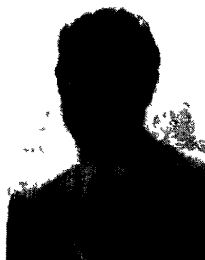


The Flaw of the Excluded Middle

PAUL G. HIEBERT



Western world view has a blind spot that makes it difficult for many Western missionaries to understand, let alone answer, problems related to spirits, ancestors and astrology. Dr. Hiebert here brings us a reevaluation of these problems from a Biblical perspective which challenges some of the assumptions of Western theology and opens the door for a more holistic, relational and relevant theology of mission.

“JOH^N’S DISCIPLES asked, ‘Are you he that should come, or do we look for another?’ ” (Lk 7:20). Jesus answered not with logical proofs, but by a demonstration of power in the curing of the sick and casting out of evil spirits. So much is clear. Yet when I read the passage as a missionary in India, and sought to apply it to missions in our day, I had a sense of uneasiness. As a Westerner, I was used to presenting Christ on the basis of rational arguments, not by evidences of his power in the lives of people who were sick, possessed and destitute. In particular, the confrontation with spirits that appeared so natural a part of Christ’s ministry belonged in my mind to a separate world of the miraculous — far from ordinary everyday experience.

The same uneasiness came to me early in my ministry in India. One day, while teaching in the Bible school in Shamshabad, I saw

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Yellayya standing in the door at the back of the class. He looked tired, for he had walked many miles from Muchintala where he was an elder in the church. I assigned the class some reading and went with him to the office. When I asked why he had come, he said that a few weeks earlier smallpox had come to the village and taken a number of children. Doctors trained in Western medicine had tried to halt the plague but without success. Finally, in desperation the village elders had sent for a diviner who told them that Maisamma, Goddess of Smallpox, was angry with the village.

To satisfy her and stop the plague the village would have to perform the water buffalo sacrifice. The village elders went around to each household in the village to raise money to purchase the buffalo. When they came to the Christian homes, the Christians refused to give them anything, saying that it was against their religious beliefs. The leaders were angry, pointing out that the goddess would not be satisfied until every household gave something as a token offering — even one paisa or penny would do. When the Christians refused, the elders forbade them to draw water from the village wells and the merchants refused to sell them food.

In the end some of the Christians had wanted to stop the harassment by giving a paisa, and to tell God they did not mean it, but Yellayya had refused to let them do so. Now, said Yellayya, one of the Christian girls was sick with smallpox and he wanted me to pray with him for God's healing. As I knelt, my mind was in turmoil. I had learned to pray as a child, studied prayer in seminary and preached it as a pastor. But now I was to pray for a sick child as all the village watched to see if the Christian God was able to heal.

Why my uneasiness both in reading the scriptures and in the Indian village? Was the problem, at least in part, due to my own world view — to the assumptions I as a Westerner made about the nature of reality and the ways I viewed the world? But how do I discover these assumptions? They are so taken for granted that I am rarely even aware of them. One way is to look at the world view of another culture and then to contrast it with the way I view the world.

Ills and Remedies in an Indian Village

There are many illnesses in an Indian village. People become

sick with hot diseases such as smallpox and must be treated with cold medicines and foods; or they have cold diseases like malaria and need hot foods and medicines. Some need treatment for boils, cuts and broken bones, others for mental illnesses. Women may be cursed with barrenness. Individuals or whole families may be plagued by bad luck, by constantly being robbed or by having their houses burn down. Or they may be seized by bad temper, jealousy or hate; be possessed by spirits; or be injured by planetary forces or black magic.

Like all people, Indian villagers had traditional ways of dealing with such diseases. Serious cases, particularly those that were life threatening or had to do with relationships, they took to the *sadhu* or “saint”. This would be a person of God who claimed to heal by prayer. Because God knew everything, including the nature and causes of the illness, the saints asked no questions. Moreover, because they were spiritual, they charged no fees, although those who were healed were expected to give a generous offering to God by giving it to the saint.

