

In what way should the mission movements of the Majority World use narrative?

By Robert Strauss

It seems everyone everywhere is using story. It is a more effective means of communication. But, we know that the story format alone does not displace a worldview. It alone does not prevent syncretism. It alone does not build a new worldview. Given these realities, in what way should the mission movements of the Majority World use narrative?

India – Prominent in the Majority World Mission Movement

For more than a few years the consultants of Worldview Resource Group (WRG) had been praying about working in India, and there we were, teaching three courses to Masters level students at the Academy for Church Planting and Leadership (ACPL) in Bangalore. Most of the 26 students were from the states of Nagaland and Manipur; others were from West Bengal, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka. It was November 2007 and consultants from Worldview Resource Group were at ACPL by the invitation of its Founder and President, Rev. Jayakumar. The three courses WRG facilitated in the ACPL Tribal Track of missionary training focused on: (a) worldview issues in cross-cultural ministry, (b) ethno-religionists, and (c) narrative as a missiological strategy and methodology.

India is the 2nd most populous nation on earth with over 1 billion people, originating from more than 400 ethnic groups (Barrett, Kurian, and Johnson, 2001). With an estimated population of 6.5 billion people and considered to be the fastest growing city in India due to the IT industry, Bangalore is the capital of the state of Karnataka. Also known as the Garden City, it is home to numerous evangelical institutions and ministries. For example, founded in 1984 by Graham Houghton, the South Asia Institute of Advanced Christian Studies (SAIACS) is a premier institute for higher training in South Asia. Also



Figure 1: Political map of India

in Bangalore is the India Evangelical Mission (IEM), now under the leadership of Rev. P. John Wesley, with his wife Mercy. IEM has over 600 missionaries working among the tribal peoples of India and South Asia.

The mission movement in India is well established and capably organized (see details at Barnabas, 2005, pp. 264-290). The India Missions Association (IMA) is a network of over 250 national sending agencies and mission organizations. The India Institute of Missiology (IIM), directed by C. Barnabas and headquartered in Trichy, Tamil Nadu, oversees and accredits approximately 50 Indian missionary training centers. In 2007, the IIM launched a PhD Programme to offer post-graduate degrees in missiology to the emerging leaders and trainers in the India mission movement. Currently there are nine scholars enrolled in the PhD Programme that is being directed by Siga Arles.

The Academy for Church Planting and Leadership, the 4-year missionary training institution where we taught, is one of the auspicious trainer centers in the IIM network. Without a doubt the mission movement within and from India is prominent in the Majority World mission enterprise.

Pervasive Syncretism

In the course at ACPL on ethnoreligion [also termed *animism* (Van Rheenen, 1991) or *indigenous spirituality* (Fisher, 2002)], the MA students from Nagaland and Manipur expressed gratefulness that the Gospel had come to their region of India through American Baptist missionaries 150 years ago. By some classifications, the northeast states are considered Christian, not Hindu. Yet, the students told many stories of wide-spread syncretism. Eugene Nida wrote, “Syncretism involves an accommodation of content, a synthesis of beliefs, and an amalgamation of world views, in such a way as to provide some common basis for constructing a new system or a new approach” (1990, p. 131; see also Van Rheenen, 1997, p. 173).

A story from the northeast describes a function of the evangelical pastors. If someone is frightened by an unexpected phenomenon, that person’s human spirit will leave the body and go to a field adjacent to the village. The person ought to immediately go home and rest because of the imminent threat of physical illness. The pastor is summoned at once. As part of his understood responsibilities, he will go to the field and retrieve the human spirit through an incantation. Carrying the disembodied human spirit on his back, the pastor will make his way to the person’s home without stopping or conversing with anyone. Through another incantation he will impart the spirit to the person who then is restored to wholeness and is freed from the threat of illness.

