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## ADVENTIST ENCOUNTER WITH FOLK RELIGIONS

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The Seventh-day Adventist Church grew up and honed its evangelistic methods and skills in the Western nations of North America, Europe, and Australia. The targeted audience was largely Christian, usually educated, and many generations removed from the context of tribal religions and animistic practices. An appeal to logic and intellect, and presentations that stressed biblical truths and fulfillment of prophecies found ready acceptance among a large segment of the population in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But as Adventist mission enters the twenty-first century and begins to focus on the task remaining in the 10/40 window among the unreached peoples of the world, new methods are called for that can convincingly communicate Christ to those living with an animistic worldview. People with such a worldview are found among the tribal peoples of the world, but many are also found among the followers of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. We call such religious adherents followers of folk Buddhism, folk Islam, and Christo-pagans. When the followers of the New Age movement, Hinduism, and those practicing their traditional Chinese religions are included, it is staggering how widespread animistic and folk beliefs are. In folk religions human beings have been placed in the center of the universe with a view of themselves as omnipotent—having a god within.

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All consult spirits and claim they know how to channel or manipulate spirit power. All believe life can be transformed by techniques applied to mind, body and spirit. All claim that there is no such thing as sin—i.e., offending a righteous God. All seek to dispense with guilt as merely an outside imposition. All would basically ignore the fact that history is moving toward final culmination. And all would claim that spirit involvement produces self-knowledge and awareness of one's identity, issuing in success, happiness and security.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper animism and folk religions will be treated as similar in that both groups hold to animistic worldviews. Animism is defined as

the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.<sup>3</sup>

As Adventists encounter peoples with animistic worldviews, what types of religious experiences will they find? Will the traditional Adventist methods of evangelism reach the followers of the folk religions? What are some of the strongest needs of the animist, and how can the sharer of truth be faithful to the teachings of Scripture while at the same time begin the Gospel presentation from where the followers of folk religions are?

This paper describes some of the basic types of religious experience and common characteristics practiced and followed by folk religionists. The last part of the paper then looks at important issues that must be dealt with when sharing the Good News with animistic peoples.

### **Common Characteristics of Folk Religions**

When members of the Adventist community encounter followers of folk religions, what type of religious experiences will they find? What are some of the typical practices and indications that a person has an animistic worldview?

1. *Folk religions are holistic and spiritualistic.* Life is viewed as larger than the sum of its parts. Holism sees the world as completely interconnected, with sky, spirits, earth, the living and the dead, the material, and the spiritual all working together. Animists view the physical, material, and spiritual aspects of this world as one system, and would have a very difficult time seeing the world with divisions between the material, physical, and spiritual. Animists see no difference between

<sup>2</sup>Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Houston: Touch, 1990), 44.

<sup>3</sup>Gailyn Van Rheenen, *Communicating Christ in Animistic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 20.

the sacred and the profane or the secular and the religious. All are one. Holism is a foundational characteristic of animism and leads naturally to pantheism.<sup>4</sup>

Those with an animistic worldview see life as essentially spiritual rather than material. Everything that people do, come in contact with, or interact with is viewed as being under the control of spiritual powers or forces. Nothing happens in life that is not attributable to the influence of the spirit world.<sup>5</sup>

2. *Folk religionists are concerned with the immediate issues of life.* Animists and folk religionists ask questions such as, Why am I sick? Why did my oxen die? How can I find out the best day to get married or the right day to plant and harvest my crops? What must I do to stop the drought? Who is causing the drought? Who or what caused the problem? For example, if a follower of a folk religion had his garden trampled by several of his neighbor's water buffalos he would want to know who directed the buffalos towards his particular garden and why. Or, if a person developed an abdominal pain, the family would go to the village prophet and ask him to reveal which ancestor was upset and what offering was required to appease that particular ancestor. The animist seeks answers in the spiritual realm and views disasters and catastrophes not as having natural causes but as resulting from discord and disharmony in the spiritual areas of life.<sup>6</sup>

Animists are looking for reasons why things happen to them, and they seek out spirits and gods to follow or worship who can satisfy their personal needs. They have little concern for what kind of god or spirit they receive help or power from as long as they are able to sense that they have improved their chances to overcome problems or issues in everyday life.