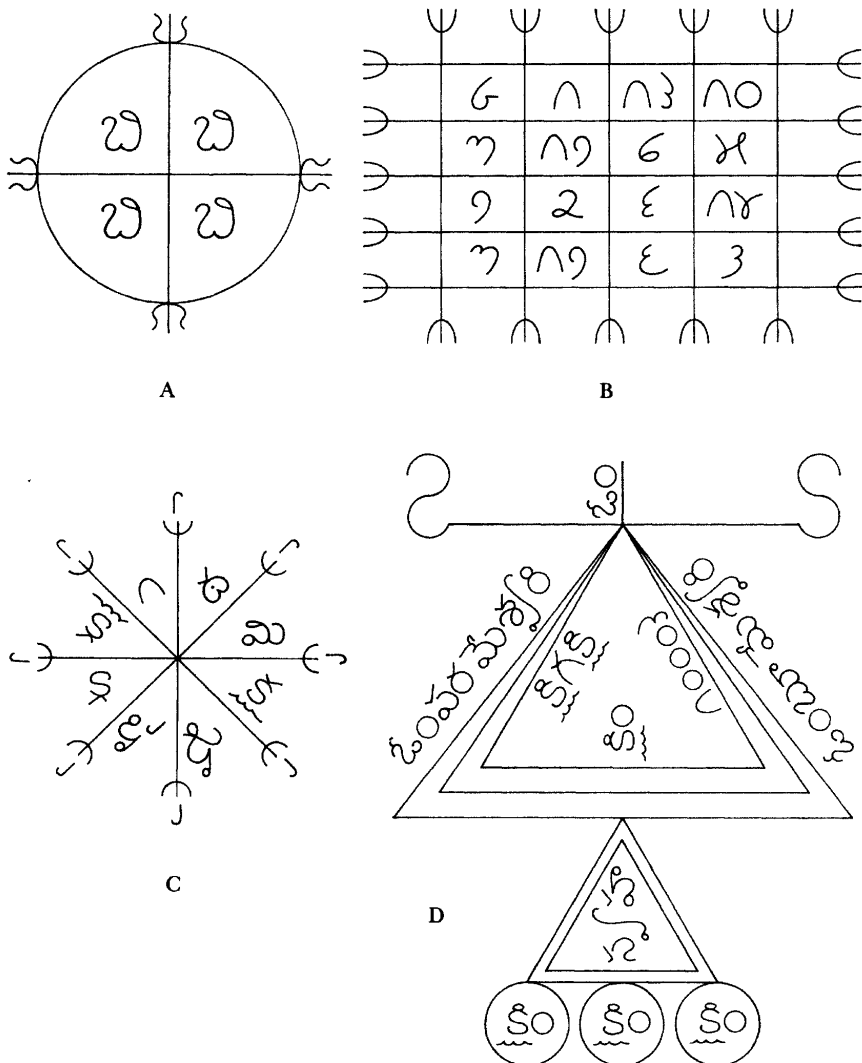
Other cases villagers took to a *mantrakar* or magician, particularly cases in which the villagers suspected some evil human or supernatural cause. The magician cured by means of knowledge and control of supernatural spirits and forces believed to exist on earth. If, for example, any were to venture out on an inauspicious day when the evil forces of the planets were particularly strong, they might be bitten by a viper. To cure this the magician would have to say the following magical chant (mantra) seven times for each stripe across the viper’s back:

OM NAMO BHAGAVATE. SARVA PEESACHI GRUHAMULU NANU
DZUCHI PARADZURU. HREEM, KLEM, SAM PHAT, SVAHA.

This combines a powerful formula to counter the evil forces and a series of powerful sounds (hreem, klem, sam, phat, svaha) that further empower the formula. Sometimes the magician used visual symbols (*yentras* — see figure 1) or amulets to control spirits and forces in this world. Because they can divine both the nature and the cause of the evil plaguing the patient, they need ask no question, and, like the saints, they receive the offerings of those who have been helped.

A third type of medical practitioner was the *vaidyudu* or “doctors” who cured people by means of scientific knowledge based on the *ayyurvedic* or *unani* systems of medicine. Because of their skills in diagnosis, these, too, asked no questions. Villagers

FIGURE 1
MAGICAL CHARMS IN AN INDIAN VILLAGE



Magical charms, when properly used in a south Indian village, will automatically bring about the desired results. These charms combine powerful figures, sounds, and words. A: Yantra for a headache, including writing it on a brass plate, lighting a candle before it after it is wrapped in string, covering it with red and yellow powders, and tying it to the head. B: Yantra for assuring conception, involving inscribing it on a piece of paper or copper sheeting and tying it to the arm of the barren woman. C: Used for malaria. D: To the god Narasimha, for power and general protection.

report these *vaidyudu* would feel their wrists, stomachs and bodies and be able to determine their illness. They charged high fees for this knowledge was powerful, but they gave them a guarantee: medicines and services were paid for only if the patient was healed.