Syncretism is rampant in evangelical churches worldwide (Hesselgrave, 2006, p. 72). This fact is well established and was addressed by the publication of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) in 2006, “Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents,” edited by Gailyn Van Rheenen. Such stories among Christ followers are common all over the world. In

Bolivia an evangelical pastor saw a fox in his bedroom window and knew it was his reincarnated grandfather. In Argentina water bottles are placed at the shrine of the “Difunta Correa” who then in turn will impart good fortune when one is traveling. In Riga, Latvia a scarf is used to cover the front of one’s neck to prevent evil spirits from entering the body. On the island of Java in Indonesia, shamans play the singularly key role in the multi-stage 1000-day migration of the human spirit from earth to heaven after death. This *selamatan* celebration permeates Javanese culture. However, in the evangelical churches, the pastor has replaced the shaman. In the United States pastors have addressed split-level Christianity (Hiebert, Shaw, & Tienou, 1999) by preaching on “Lordship salvation,” while failing to realize that split-level Christianity is a worldview issue of syncretism rather than a topic related to salvation. Paul Hiebert and his colleagues analyze split-level Christianity correctly. “The problem here is not with old religious beliefs, but with the underlying assumptions on which they are built. The gospel must not only change beliefs, but also transform worldviews; otherwise the new beliefs will be reinterpreted in terms of the old worldviews” (p. 378).

Emanuel Gerritt Singgih, Dean of Post-Graduate Studies at Duta Wacana Christian University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia astutely highlights the power of a worldview when he writes, “In Africa, many Christian leaders and intellectuals suddenly realize that the primal worldviews which they disdainfully termed as ‘primitive religions’ are not gone at all, but together with Islam are now thriving, i.e., their numbers are increasing rapidly. Many are acknowledging that the grassroots primal worldviews are never put aside” (2000, pp. 361-362). Van Rheezen concurs, “Christian conversion without worldview change in reality is syncretism” (1991, p. 89).

Responsibility and Remedy

The purpose of this overall chapter is not to illustrate the pervasiveness of syncretism in evangelical Christianity both in the United States and around the world. This has already been established. Rather, my intention is to inquire about a change in strategy. Clearly God has shifted the lotus of Christian mission to the South and East (Engel & Dyrness, 2000; Jenkins, 2002, 2006; Neill, 1986; and Walls, 2003). The Majority World will lead the mission enterprise into the future and accordingly, this will call for a change in roles for those of us in the current mission enterprise. What will we do? Should what has been done in the past continue to be done? In David Hesselgrave’s challenge to the established mission enterprise, he asked to what degree that enterprise is responsible for the “pervasive syncretism” (2006, p. 72) and in what ways can we help with a remedy? If we do humbly acknowledge our responsibility for a pervasive syncretism, what is our role in examining a more effective strategy in partnership with the Majority World mission leaders?

From our weeks of interacting with the Masters-level students from the northeast of India, it was clear that the syncretism in Manipur and Nagaland was closely related to the unbiblical bifurcation of high and low religions. High religions typically answer cosmic questions related to: origins, purpose, destiny, ultimate reality, and truth. High religions have written texts and are often institutionalized. In contrast, low religions are concerned with the affairs of daily life,

such as the surety of a good crop, reasons for drought, and how to attain good fortune or avoid calamity. The questions are existential rather than cosmic. Without written texts, traditions are passed along through storytelling symbols and repeated rituals (Steffen, 2005, p. 164). Successful living requires rituals that seek to attain and maintain control of gods, spirits, ancestors, and impersonal forces (Hiebert, Shaw, & Tienou, 1999). While high religionists concentrate on truth, low religionists seek power.

It has been the “almost universal tendency” of mission and missionary to present biblical truth as a high religion (Hesselgrave, 2006, p. 76), addressing outward behaviors and socio-cultural institutions (note the worldview model in Figure 2 adapted from Barney, 1973; also see Hesselgrave, 1991). Furthermore, the presentation has most often been in the form of teaching propositional truth topically. All the while, “the old worldview that influences all else in ways not readily observable is allowed to remain more or less intact. Outer layer change unaccompanied by a corresponding worldview transformation inevitably leads to syncretism” (Hesselgrave, 2006, p. 77).