3. *Folk religionists are concerned with power.* A primary focus of the folk religionist is a constant search for power to protect and to manipulate or control events and activities. Among Taiwanese folk religions, the adherents

ignore the nature of the gods they worship. What is worshipped is the effectiveness or the power of the god to grant petitions. Heavenly beings, spirits, people, stones, old trees, bones, corpses found floating in rivers, all are acceptable as objects of worship or "gods" as long as they are effective in answering the petitions of their devotees. If the god gives the worshipper what he wants, then it will be continually worshipped and pampered. If not, it will be ignored.<sup>7</sup>

Animistic peoples go wherever the power is. They care little for the source or consequences of seeking that power. With no written Word of God to guide them, the animist seeks any power that could possibly solve the immediate issue at hand. It is in this area where followers of Islam, in seeking the powers, become less than

<sup>4</sup>Steyne, 58, 59.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>6</sup>Van Rheenen, 172.

<sup>7</sup>Gerald P. Kramer and George Wu, *An Introduction to Taiwanese Folk Religions* (Taipei: n.p., 1970), 8.

orthodox; Buddhists in seeking the powers develop a corrupted form of Buddhism; and Christians become known as Christo-pagans. These Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians may continue to follow the teachings of their religion, but they seek additional powers other than those found within the mainstream of their group, creating problems of syncretism and dual allegiance.<sup>8</sup>

A passive approach to religion is not how the animist approaches religious life. Religion must work for him, must provide for his needs and protect him from what he fears. There is no concern to seek or do the will of the gods, rather there is a concentrated effort on entreating or coercing the gods to do what is desired.<sup>9</sup>

4. *Folk religionists have few, if any, written texts or holy writings.* Instead, beliefs and practices are shared through folklore, word of mouth, oral traditions, rituals, dance, and reenacted dramas. With no written record, the practices of folk religionists are dynamic and fluid. Reinterpretations are frequent; new solutions to immediate problems are easily adapted. Animistic people have no problem making radical belief changes as long as they can experience practical help for everyday needs.<sup>10</sup> This fact explains why it is so easy for animists to convert to Christianity when a power encounter is used.

5. *Folk religions are amoral.* The spirit beings worshipped and feared by people might be either good or evil, benevolent or malevolent. There is no moral model such as is provided by the God of Christianity for the followers to imitate, so ethical standards and moral practices remain at the level of what is generally practiced in that particular culture.<sup>11</sup> The gods and spirits are bargained with, manipulated, and appeased, with little thought as to what is right or wrong. Ethics or morality is often not an issue. What matters is getting the desired results.<sup>12</sup>

Neither ethics, integrity nor morality matter to a typical shaman. With few exceptions, he is quite ambivalent in his morality, condoning almost any practice if it will benefit him. Should he be asked to work ill, as in Balaam's case, he will not hesitate to do so. He will cast a spell and so act the part of sorcerer. Or he will divine an illness, prescribing a cure, and so be a good medicine man. At best, good or evil are relative terms in animist morality. Gaining advantage over another is of paramount importance, whether through human or supernatural means.<sup>13</sup>

6. *Folk religions are informally organized.* Animistic practices are usually community based with little far-reaching influence or control even in nearby villages. No hierarchical structures or bureaucracies operate among the folk religions of the world. Rather, leaders are recognized for their ability to perform,

<sup>8</sup>Van Rheenen, 272-73.

<sup>9</sup>Steyne, 38-39.

<sup>10</sup>Van Rheenen, 58-59.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>12</sup>Kramer and Wu, 8.

<sup>13</sup>Steyne, 155.

to appease the spirits, and to deliver the promised benefit. The better the shaman is at doing what the people need and ask for, the greater his or her power in the community.<sup>14</sup>

### Important Issues When Dealing with Folk Religions

When Adventists encounter folk religions, there are a number of issues that need to be dealt with in the course of bringing animists to Jesus Christ. It is quite easy to help people attend church on Sabbath, to stop smoking and drinking, to return tithes, and do those outward things that give the appearance of deep heart change. However, there are too many examples of peoples brought to Christ who never experienced a worldview change. To become a Christian requires that the old core values and principles of life be exchanged for values and principles shaped by the biblical message. What are some of those new values and principles?

1. *The power of Jesus Christ.* Many of those who have come to Christ in Cambodia over the past three years have initially become open to Christianity because Jesus Christ demonstrated that He had more power than the spirits and gods worshiped and feared by the people. The healing of severe illnesses and the casting out of difficult evil spirits has created village-wide interest in the Christian God. There are some within Adventist circles who have cast a disapproving eye on what they term "Power Evangelism,"<sup>15</sup> but among animists it is the NT power of Jesus Christ that initially attracts many to the gospel. It is good news to be healed or set free from fear or bondage of the spirits.