In addition there were village quacks who healed people with folk remedies. Their knowledge was limited so they had to ask questions about the illness — where it hurt and for how long, had they been with someone sick and what had they eaten. For the same reason they charged low fees and gave no guarantees. People had to pay for the medicines before receiving them. (It should not surprise us that Western doctors were often equated at the beginning with the quacks.)

What happened to villagers who became Christians? Most of them took problems they formerly took to the saints to the Christian minister or missionary. Christ replaced Krishna or Siva as the healer of their spiritual diseases. Many of them in time turned to Western allopathic medicines for many of the illnesses they took to the doctor and quack. But what of the plagues that the magician cured? What about spirit possession, or curses, or witchcraft or black magic? What was the Christian answer to these?

Neither the missionary evangelist or doctor had an answer. These did not really exist, they said. But to people for whom these were very real experiences in their lives, there had to be an answer. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of them returned to the magician for cures.

This survival of magic among Christians is not unique to India. In many parts of the world, the picture is the same. In the West, magic and witchcraft persisted well into the 17th century, more than a thousand years after the coming of the gospel.

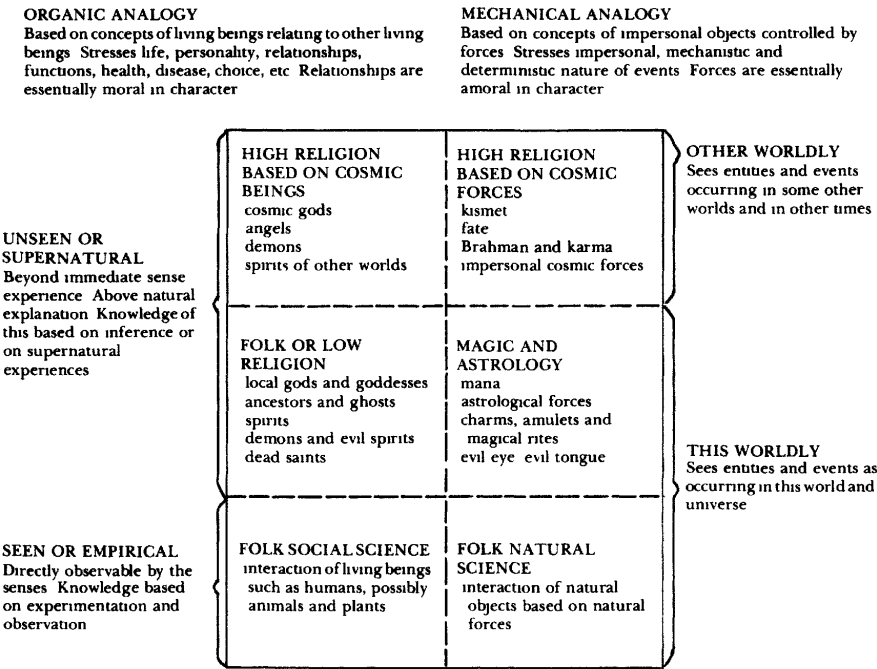
An Analytical Framework

In order to understand the biblical texts, the Indian scene and the failure of Western missionaries to meet the needs met by magicians, we need an analytical framework. To create this, we need two dimensions of analysis (see figure 2).

The Seen-Unseen Dimension

The first dimension is that of imminence-transcendence. On one end is the empirical world of our senses. All people are

FIGURE 2
AN ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE
ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS



aware of this world, and develop folk sciences to explain and control it. They develop theories about the natural world around them — about how to build a house, plant a crop or sail a canoe. They also have theories about human relationships — how to raise a child, treat a spouse and deal with a relative. When a Naga tribal person attributes the death of the deer to an arrow, or a Karen wife the cooking of a meal in terms of the fire under the pot, they are using explanations based upon empirical observations and deductions. Western science, in this sense, is not unique. It may be more systematic in the exploration of the empirical world, but all people have folk sciences that they use to explain many of the ordinary, immediate experiences of their lives.

