in the closed nexus of law was unthinkable. God never intervened. At most, he might use a law heretofore not discovered by man to achieve his purpose. Miracles were impossible. Prayer was meditation. Its good effects resulted from changes it produced within the men who prayed, not in any action of a personal God outside the process.

This in barest outline was deistic culture. This symposium knows that Christianity ought to adjust to each culture in which it finds itself. Let us see how it ought to have adjusted to deistic culture. According to the Bible, God made this universe. The laws he used in creation were conceived by him. When God said, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3), only a wooden literalism would hold that he pronounced these four English words and in somewhat less than two seconds of time, light burst forth. A more reasonable view of the Bible is that those four words tell us that God created light. The processes by which he wrought the creation may well have taken aeons of time. Recent discoveries as to the way in which God gave our sun and other suns nuclear fuel, which burns for billions of years and thus made light and heat, add to our reverent understanding of his glory and wisdom. Furthermore, the rule of law has enabled men to control nature, rivers, diseases, fertility, heat and cold, and thus add immeasurably to the welfare of men. Since God desires the welfare of men, a culture which emphasizes the means for enhancing human welfare is certainly in the will of God. Christians consequently rejoice in such control and teach God's laws in churches and schools. Deistic culture has much truth and goodness in it, and Christianity ought to incorporate many of its components into itself.

However, this symposium also knows that adjustment can go too far. Whenever adjustment imperils the essence of the faith, syncretism has taken place. Whenever Christians, counting culture of higher value than revelation, cloud the clear teaching of the Bible concerning the nature of God and his will for man and thus adulterate the pure biblical faith, the process of adjustment has gone too far.

As we apply this principle to the intercourse of Christianity with deistic Eurican culture during the last two centuries, we see that some segments of the church made such large adjustments to it that, among their members, they all but destroyed "the faith once for all delivered to the saints." Their Christians grew cold in the grip of iron law. Among them, the vivid experience of meeting the living God occurred rarely. The icy impersonalism of deism emptied their churches. They scorned evangelism. Ethics and law replaced a bubbling joy in the Lord. Prayer seemed futile--they really believed that there was no one out there to hear. All these adjustments to the deistic culture were syncretisms. Under the guise of adjusting Christianity to a rational culture, theologians and leaders of these segments of the church gave birth to a new syncretistic religion. They still called it Christianity. It used the old familiar words.



It met in church houses and listened to robed choirs. It sang hymns and employed ministers trained in seminaries which devoted themselves to hastening the adjustment to deistic culture. It looked very like Christianity--but it radically disbelieved the Bible, had little faith in the resurrection of our Lord and had little power. It converted few sinners. In America, it maintained itself by proselytizing out of the orthodox churches Christians whose faith had grown cold. It emphasized ethics--partly because righteousness was the one component of the pure faith in which it yet believed, and partly because, having lost the vertical dimension, it had to compensate by stressing the horizontal. Missiologists do not have to go abroad to observe the tragic futility of syncretism.

We should note that these major wrong adjustments to deistic culture did not have to take place. They could have been avoided. Many segments of the church did avoid them. It is clear to all thinking men that as far as the rule of law is concerned, God made the laws and is not bound by them save as he wills to be bound. God is not a helpless prisoner of the universe he has made. If puny man can so manipulate law as to hurl rockets weighing hundreds of tons clear of global gravity, God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, can easily find ways to do anything he wants. If a mortal man by the power of his thought alone can set his ten pounds of blood pounding in his veins, surely the Great Thinker can cause all sorts of changes in inert matter, and even more easily in thinking willing men.

The arguments from reason, just tendered, are not the Christian's strongest. His strongest arguments are from revelation. God's revelation assures him that God has given him dominion over all the earth and directs him to get wisdom to enable him to rule well. The Bible also assures the Christian that the earth is the Lord's, the whole universe holds together in Christ, not a sparrow falls to the ground without the Father's will, and God hears and answers prayer. Missiologists adjusting Christianity to a culture dominated by the rule of law must leave such biblical faith intact.