In our initial introductions of Christianity there is no doubt that an approach that uses power encounters is by far the most effective method of bringing the Good News to the people of Cambodia. These power encounters deal with everyday issues of life. Spirit paraphernalia, idols, and items used for ungodly magic must be torn down and destroyed. Those held in bondage through oppression and possession must be set free by the mighty power of Jesus Christ. The grip of Satan on the institutions and cultural customs must be confronted so that the purity of biblical ethics and morality can be established. All this requires a power encounter where a visible demonstration of God's power and might is clearly shown to be superior to that of the spirits worshiped and feared by the people. The announcement of God's kingdom in Matt 10:7-8 was to be accompanied with power encounters as proof that God's kingdom was greater than the kingdom of Satan, and also to set people free.

A power encounter is defined as "a spiritual encounter that exposes and calls to account the powers of darkness in their varied forms by the power of God for

<sup>14</sup>Van Rheenen, 59.

<sup>15</sup>Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, "The Power of the Gospel or the Gospel of Power?" *Adventists Affirm* 11, no. 1 (1997): 14-24.

the purpose of revealing the identity of the one true God resulting in an acknowledgment of and/or allegiance to his lordship by those present.”<sup>16</sup> The power encounter is usually the first step leading to a definite break with the traditional sources of power that have held the people in bondage. The demonstration of God’s power often leads to a commitment to follow Jesus Christ (Matt 28:19-20), but it is important to promptly continue with good biblical teaching (v. 20).

Power encounters are only the first step in a lengthy process. Hopefully, the encounter leads to conversion, where people begin to understand the awesomeness of the creator God, are taught how to place themselves under His sovereignty, and who learn to accept Him as Lord of lords and God of gods. They must come to realize that power comes from God, and is to be used for His glory and to set free those held in bondage. Unlike animistic power, the power of God is never to be manipulated or controlled for selfish or personal purposes.

2. *The truth of God’s Word.* Sometimes people become Christians in order to have access to God’s power rather than truly believing in Christ. In such situations they are merely exchanging one system of power for another system. Many animistic people are looking for better power sources rather than searching for God. Thus, while we may use a power encounter as an initial introduction to God, we must quickly move on to an encounter with biblical truth that will safeguard the new believer from an ever-continuing search for new and greater sources of power. Without a truth encounter, believers, during times of crisis, often revert back to their old ways of looking for alternate sources of power, which results in dual allegiance and syncretism.<sup>17</sup>

Many typical Adventist evangelistic strategies begin with topics that stress biblical truths. In animistic settings it is recommended that the starting point be through power encounters, but that people quickly be grounded in biblical truth. Without a biblical anchor it is very likely that the result will only be a Christian veneer.

3. *The sovereignty of God.* When animists seek to manipulate the spirits or force the deities to respond in a prescribed way, they are in direct rebellion against the sovereignty of God. God’s very nature is love; His nature compels Him to give good gifts to His children. He is a seeking God who has provided all that is necessary for relationships with His created beings. God has demonstrated His desire to relate to His creation by sending deliverers to free His people, prophets to proclaim His message, and His Son to be the incarnation of His nature. Since God is sovereign in the world that He created, His creation should give Him glory, honor, and praise. He actively works in His world as He desires and cannot be manipulated or controlled. While prayerful supplications affect His working,

<sup>16</sup>Van Rheezen, 84.

<sup>17</sup>Marguerite G. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995),

divination implies a desire to force deity, an impatience to look behind the curtain of time, an arrogance to disbelieve in God's sovereignty. An animist attempts to manipulate the spiritual forces of God's world to find out its secrets and use them for personal benefit. Such motivations, based on greedy self-benefit, are alien to the mind of God. While the Christian way is relational, the animistic way is manipulative.<sup>18</sup> When taking the Good News to animistic peoples, the teaching must be in such a way that God is shown to be fully and completely in control of all of life, the future, and time. Any attempt to manipulate God or force His hand is rebellion against Him. When teaching on the sovereignty of God, we must also include in the discussion God's sovereignty over the spirit world.

4. *Themes from the Great Controversy.* Adventists have been teaching on spiritual warfare for over 150 years, whereas many evangelical churches came aboard fifteen to twenty years ago. The themes of the Great Controversy that clearly explain the conflict between good and evil, the warfare between God and Satan, how fallen angels appear as spirits and demons in this world, and the constant struggle between the people of God and the principalities and powers must be clearly taught. We must teach that Jesus Christ, at the cross, defeated Satan's kingdom. Satan is a fallen foe; Christ was victorious over him when He came from the grave. God's people have nothing to fear "because greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4). Teaching about the two sources of power and a warning about the consequences of returning to the old power sources must be clearly taught in animistic societies.