Above this level are beings and forces that cannot be directly perceived but are thought to exist *on this earth*. These include spirits, ghosts, ancestors, demons, and earthly gods and goddesses who live in trees, rivers, hills and villages. These live not in some other world or time, but are inhabitants with humans and animals of this world and time. In medieval Europe these included trolls, pixies, gnomes, brownies and fairies who were believed to be real. This level also includes supernatural forces such as mana, planetary influences, evil eyes, and the powers of magic, sorcery and witchcraft.

Furthest from the immediate world of human experience are transcendent worlds beyond this one — hells and heavens; and other times such as eternity. Here are African concepts of a high god, and Hindu ideas of Vishnu and Siva. Here is located the Jewish concept of Jehovah who stands in stark contrast to the Baals and Ashtaroth of the Canaanites who were deities of this world, of the middle zone. To be sure, Jehovah entered into the affairs of this earth, but his abode was above it. On this level, too, are the transcendent cosmic forces such as karma and kismet.

The Organic-Mechanical Continuum

Scholars have widely noted that humans use analogies from everyday experiences to provide them with pictures of the nature and operations of the larger world. Two basic analogies are particularly widespread: 1) to see things as living beings in relationship to each other, and 2) to see things as inanimate objects that act upon one another like parts in a machine.

In the first or “organic” analogy, the elements being examined are thought to be alive in some sense of the term, to undergo processes similar to human life, and to relate to each other in ways that are analogous to interpersonal relationships. For example, in seeking to describe human civilizations, Spengler and Toynbee speak of them as living things. Civilizations are born, they mature and they die. Similarly, traditional religionists see many diseases as caused by evil spirits that are alive, that may be angered, and that can be placated through supplication or the offering of a sacrifice. Christians see their relationship to God in organic terms. God is a person and humans relate to him in ways analogous to human relationships.

Organic explanations see the world in terms of living beings in relationship to one another. Like humans and animals, they may

initiate actions and respond to the actions of others. They may be thought to have feelings, thoughts and wills of their own. Often they are seen as social beings who love, marry, beget offspring, quarrel, war, sleep, eat, persuade and coerce one another.

In the second or "mechanical" analogy things are thought to be inanimate parts of greater mechanical systems. They are controlled by impersonal forces or by impersonal laws of nature. For example, Western sciences see the world as made up of lifeless matter that interacts on the basis of forces. Gravity pulls a rock down to the earth not because the earth and rock wish to meet — neither earth nor rock have any thought in the matter. In Western science even living beings are often seen as being caught up in a world ultimately made up of impersonal forces. Just as we have no choice about what happens to us when we fall out of a tree, so it is often thought we have no control over the forces in early childhood that are believed to make us what we are today.

Mechanical analogies are essentially deterministic; living beings in a mechanistic system are subject to its impersonal forces. But if they know how these forces operate, they can manipulate or control them for their own advantage. In a sense they become like gods who control their own destiny.

Mechanistic analogies are basically amoral in character. Forces are intrinsically neither good or evil. They can be used for both. Organic analogies, on the other hand, are characterized by ethical considerations. One being's actions always affect other beings.

Many of the similarities between modern science, magic and astrology which have been pointed out by anthropologists are due to the fact that both use mechanistic analogies. Just as scientists know how to control empirical forces to achieve their goals, the magician and astrologer control supernatural forces of this world by means of chants, charms and rituals to carry out their purposes.

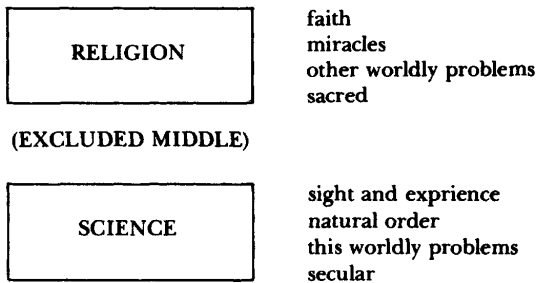
One of the greatest cultural gaps between Western people and many traditional religionists is found along this dimension. The former have bought deeply into a mechanical view of this universe and of the social order (cf Berger 1974). To them the basis of the world is lifeless matter controlled by impersonal forces. Many tribal religionists see the world as alive. Not only humans, but also animals, plants and even rocks, sand and water

are thought to have personalities, wills and life forces. Theirs is a relational, not a deterministic world.