That the biblical faith, when presented to unbelievers in the culture, seem credible is important, but not most important. The task of the Christian is to make his faith seem reasonable to men, but more important than making it seem reasonable, is that he present it faithfully. He must always be sure that--like his Lord--he says only that which God gives him to say. He must not tamper with the revelation. Even the new light which God gives him from time to time through the Word, must be brought into harmony with the Light which entered the world in Jesus Christ and lies enshrined in the Bible.

In making adjustments to fit different cultures, to be particularly avoided as essentially evil is the process by which old sacred words are filled with radically different meanings and used without making it clear that their content has been thoroughly changed. When one speaks of "prayer" and means meditation, or speaks of the "atonement" and means what man does for himself, or talks about "revelation" but means what man has discovered by his unaided reason, then hypocrisy and dishonesty are abroad in the land. Some cynical Christians announce that they practice "morphological fundamentalism." By this, they mean that they use the old forms, the dear words which time and usage have made sacred and powerful, but use them with radically new meanings. In effect, they perpetrate a pious fraud on the church and defend it on the ground that Christianity must always adjust to culture. New knowledge must indeed be added to the golden store of wisdom, and truth must be expressed in meaningful current terms, but it must be truth which

is expressed. Plain honesty demands either that new words be employed to convey new meanings, or that the changed meanings of the old words be called sharply to the attention.

### Arianism

My third illustration of the way in which Christians should and should not make adjustments to culture goes back to the third and fourth centuries A.D. As Christianity spread around the Mediterranean, it encountered many cultures, many philosophies and many religions in which incarnations, saviors and god-men of various sorts were worshipped. Garbe believes that Mahayana Buddhism, teaching many reincarnations of the Buddha, was well-known around the Mediterranean (1959:71, 78). If one realizes that the Greek word gnosis would inevitably be used for the Sanskrit buddhi and Buddhism would necessarily portray itself as a gnosticism, Garbe's belief seems reasonable. Indeed, gnosticism may be the form in which Buddhism appeared when it spread into the West. There are some remarkable parallels. Be that as it may, the cultures of that day (except for the growing Christian culture) were generally friendly to the idea of incarnations and saviors and salvific rites and ceremonies. Saviors were conceived of as emanations of the One, the Supreme, the Monad, the Unknowable. A characteristic feature of gnosticism was that of the Primal Man, who existed before the world, a prophet who went through the world in various forms and finally revealed himself in Christ and other saviors. Manicheism also taught that the God of Light begot the Primal Man and sent him to fight against Satan--Primal Man in the character of Christ disseminated the true gnosis. But none of the gnostics would have claimed that the saviors they knew were God, the One, the Absolute, or were of one substance with the Absolute.

In the Mediterranean culture I have been describing, the presbyter-theologian Arius about A.D. 320 was trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in a gnostic or neoplatonic way in order to preserve the uniqueness of God the Father. Arius taught that Christ was created by God the Father and was less than God, though higher than man. Arius was describing the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (all clearly taught in the apostolic writings) and describing it in an intellectual climate shot through and through with ideas of saving emanations, who were created by and were less than God. In short, Arius was formulating an ethnotheology, or adjusting Christian theology to contemporary gnostic culture. Jesus Christ, he felt, could be best understood were he to be seen as created by God. Arius did not want to ask men to believe that Jesus Christ was One with the Father--an idea alien to gnostic culture and difficult for men of that century to conceive. While by 325 (the date of the Council of Nicea) the battle against gnosticism was being won, gnostic ideas were still common coin. They appeared reasonable to men both within and without the church. Floyd Filson, the New Testament scholar says,

The ancient world was a ferment of competing philosophies and religions. Denunciations of false teachers in the New Testament show that not every Christian teacher avoided the danger of surrendering to the world something essential (1973:707).