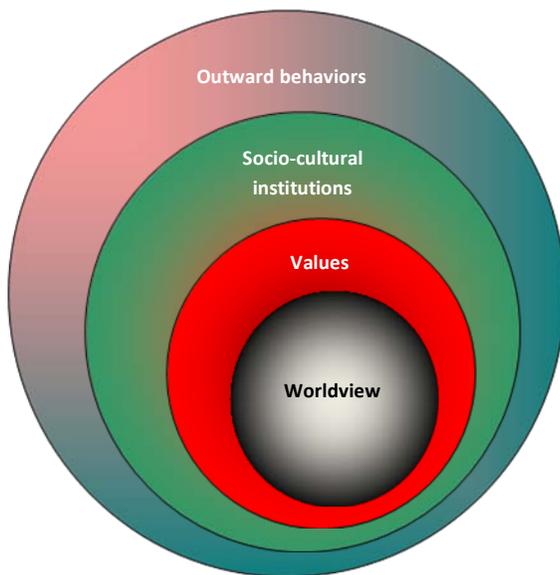


Figure 2: Worldview model

In the training seminars sponsored by Worldview Resource Group (WRG), attended primarily by mission leaders or trainers, the humble acknowledgement of syncretism is not what other evangelical Christians are doing, but what the participants themselves are practicing on a daily basis. For example, participants at the WRG seminars have told the facilitators that they:

- Sleep with their head facing in the east, the source of good energy; by so doing one will live a long life
- Sleep with their Bible near their head; if alarmed in the night, they touch the Bible to provide protection from evil spirits; additionally, the power from the Bible will be

absorbed while one sleeps

- Keep a Bible in the home opened to Psalm 91 to protect the household from malevolent spirit beings and impersonal forces
- Read coffee grounds at the bottom of the coffee cup to predict the future
- Hang garlic outside the entrance to their homes to ward off the power of the evil eye
- Believe they have seen tigers turn into men and men into tigers
- Feel they have seen a woman’s hand grow into a tiger’s paw

These simple illustrations of syncretistic beliefs and behavior among evangelicals are not mere cognitive presuppositions that are presumed lightly. These are cultural assumptions that are held with deep emotion (Redfield, 1953, pp. 85-86) and represent an assumed structure of reality (Geertz, 1973, p. 129). Based upon history and memory, these cultural assumptions are

part of a whole system of powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting “moods and motivations” (p. 78).

The students from Manipur and Nagaland testified that the Bible and the evangelical church provide the solution to sin and a way to heaven. But, in daily life, the old tribal beliefs and rituals are widely prevalent and zealously practiced. The old forms, functions, and meanings of the low religion have been retained (Kraft, 1999). In essence, the Bible, representing high religion, has been laid over the top of animism, the pragmatic low religion that works in daily life. As such, the animist’s basic understanding of the nature of reality is not displaced by the presentation of biblical topics and truths. In actuality, such phenomenological structures and systems indeed cannot be displaced by the traditional presentation of dogma from the high religion. The history of Christian expansion has dramatically shown that syncretism is the assured end result. Hence, tigers are turning into men and men into tigers. A multitude of malicious spirit beings and impersonal forces is the lotus of reality and as such the focus of daily life. God the Creator is not the sovereign LORD. Jesus Christ is not preeminent. Yet, paradoxically, the problem is not doctrinal. “There are within Hinduism large numbers who are the victims of superstition, but even in countries where the higher civilization is said to have displaced the lower, the lower still persists (Radhakrishnan, 1988, p. 38).

The insidious influence of worldview systems is not a new concept. We have understood this reality for a long time. Many years ago Bronislaw Malinowski wrote, “Magic and religion are not merely a doctrine or a philosophy, not merely an intellectual body of opinion, but a special mode of behavior, a pragmatic attitude built up of reason, feeling and will alike. It is a module of action as well as a system of belief, and a sociological phenomenon as well as a personal experience” (1925, p. 24). What is emerging as new is an understanding of how to communicate more effectively at a worldview level, even how to address an entire worldview system that is emotionally embraced.

Narrative, A Missiological Strategy and Methodology

The entire missionary enterprise, along with most of Western culture, is embracing the effective method of storytelling. Story is the new language of marketing, management, psychology, and education.