The Excluded Middle

The reasons for my uneasiness with the biblical and Indian world views should now be clear. I had excluded the middle level of supernatural but this-worldly beings and forces from my own world view. As a scientist I had been trained to deal with the empirical world in naturalistic terms. As a theologian, I was taught to answer ultimate questions in theistic terms. For me the middle zone did not really exist. Unlike Indian villagers, I had given little thought to spirits of this world, to local ancestors and ghosts, or to the souls of animals. For me these belonged to the realm of fairies, trolls and other mythical beings. Consequently I had no answers to the questions they raised (see figure 3).

FIGURE 3
A WESTERN TWO-TIERED VIEW OF REALITY



How did this two-tier world view emerge in the West? Belief in the middle level began to die in the 17th and 18th centuries with the growing acceptance of a Platonic dualism (Bufford 1981:30), and with it, of a science based on materialistic naturalism. The result was the secularization of science and the mystification of religion. Science dealt with the empirical world using mechanistic analogies, leaving religion to handle other-worldly matters, often in terms of organic analogies. Science was based on the certitudes of sense experience, experimentation and proof. Religion was left with faith in visions, dreams and inner feelings. Science sought order in natural laws. Religion was brought in to deal with miracles and exceptions to the natural order, but these decreased as scientific knowledge expanded.

It should be apparent why many missionaries trained in the West had no answers to the problems of the middle level — they often did not even see it. When tribal people spoke of fear of evil spirits, they denied the existence of the spirits rather than claim the power of Christ over them. The result, as Newbigin has pointed out (1966) is that Western Christian missions have been one of the greatest secularizing forces in history.

What are the questions of the middle level that Westerners find so hard to answer, and how do they differ from questions raised by science and religion? Science as a system of explanation, whether folk or modern, answers questions about the nature of the world that is directly experienced. All people have social theories about how to raise children and organize social activities. All have ideas about the natural world and how to control it for their own benefits.

Religion as a system of explanation deals with the ultimate questions of the origin, purpose and destiny of the individual, a society and the universe. In the West the focus is on the individual; in the Old Testament it was on Israel as a society.

What are the questions of the middle level? Here one finds the questions of the uncertainty of the future, the crises of present life and the unknowns of the past. Despite knowledge that seeds once planted will grow and bear fruit, that travel down this river on a boat will bring one to the neighboring village, the future is not totally predictable. Accidents, misfortunes, the intervention of other persons and other unknown events can frustrate human planning.

How can one prevent accidents or guarantee success in the future? How can one make sure that a marriage will be fruitful and happy, and endure? How can one avoid getting on a plane that will crash? In the West these questions are left unanswered. They are “accidents”, “luck” or “unforeseeable events”, hence unexplainable. But many people are not content to leave so important a set of questions unanswered, and the answers they give are often in terms of ancestors, demons, witches and local gods, or in terms of magic and astrology.

Similarly, the crises and misfortunes of present life must be handled: sudden disease and plagues, extended droughts, earthquakes, failures in business, and the empirically unexplainable loss of health. What does one do when the doctors have done all they can and a child grows sicker, or when one is

gambling and the stakes are high? Again, many seek answers in the middle level.

