

Self-Theologizing in South Asia

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“I live in a city where the spirits are all around us. As a new believer should I still believe in them?”

“Help me understand who the Holy Spirit is and how he works with the spirits in my city.”

“What does the Bible say about the dreams I have every night? Should I pay attention to them?”

These are examples of the questions believers in non-Western contexts struggle with after coming to faith in Christ. Many of them live in cultures where other religious systems dominate. Immediately after salvation they are confronted by what to do with beliefs and practices that now seem incompatible with Christianity. How do they develop a theology that is both loyal to biblical truth and addresses the culture that they live in?

Theologians such as Lammin Sanneh have proposed that a Western influence on the theologizing by the local context is not needed, and the best approach is to leave the locals to figure it out for themselves.¹ On the

¹ Lammin Sanneh, *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003).

other extreme are those who completely import an outside theology in both content and approach resulting in a disconnect with locals. Missiologist Paul Hiebert has contributed significantly to the understanding and practice of missions, especially in these cross-cultural contexts. One of his contributions is to raise awareness of the need for self-theologizing.² He argues that when self-theologizing is done correctly it will produce three results:

1. A theology from within the culture that can be called indigenous, where the emphasis is on the worldview of the local culture and an approach to theology that speaks to all aspects of life in this local culture.
2. A theology that is faithful to biblical teaching. This means that biblical teaching has authority over a local cultural worldview with all its beliefs and practices, so that these are critically analyzed according to biblical truth.
3. A theology where outside missionaries do not impose their own understanding on the local context but rather are available as an encouragement to and a resource for the local believers as they self-theologize.

For missionaries serving with Western agencies, this is a constant challenge. In our Western contexts, we have a legacy that points to generations of theologians who ended up producing statements and systems that express our theological beliefs and practices. These speak to our Western contexts so that they fit into our cultures while acknowledging the need to revise as even our own Western cultures constantly change. Our temptation on the mission field is to help believers in the local culture by simply translating our well-developed Western theology into their language. This seems efficient and can be done in a relatively short period of time. We then hold seminars/classes where we teach this to them and answer any questions that arise. For most of the local believers, they become passive receivers of this

² See the explanation and development of this argument in Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 193-224.

theology, not risking embarrassment by asking deep theological questions arising from within their own cultures. The result is a largely imported theology rather than that which can be called *self-theologizing*.

With all of this in mind, I have been blessed and enlightened to see Western missionaries in South Asia directly and intentionally take up this challenge. I was invited by a team of missionaries on two separate occasions, five years apart, to observe and respond to attempts at self-theologizing. The missionaries had served in this context for multiple terms with significant insight into the local culture and fluency in the language. A brief summary of what took place is as follows.

A network of church leaders gathered together for three days with the purpose of developing their own confession as to a significant biblical/theological belief. The gathering I observed focused on the person and work of the Holy Spirit. There were about fifty people, and roughly 70% were men and 30% women. After some brief introductions, they were divided into small groups of 5-7 people and spent most of the time discussing passages to do with the Holy Spirit. These passages were listed on a board up front by the trainers. Each group had to report each day about what they had discovered as they studied and discussed the passages. The other groups would listen and provide feedback. At the end of the three days, they crafted their confessional belief statement about the Holy Spirit and committed to teaching it to their church members. Some principles stood out in the process.

1. The missionaries allowed the local believers to build the plane while flying. In other words, The missionaries allowed them to grapple with deep theological issues like the Trinity while they were still young in the faith and with limited Bible education and background. These were not seasoned believers in areas well-established in the Christian faith, but rather those from Unreached People Groups and in some cases likely the first generation of evangelical believers. There were missionaries and

more experienced believers in the room who were available as resources when questions or issues arose that seemed to hold them back.

2. In any missionary training, there is the constant challenge of balancing the local vs expat involvement. Ideally, the momentum and participation should be led by the locals, and this training method seemed to do its best to make this happen. There were several times I wanted to intervene and teach, but I knew because of the way it was being done that I needed to just watch. When we did address an issue, it was by asking each group pointed questions that drove them back to the Bible and then patiently waiting for them to find a solution. The church in every culture needs outside voices to enhance their understanding and point out blind spots; the key is to do this in a way that allows the local voice to remain primary.
3. The position of the Bible as inerrant, authoritative, and central was clear. I was blessed to see how the confession statement was thoroughly biblical and could stand alongside other statements such as the BFM 2000. After three days together, the leaders had experienced an approach where every day they opened the Bible to find answers. They were not reading other books or going to websites and blogs to find the answers. I'm sure the day will come when they will consult all these other sources, but hopefully the pattern will be set for them as to the priority of the Bible.
4. Of significance missiologically is that they *owned* the confession statement – that is, it came from their study and discussion, and they crafted the words. They self-theologized. At this point, they can now hold their statement up against those who have done the same and allow it to be confirmed or even modified. This builds a great sense of confidence so that even if they are still young in the faith, they can move forward in developing a biblically sound indigenous theology.
5. There is the issue of speed and how long it will take to cover even the core aspects of theology. This was one training on one person of the Trinity, and this network of church planters will now go back and teach

others over some months or even a year before going through the same training on another aspect of theology. How long then before they have completed a foundational base of theology? Does it matter how fast or slow the training progresses? Does it depend on each network and allow them to set the pace? These are questions for the trainers to work through.

Will some of these local church planters leave their context and attend Bible Schools or other outside training? Should we try to prevent this? I don't think this is an issue to be concerned about unless those schools teach heresy. They now have a sound biblical foundation, and any outside teaching will simply build on what is already indigenous. They now have their own beliefs and categories through which they can consider adding new information.

Not all contexts are the same, but it will be interesting to see if this approach can be applied in other contexts. In working towards the self-theologizing that Hiebert speaks of, missionaries and their local partners need to be looking for and trying best practices. Is the training being done in South Asia a best practice that should be tried elsewhere? From the evidence that is being documented across South Asia it does suggest that their approach could be considered in other contexts. These other contexts will need to adapt and modify to fit their needs and in turn, provide new insights for others to consider. All of this helps to address how to develop a theology that is both loyal to biblical truth while at the same time addressing the local culture.

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