

CULTURE AND THE GOSPEL

BRIGHT HOPE NEWS



I recently heard two very interesting stories about culture and how it intersects with the Gospel.

In one, a missionary working in Mongolia told how the local culture has a ceremony for young children in which their hair is cut for the first time. A local lama or shaman will come and bless the child, as a key expression of their Buddhist faith. The missionary explained how part of their strategy is to 'redeem' this cultural ceremony with a Christian blessing, retaining its place in the culture but changing its nature.

The other story I heard was from someone who was connected to ministry to Maori in New Zealand. They made the comment that part of the pathway to Maori accepting the Gospel is recognising and legitimising the role of Maori gods.

This raises the question: how far do we go? What aspects of other belief systems and world views can, and should, still be retained when one comes into a relationship with Jesus?

It's a tough question because, for centuries, people who received the Gospel in non-Western countries were typically encouraged – or forced – to embrace Western cultural traditions and abandon their own, and the communities they previously belonged to. An African professor once noted that when the bread of life (the Gospel) came to Africa it was wrapped in plastic (European cultural traditions) and "...they fed us the bag along with the bread...now the plastic bag is making us sick...but we can remove the plastic and enjoy the bread."

Bright Hope World has a number of partners who have wrestled with this issue and have come to conclusions that are bearing abundant fruit. One of our partners in Indonesia has become incredibly successful in communicating the Gospel to Muslims and encouraging them to retain many of their cultural traditions. They are also encouraged to stay in their communities so that the Gospel can be more effectively spread.

In Thailand, one of our partners has become extremely good at contextualising the Gospel into a Thai Buddhist worldview. Some of the language and vocabulary of Buddhism is retained, but the concepts are transformed. The focus is on a genuine and transformative heart change first, knowing that the lifestyle changes that God desires will follow.

But this is scary territory, and one naturally fears syncretism, in which there is an attempted fusion of multiple religions. That would be too far. Yet, our partners are extremely adept at knowing the difference between benign cultural norm and malignant false religion.

And we, of course, are not immune from this. Our culture is plagued by radical individualism and an earth-crippling consumerism that one can often see evidenced within the church. Might these cultural norms be some ungodly hybrid of Christianity and self-focused humanism?

Might we be holding on to the plastic and missing the good bread within?

Fraser Scott
Executive Director

Didn't the Millennium just happen? How did it get to be 2020 already?! If you are feeling a little old and jaded by how quickly time flies, you are not alone!

Our (old and jaded?) team had the pleasure of all coming together in January as we do every year. It's a real highlight for us. It is a time when we all look to the future, strategise, share experiences and just hang out. We feel very blessed to be able to have this time together.

As we shared stories from around the world, we were struck by how many of our partners are in stressed areas.

In Lebanon there is a rise in rioting, violence and unrest that has been going on for several months now and may erupt into a very serious conflict.

In Asia, particularly in Southeast Asia, the threat and uncertainty over Coronavirus is making people very nervous.

Even our team is questioning the wisdom of travelling to various parts of the world right now. As always, when these kinds of global pressures hit, it is the poorest parts of the world that tend to suffer most, particularly in the absence of free, reliable healthcare.

These issues should serve to remind us that, as believers, we are all connected as family. When one of us suffers, we all suffer.



Sarah is a single mother supporting three children. Her eldest child is 19 years old and is in university, and her younger children are in Senior 3 and Primary 3. Sarah used to run a restaurant in the market, but when the market caught fire her business was destroyed.

Sarah tried to establish her business again, but was unable to secure a site due to the rebuilt market operators demanding costly bribes. Life after the fire was very difficult and Sarah struggled to support her children.

Eighteen months ago, Sarah was given a first loan of 300,000 UGX (US\$80) from the Jehovah Jireh Widows’ Loan Programme. With this money she was able to secure another place to rent and began a new restaurant at a very basic level.

She was able to repay her loan after six months and then took another loan of 1,000,000 UGX (US\$270) a year ago which she used to expand and develop her business further (particularly with furniture and cooking implements). She has been able to maintain repayments and now has 550,000 UGX (US\$150) left to pay.

Currently Sarah employs five people in cooking, delivering and serving food, and trains them in their work. She provides breakfast and lunch at the venue and also meets orders from local businesses in town by delivery. She is keen to expand further and thinks that getting a fridge would enable her to provide drinks and small snacks within her business.

Sarah is very pleased about the changes, and her ability to build up her business again and support her children through school. She is happy to have had the chance to receive the loans and is now able to look positively towards the future.

More info at <https://www.brighthopeworld.com/partnerships.asp?pid=157>.

1. Pray for our partners that are operating on the bleeding edge of communicating the Gospel into new cultures. Pray for God’s discernment and for wisdom in this space – for them and for us.
2. Pray for Sarah and the other women having their lives transformed by the Jehovah Jireh loan programme in Mbale, Uganda. Pray also for Sarah’s children and for those for whom she is providing a job.
3. Pray for our partners in Lebanon who are struggling under the weight of civil unrest and fighting, and the prospect of a wider conflict. Pray also for our partners throughout Asia faced with the threat of Coronavirus.
4. Praise for an uplifting, inspiring, fun and encouraging time with our wider team at our annual Team Gathering in Nelson in January.