The entertainment industry has unmistakably understood the power of story. Last year my wife and I faithfully watched American Idol, USA. One of the contestants was from an evangelical church where my wife’s nephew was an associate pastor. We felt an immediate connection with the contestant and the show. Each week we voted repeatedly for Chris on our mobile phones. We were not just watching a show, we were part of it! The lives of the contestants were explored through personal interviews and video clips of their families and homes. Each week was suspenseful; not until the end of the show did the judges, contestants, and viewers know who was voted off and going home and who was staying another week. The show was emotional, exciting, and addictive.

Story involves more than cognitive reasoning; it invokes emotion. It is not just information (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 143-144). It implants images that are life related. Story mobilizes reason and emotion; therefore it most closely resembles experience (Curtis & Eldridge, 1997, p. 38; note how Laurie Green links “word” and “event”, 1999). Story has the ability to make one hopeful, uncomfortable, happy, sad, angry, and empathetic, spanning the entire spectrum of human feeling. Through conflict and mystery, story stirs the imagination, creates curiosity, and fosters hope. A good story has a rhythm of expectation and satisfaction (Egan, 1986, pp. 25-26). Story draws the listeners into the narrative so that they are not just hearing the story or simply observing the plot and action as a distant spectator (Fackre, 1975, p. 59). They are “in the story.” Story is not in opposition to propositional truth, but rather story illuminates propositional truth (Miller, 1987, p. 132). Story makes meaning even in the midst of chaotic facts. By weaving together the setting, characters, plot, storyline, ideal/un-ideal arch-types, and foils, story creates a comprehensive whole (Ryken, 2005, pp. 53-89). It is this final characteristic that is the true power of story, that is, “the comprehensive whole.”

The optimal insight into the narrative world is to understand the role of narrative in creating the overarching meta-narrative (Wright, 1992, pp. 37-80). We must keep learning, moving beyond simply converting the doctrinal topics from systematic textbooks into story formats. Furthermore, the comprehensive whole of the biblical narrative is markedly more significant than picking the top ten stories from the Old and New Testaments. If one only converts topics to a story format or simply chooses the top stories in the Bible, these well-intended remedies actually fall short. Is it possible that they may be continuations of the same methodologies that historically have caused syncretism (see Peter Block, 1993, p. 208, regarding culture change)? Neither one addresses an overarching worldview. It is the whole biblical canon as a source of authority and truth in contemporary culture that is important to the cross-cultural worker (Wright, 1997).

Regarding current strategies and methodologies, “we have fragmented the Bible into bits – moral bits, systematic-theology bits, devotional bits, historical-critical bits, narrative bits. When the Bible is broken up in this way there is no comprehensive grand narrative to withstand the power of the comprehensive humanist narrative that shapes our culture” (Goheen, 2005, pp. 5-6). Note carefully Michael Goheen’s insight – narrative bits. The objective of storytelling is not merely an adjustment in the delivery of curriculum content where hard facts are converted to story. But narrative must involve a patient and careful building of a comprehensive framework that is new and holistic – a worldview framework rooted in the Bible itself. In fact, the whole of the Bible is the comprehensive framework – the overarching meta-narrative. Leland Ryken argues that “the whole story is the meaning” (2005, p. 88).

The Overarching Story – A Missiological Strategy for Majority World Mission Movements?

The history of Christian expansion vividly demonstrates that the Gospel is more than creeds, catechisms, and confessions.¹ As rich as these documents are in history and tradition, they are esteemed and venerable symbols of the high religion of Christianity. But, outside of the narrative format of Scripture, they do not create an overarching story. Yes, hypotheses, assumptions, and presuppositions are embedded in story, but when they are removed from the story context – the teller, hearer, storyworld, and story line – the overarching framework of God’s view of reality is diminished. Kevin Bradt (1997) argues that human knowing, thinking, and consciousness are inextricably tied to a mode of communication, namely story. He writes, “Story is not just an art form or literary genre but a way of structuring thought (p. 233). Ken Gnanakan’s call to “recover the significance” of the creeds (2004, p. 24) will be answered by “reclaiming story” (Bradt, 1997, p. 88).