So Arius taught that Christ was not God. Some passages in the New Testament, taken by themselves, supported his position and he and his many followers leaned heavily on them.

The Arian accomodation to the culture of the early fourth century had two fatal weaknesses. First, it allowed for the existence of other emanations. Perhaps the Arian preacher did not advertise these. We may hope that he advocated Christ. But by teaching that Jesus Christ was created by God, he opened the door to the thought that God had created other Primal Men, prophets, teachers, and saviors. The Arian formulation permitted doctrines to arise which flatly contradicted the pure faith. Second, Arius brushed aside and explained away the many passages of the Bible which imply the trinitarian faith. The Bible does not clearly set forth trinitarian doctrine, but many passages lead straight in that direction. They cannot be understood save on the hypothesis of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, all uncreated, all existing from before time and all constituting one God. Stated in any language, adjusted to any culture, these biblical affirmations must come through.

As the Arian adjustment to gnostic culture spread and flourished, many orthodox leaders of the church believed that a vital part of the biblical evidence was being suppressed, the pure faith was being altered, syncretism was occurring. The apostolic faith was being displaced and adulterated by the non-Christian culture. These leaders gathered to draw the line, to state in contemporary terms (which were also true to the teaching of the apostles in the canonical books of the New Testament) the faith once for all delivered to the saints. They took with utmost seriousness both the passages which affirm the humanity of Jesus Christ and those which affirm his deity. The issue was a most important one. It concerned the very center of the faith. It also concerned the authority of the Bible. Was John's prologue, for example, just an awkward passage voiced in an earlier Greek culture which had little meaning for men in the fourth century? Or was it an intergral part of what God had revealed? Would the prologue stand for all time? The Council deliberated at length and finally pronounced Arius' adjustment--his ethnotheology--a heresy. The Nicene creedal statement ends with these plain words:

As for those who assert that there was a time when He was not, and that before He was begotten He was not, and that He was made out of nothing, or that He is of a different substance or essence, or that the Son of God is created, changeable, mutable--these men the universal Church declares anathema (Musurillo 1962:598).

Sound Christology, adjusting to any culture whatever, must satisfy all the biblical data--not just some of them, not just those which state the Lord's humanity. Every low Christology falters at this point. It can appear reasonable only if it warps or by-passes those passages which speak so clearly of Christ's divinity and tie the Holy Spirit so closely to him and to the Father.

It is worth noting that the same church which pronounced anathema on Arius' adjustment to the dangerous gnostic culture, instructed the missionary Boniface in discipling the German tribes to allow or rather to engineer many minor syncretistic adjustments to their weak and disappearing former pagan faith. Of these the most famous is the celebration of the winter solstice as the birthday of the Lord and the use of a tree sacred in the pagan faith as part of the festivities. I am preparing this chapter during the Christmas season and I must confess that I am grateful for this bit of ethnotheology, for the instructions which the Pope sent to the missionary Boniface.

CONTRASTS BETWEEN DR. TIPPETT'S  
ILLUSTRATIONS AND MINE

Dr. Tippett chose his illustrations of faulty adjustments exclusively from one rather narrow segment of churchly experience. I have chosen mine from a much wider segment lying at the opposite pole. Four contrasts thus afforded will help us see the real issues involved in our subject.

First, the faulty adjustments he cited could easily have been prevented by the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America. It was wealthy, powerful and in full control of the situation. At its top levels, it would certainly have judged then (as it judges now) that these adjustments were erroneous. The resulting religion was not Roman Catholic Christianity. Faulty adjustments were allowed, however, partly through inertia, but mostly through a race pride which despised the ignorant Indians and permitted them to do whatever was culturally agreeable to them as long as they paid token respect to the church. One might almost say that sensitiveness to tribal beliefs and reluctance to replace them created the Christopaganism which Dr. Tippett and other missiologists today find appalling.