5. *How God deals with everyday issues and problems.* Followers of folk religions seek power and protection because of their fear of the forces of nature and evil spirits. Even faithful Christians, during times of stress or crisis, can revert to the old ways. Many Christians in Cambodia have not been adequately taught how to give their daily troubles and fears over to a loving, caring God. The concepts of God's Spirit dwelling inside believers, of guardian angels, and of the countless promises that God will protect and care for His people are often poorly understood. With poor understanding comes a return of the fears that drive people to seek other sources of power and protection.

We must also teach that the source of trouble is Satan. People in Cambodia relate very well to the story of Job, since it helps them to have patience in dealing with their many problems of evil, suffering, and oppression. They look forward to the judgment day and to a new heaven and a new earth.

Folk religionists use all types of amulets and charms to ward off evil. Objects hanging from strings tied around wrists, bellies, and necks are thought to ward off sickness and evil. Spirit flags in the rafters of houses, tattoos, magic writing on handkerchiefs, and countless other means have been invented to protect from the evil in this world, but all such activity is a denial of God's protection and care.

<sup>18</sup>Van Rheenen, 192.

God, rather than amulets and charms, must be the one relied upon for help and protection.

6. *Functional substitutes.* Adventist mission has often entered animistic societies with the correct goal of destroying everything connected with false systems of worship. However, the Christian witness has not replaced the rituals and practices with Christian functional substitutes. For example, many folk religionists have ceremonies for dedicating houses, fields, harvests, and babies, and for dealing with evil and sickness. Christian house dedications, prayer in the fields before planting, harvest celebrations, baby dedications, naming ceremonies, anointing ceremonies for the sick, group prayer, and singing when evil spirits manifest themselves are not only appreciated but also a must in folk societies. Where a Christian functional substitute for the various ceremonies and rituals has been devised, there the church is strong. Where functional substitutes have not been suggested, reversion to paganism and dual allegiance is extremely high and the church is weak.<sup>19</sup>

People usually do not readily change unless two factors are present: (1) dissatisfaction with the old way, and (2) a demonstration of a better alternate way. God's Spirit is at work in this world creating dissatisfaction with old religious systems and practices. The Christian witness must be informed and available to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, and to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners. These functions are often accompanied in folk societies with signs and wonders and a manifestation of God's power. The Adventist witness should never shrink from biblical practices of healing and deliverance, for these are the very things that often move the folk religionist to taste and see that the Lord is good. In fact, we should look for opportunities where God can demonstrate His power to heal and deliver, since Luke 10:9-15 is a command.

### Possible Problem Areas

1. *An evangelistic strategy that emphasizes practicing the power of God can easily become an end in itself.* Jesus warned the Seventy-two when they returned from their first missionary trip and were excited that even the demons submitted to them that they should rather find joy in having their names written in heaven (Luke 10:17,20). Jesus never gave a sign or performed a miracle to satisfy the curiosity of people. His power was used to bless and set free those held captive by Satan. His constant purpose was to draw men and women to the Father. We must be equally clear that the power of Jesus is not for any other purpose than to attract people to the God who saves.

<sup>19</sup>Van Rheenen, 38.



2. *Confusion could result as to whether the power comes from God or from Satan.* Clear teaching is necessary so that those coming out of animism can clearly distinguish between good and evil power (1 John 4:1-6). We must teach about the fruits of the Spirit in God's people and expect that those lifting up the name and power of Jesus Christ will also manifest those fruits in their lives (Gal 5:22-23). All teaching and practice must be in complete harmony with the teachings of Christ and the word of God.

Even with these dangers and possible problem areas, we should never draw back from being instruments in God's hands to set people free. Westerners often see little of the bondage and captivity that Satan imposes on many of the world's unreached peoples. But blind spots in a Western worldview should never be reason to deny or discourage an approach that has started a process of setting thousands free from the debilitating and destructive forces of Satan's kingdom.

### **Conclusion**

It is recommended that Adventist colleges and seminaries in areas of the world where animism is widespread introduce courses in the curriculum that teach future pastors and church leaders about the issues important to the peoples with an animistic worldview. Subjects such as how to pray for the sick, how to deal with demonized people, and the relationship between power encounters and truth encounters must be understood. Administrators and church leaders, as well as those witnessing to folk religionists, must understand the importance of giving former animistic practitioners Christian functional substitutes for their previous important ceremonies. Presently, too much of the theological training in this part of the world is patterned after the needs and problems of the western world. If Adventist mission is to be more successful in the twenty-first century at bringing large numbers of peoples from the folk religions into the Adventist Church, we must look closely at the target audience so our graduates and leaders are able to answer the questions and meet the needs of the people they minister to.