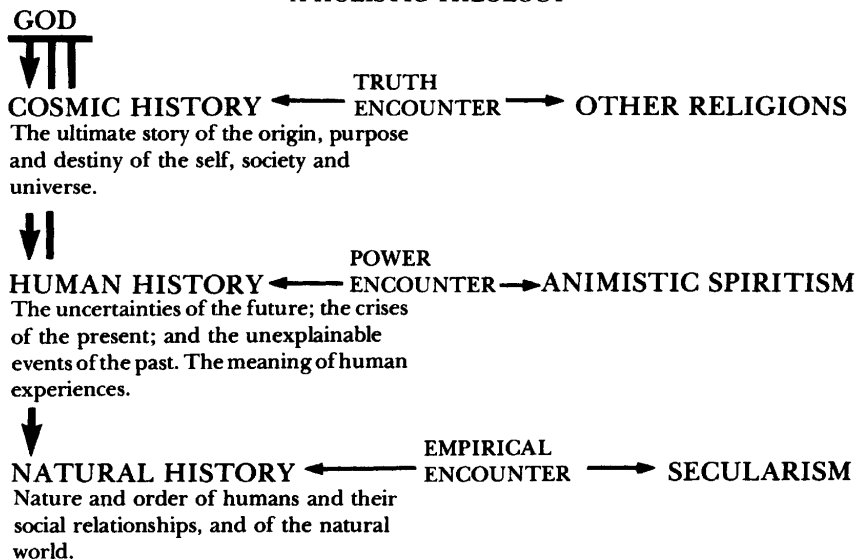
And there are questions one must answer about the past: why did *my* child die in the prime of life, or who stole the gold hidden in the house? Here again transempirical explanations often provide an answer when empirical ones fail.

Because the Western world no longer provides explanations for questions on the middle level, it is not surprising that many Western missionaries have no answers within their Christian world view. What is a Christian theology of ancestors, of animals and plants, of local spirits and spirit possession, and of "principalities, powers and rulers of the darkness of this world" (Ep 6:12)? What does one say when new tribal converts want to know how the Christian God tells them where and when to hunt, whether they should marry this daughter to that young man, or where they can find the lost money? Given no answer, they return to the diviner who gave them definite answers, for these are the problems that loom large in their everyday life.

Implications for Missions

What implications does this all have for missions? First, it points out the need for missionaries to develop holistic theologies that deal with all areas of life (see figure 4), that avoids

FIGURE 4
A HOLISTIC THEOLOGY



the Platonic dualism of the West, and takes seriously body and soul. On the highest level this includes a theology of God in cosmic history: in the creation, redemption, purpose and destiny of all things. Only as human history is placed within a cosmic framework does it take on meaning, and only when history has meaning does human biography become meaningful.

On the middle level, a holistic theology includes a theology of God in human history: in the affairs of nations, of peoples and of individuals. This must include a theology of divine guidance, provision and healing; of ancestors, spirits and invisible powers of this world; and of suffering, misfortune and death.

On this level, some sections of the church have turned to doctrines of saints as intermediaries between God and humans. Others have turned to doctrines of the Holy Spirit to show God's active involvement in the events of human history. It is no coincidence that many of the most successful missions have provided some form of Christian answer to middle level questions.

On the bottom level a holistic theology includes an awareness of God in natural history — in sustaining the natural order of things. So long as the missionary comes with a two-tier world view with God confined to the supernatural, and the natural world operating for all practical purposes according to autonomous scientific laws, Christianity will continue to be a secularizing force in the world. Only as God is brought back into the middle of our scientific understanding of nature will we stem the tide of Western secularism.

A second implication is that the church and mission must guard against Christianity itself becoming a new form of magic. Magic is based on a mechanistic view — a formula approach to reality that allows humans to control their own destiny. Worship, on the other hand, is rooted in a relational view of life. Worshipers place themselves in the power and mercy of a greater being.

The difference is not one of form, but of attitude. What begins as a prayer of request may turn into a formula or chant to force God to do one's will by saying or doing the right thing. In religion, we want the will of God for we trust in his omniscience. In magic we seek our own wills, confident that we know what is best for ourselves.

The line dividing them is a subtle one as I learned in the case of

Muchintala. A week after our prayer meeting, Yellayya returned to say that the child had died. I felt thoroughly defeated. Who was I to be a missionary if I could not pray for healing and receive a positive answer? A few weeks later Yellayya returned with a sense of triumph. "How can you be so happy after the child died?" I asked.

"The village would have acknowledged the power of our God had he healed the child," Yellayya said, "but they knew in the end she would have to die. When they saw in the funeral our hope of resurrection and reunion in heaven, they saw an even greater victory, over death itself, and they have begun to ask about the Christian way."

In a new way I began to realize that true answers to prayer are those that bring the greatest glory to God, not those that satisfy my immediate desires. It is all too easy to make Christianity a new magic in which we as gods can make God do our bidding.

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