The faulty adjustments to secularism, deism and gnosticism I have presented could not have been prevented by the churches concerned. No one church was in charge. The adjustments rose within the churches and were only gradually recognized as wrong. At first they appeared to be merely restatements of Christian faith in the thought forms of the dominant culture. It was argued that they would benefit Christianity, indeed, that they alone would enable it to survive. Only gradually did it become clear that they distorted or denied the clear teaching of our Lord and his apostles as recorded in the canonical books.

Second, the erroneous accommodations Dr. Tippett describes were made by the conquered Indian tribesmen--depressed and illiterate men, who knew very little of Christianity and nothing of the Bible. Those I have set forth were made by highly educated men, most of them ordained ministers, who knew the Christian system thoroughly well.

Third, in the Indian populations of Latin America, faulty adjustment was caused by criminal neglect on the part of a wealthy powerful church, which did not approve of Christopaganism but winked at it. In the Eurican populations of the last two hundred years, by way of contrast, faulty adjustments were caused by intelligent Christians and the churches they controlled consciously adjusting to culture and consciously slighting portions of Scripture which were inconvenient to their purposes.

Fourth, Dr. Tippett was portraying the adjustment-syncretism axis of dominantly non-Christian countries. I have been portraying it in dominantly Christian lands, believing that the principles of correct adjustment are the same everywhere. Ethnotheology is being framed in Eurica just as much if not more than in Latfricasia. Each ethnos in which the church forms requires a statement of biblical truth in its thought forms and idioms. When we think of adjustment solely in terms of tribal peoples, often the victims of Eurican imperialism, we confuse the issue. We rush to champion the oppressed. The Eurican guilt complex deprives us of good judgment. We emotionally declare everything Eurican no better than everything tribal. As a result, the question to which we address ourselves soon becomes: Should Euricans oppress Latfricasians?

This is scarcely the subject of the Carter Symposium! The question facing us is: Granted that Christianity should adjust to each culture from which men become

Christians, when does legitimate adjustment become illegitimate syncretism? I have turned our attention away from victims of Eurican exploitation, away from tribal populations, so that we can see the real question. I trust that this change of direction has enriched our understanding of the vast and intricate subject before us.

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have not been engaging in a theological digression. The subject is inescapably theological. The right questions must be theological and the right answers must be theological. Christians being who they are and the Bible being what it is, the Carter Symposium must be built upon theological and biblical considerations.

From among the many emphases let me, in conclusion, call attention to four of great importance. First, Christianity necessarily adjusts to cultures. Such adjustment goes on ceaselessly in every age and at every level. The revelation God has given us in the Bible is a progressive revelation culminating in his Son, our Savior. The living church, constantly meeting new conditions, lives in a constant tension between the biblical given and the changing culture.

Second, erroneous adjustments are easy to make. The men who make them are fallible. The problems they face are complex. The church lives in the midst of ambiguities. Good Christians differ in regard to what the revelation is. Sin within effectively misleads us. As a result, Christian leaders often make grave errors in adjusting to cultures, jeopardize the health and welfare of the church and become what Jude calls "enemies of religion" (v. 4 NEB).

Third, these errors arise mainly from failing to take all the biblical data seriously. The Bible, we believe, contains all that is necessary for our guidance, but the whole Bible must be our guide. The apostolic faith is built on the total witness of the whole Bible, considered as unity, each part contributing to the one revelation given by God which is the Christian faith.

Fourth, that the right formulation of any adjustment to culture will be in harmony with all the biblical evidence as well as be couched in terms understandable by men in that culture. The right formulation does not have to be pleasing to that culture, but it does have to be understandable. The exclusiveness of the Nicene position, for example, must have been highly displeasing to gnostic culture, but it was beautifully clear.

#### Note:

1. Latfricasia: Latin America, Africa and Asia; Eurica: Europe and North America. Readers will kindly forgive the inconvenience caused by these contractions. When it is necessary as in this chapter, to refer repeatedly to these areas, much time is saved by the contractions.