Knowledge that comes in and through the action of storing is mediated as a holographic whole: that is, it is formed by the dynamic interacting of parts together and reveals itself from multiple perspectives and dimensions through multiple modalities simultaneously. Any attempts to isolate, analyze, or separate out any of the individual operations of this contemporaneous contextual event of knowing would destroy the singleness and unity of the experience; it is by its very nature and constitution, intrinsically multimodal and must be grasped as such. (p. 12)

The parts of the biblical story cannot be isolated or separated from the contemporaneous context of the metanarrative if the hearer is to fully understand the meaning of the component parts. In other words, it is imperative that we see the whole of Scripture as a complete system where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.² In systems thinking the parts cannot be understood in isolation from the whole. Rather than fragmentation, in the whole the parts are interrelated and interdependent.

Furthermore, the story hearer is drawn into the story. Bradt continues that storying demands interactive relationships of personal presence in the here-and-now (1997, p. 233). The bits of systematic theology (Goheen, 2005) can be “unmoored from interests” and disconnected from overarching, pertinent, and real questions (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, p. 138). The hearer will not interpret the narrative bits through the comprehensive whole of the Bible, but through the existing meta-narrative in which the he already sees himself. He already is “in a story.”

¹ These documents of endearment include early Christian creeds like the Nicene Creed dated 325 AD. The following represents some of the confessions from the Reformation: Belgic Confession (1561), Heidelberg Catechism (1576), Canons of Dort (1619), and Westminster Confession (1647).

² The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Water is an illustration. Water (H²O) as a whole has the characteristic of wetness. Neither of the separated component parts has such a characteristic.

Written as a polemic to the cultures of the Ancient Near East (ANE) – cultural cosmologies that were polytheistic, animistic, and holistic at their core (Frankfort, 2000) – the narrative of Genesis begins with God’s description of real time/space history. Rather than a linear argument through perhaps a syllogism, God begins the dramatic narrative of Scripture with the story of creation. The uninterrupted storyline continues throughout the Bible building the framework of God’s view of reality and, as such, the basis for all meaning. God Himself is the protagonist of the story. In every way and in every place, the Bible is theocentric. God defines origin, purpose, destiny, morality, structures, who is man, what is non-man, boundaries (does a man turn into a tiger and a tiger into a man?), relationships (born out the Triune God Himself), cause and effect, power, and hierarchy.

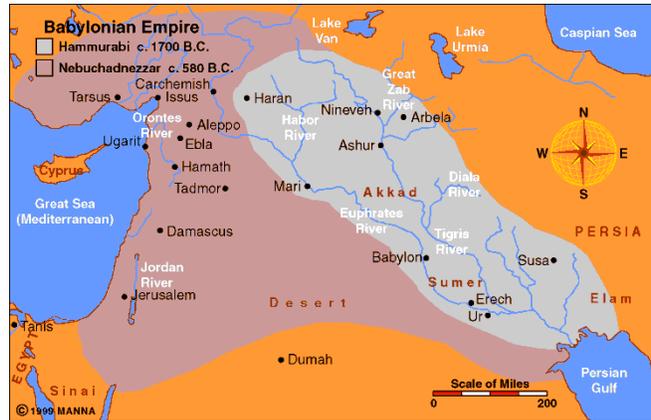


Figure 3: The Babylonian Empire of the ANE

In the first 11 chapters of Genesis alone, the hearer “sees” the reality of one³ Sovereign God who is moral and predictable. The gods of the Ancient Near East cosmologies were neither. The storyline introduces: values (God saw that the light was good), designations (he separated light from darkness; “A” is “A” and “A” is not “non-A”), time, space (God called the expanse “sky”), history set in motion (there was evening and there was morning – the second day), ecological systems, God’s sovereign control over all His creation, the uniqueness of mankind (created in the image of God), human responsibility in the creation, God’s goodness and kindness (the Provider of food, heat, rest, and enjoyment), God as the source of life, the introduction of epistemology, theodicy, the origin of sin⁴, the cause of death, delegation, the institution of marriage, the ability to be self-aware, procreation, accountability for sin, a line of people who are God-fearers, man’s helplessness in his sin, judgment, covenant relationships, God’s faithfulness in remembering mankind, both God’s transcendence and immanence, human government, and much more. All this is embedded in the story! The context is real history.

Richard Bauckham writes that a meta-narrative “is an attempt to grasp the meaning and destiny of human history as a whole by telling a single story about it; to encompass, as it were, all the immense diversity of human stories in a single, overall story which integrates them into a single meaning...a single story about the whole of human history in order to attribute a single integrated meaning to the whole. It is a totalizing framework, one which tries to subsume everything within its concept of the truth” (1993, pp. 4, 86-87). The overarching story validates or invalidates all other stories (Ward, 2003). Note Donald Carson application of this critical truth

³ Albright writes that Moses “demythologized” religion by eliminating specifically polytheistic elements in the Genesis narrative (1968:184).

⁴ Man’s choice of good and evil is a concept foreign to Islamic theology. Compare Genesis 2:17

to the use of Scripture. "The Bible as a whole document tells a story, and, properly used, that story can serve as a meta-narrative that shapes our grasp of the entire Christian faith. In my view it is increasingly important to spell this out to Christians and to non-Christians, as part of our proclamation of the gospel. The ignorance of basic Scripture is so disturbing in our day that Christian preaching that does not seek to remedy the lack is simply irresponsible" (1996, p. 84).

Hiebert and his colleagues argue that "ultimately, meaning is to be found in the cosmic story: the 'big' story about the beginning, meaning, and ending of all things" (1999, p. 115). "The good news story of the Bible should be told as a whole" (p. 278). As an illustration of methodology, the authors refer to New Tribes Mission (NTM), an organization that has worked in traditional societies for the past 60 years. From the basic model of NTM's chronological Bible teaching, numerous adaptations have been made.⁵

New Tribes Mission and others strongly emphasize "pre-evangelism," that is, taking the time to build personal relationships in the context of the host society. The implications of establishing trust bonds in deep relationships mean that the storyteller will learn language and understand culture to an effective level of proficiency. A major goal in culture investigation is learning the core worldview assumptions of the host society. Thereby, strategic storying targets worldview assumptions. The story objectives are not generic or random; they are purposeful.

Tom Steffen (1997) provides a straightforward overview of the stages in cross-cultural ministry. His reflections are based on his years of cross-cultural ministry in the Philippines among the Ifugao people. In Table 1, I adapt Steffen's stages adjusting some of the terminology found in Steffen's book "Passing the Baton: Church Planting that Empowers."

Table 1: The Five-Stage Strategy for Cross-Cultural Ministry				
Pre-Entry	Pre-Evangelism	Evangelism	The Developing Church	The Maturing Church
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research ▪ Training ▪ Team formation ▪ Strategy of ministry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relationships ▪ Culture and language acquisition ▪ Worldview analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Storying ▪ Curriculum development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contextualization ▪ Discipleship ▪ Leadership development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Transition of roles ▪ Multiplication
<p>*Steffen's book "Passing the Baton" has been translated into Spanish by Recursos Estrategicos Globales in Cordoba, Argentina for use by Latino missionaries in the Ibero-America mission movement. Also, an English version of the book is used by the PhD Programme of the India Institute of Missiology.</p>				

⁵ For the historical foundations of a storied presentation of the Bible, see Tom Steffen and J.O. Terry, "The Sweeping Story of Scripture Taught through Time." *Missiology: An International Review*. July 2007, 35(3): 315-335.

Table 1 amusingly depicts someone “parachuting in” at the Evangelism stage, bypassing Pre-Entry and Pre-Evangelism. Not only has the Western mission enterprise tended to present biblical truth as a high religion, but regrettably we now tend to bypass crucial stages of the overall strategy of multiplication and thus our tactics foster deadly syncretism. Perhaps based on our Western values, today we stress efficiency, rapid deployment, and a quick Return-On-Investment. If we value story, we must see the inextricable link between story, relationships, and worldview.

What will be passed along to the Majority World mission movements from the existing mission enterprise? Will these emerging missiologists use storytelling simply as another way to delivery curriculum, that is, merely a means of communication? After all, storytelling is more effective. Or will the Majority World mission movements embrace the true power of narrative? Will its missiologists present the whole biblical story as the meta-narrative of reality, not only to displace the old worldview, but to build a worldview and transform people and communities? Understanding the difference between these questions is critical. The answers to these questions will dramatically impact the unending pervasiveness of syncretism.

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