

# Editorial Reflections

## *Culture as a Moral Order: Recovering Missionary Elenctics From the Anthropology of Robert Priest*

The exemplary field work of one mission anthropologist, Robert Priest, has become somewhat of a plumb line for the subject of “culture and conscience.” Twenty years ago his article “Missionary Elenctics: Conscience and Culture” appeared in the pages of *Missiology* (Vol. II, No. 3, July 1994) as a contribution to the developing field of “elenctics” (i.e., what J. H. Bavinck introduced as a missiology concerned with the conviction of sin).<sup>1</sup> Raised in a SIL household in Bolivia, Priest apparently responded to the call of SIL linguist Kenneth Pike, who had “a dream, a wish, a hope—that some scholars will help us to understand conscience better by careful, documented, cross-cultural research.”<sup>2</sup> Wayne Dye’s 1976 study “Towards a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin”<sup>3</sup> also helped focus Priest’s field work among the Aguaruna Indians of Peru:

I focused on culture as a moral order, collected and analyzed moral discourses and moral vocabulary, examined shame and guilt, analyzed moral symbolism in myth and ritual, and studied native sermons and conversion narratives.<sup>4</sup>

It’s been two decades since Priest published some of his conclusions from that field work. His original article (online at <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/22/3/291.full.pdf>) offered a series of twenty-five propositions on the nature of conscience and cultural variation. His intention was to engage the mission enterprise and hopefully encourage further missiological research on the subject (he now oversees PhD research at Trinity International University in Deerfield, IL). We wish to highlight his conclusions from 1994 as a simple list without the lengthy but brilliant annotations he provides in his article. The hope is that this outline of his outstanding contribution to elenctics might catalyze discussion and application by a new generation engaged in ministry. His remarkable formal propositions about conscience, culture, and missionary elenctics now follow:

1. The faculty of conscience is culturally universal (Romans 2:1-15; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Corinthians 10:25, 27).
2. The faculty of conscience is a natural faculty and is thus capable of being studied, analyzed, and understood through empirical methods.
3. The content of conscience is fallible and variable.
4. The content of conscience is directly dependent on learned cultural meanings, norms, ideals, and values.
5. The content of conscience is likely to be shared by members of a given cultural group.
6. In an intercultural situation there will be both significant overlap and marked discontinuity between the consciences of interactants. But it is not the overlap which interactants will tend to notice. Rather it is in the area of discontinuity—specifically where one’s own conscience speaks and the other’s does not.
7. In an intercultural situation each interactant will thus tend to condemn the other morally for behavior about which the other has no conscience.
8. The content of conscience is sufficiently close to God’s own moral standards as to be God’s initial reference point in revealing our own moral failures and need of grace.
9. While human consciences do extensively agree with and overlap with morality as revealed in Scripture, there are also significant areas of discontinuity between consciences as shaped by culture and what is revealed in Scripture. Conscience on its own is not sufficient to unerringly guide us into sanctified moral understandings.
10. The missionary’s conscience has been shaped by his or her culture as well as by Scripture, and his or her conscience seldom clearly distinguishes the two.
11. In the cross-cultural context, the missionaries who attempt to live an exemplary life and “be a good witness” will naturally tend to do so with reference to their own consciences rather than with reference to the conscience of those to whom they speak. The result is that their actions—in areas addressed by native consciences but unaddressed by the missionaries (or differently addressed by theirs)—will tend to be judged immoral.
12. Missionaries, whose message entails ideas of sin and judgment, will naturally tend—as already noted—to speak of sin with reference to matters about which their conscience speaks and native conscience is silent, with the result that native conscience does not work to support the message.
13. Missionary proclamation which stresses sin with reference to that which the missionary’s conscience deems sinful, and native conscience does not, has the effect of calling the listeners’ attention to cultural discontinuity, implying that the call to conversion is a call to abandon one’s own culture for that of the missionary. This confusion of gospel and culture has two possible results:
  - a. People refuse to convert because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from one culture—

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their own, which they are familiar with, successful in terms of, and believe is good—to the missionary's national culture, which is alien and may even seem immoral.

- b. Or people may choose to convert precisely because of the implication that conversion is a conversion from their own culture to that of the missionary, such conversion being a cultural conversion rather than genuine conversion to God in Christ.
14. Preaching about good and evil in terms of missionary conscience rather than native conscience results in conversion and discipleship which bypasses native conscience and leads to converts accepting, relating to, and experiencing a new set of rules and norms, not through deep personal moral conviction, but as a new system of taboos.
15. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may lead to superficial conformity or to a compartmentalized conformity.
16. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well create a situation where the missionary feels the need to take the role of policeman.
17. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience often create a structure of dependency and paternalism.
18. Conversion and discipleship which bypass native conscience may well lay the groundwork for a breakaway, independent church.
19. Missionaries need to understand the role that culture has played in the formation of their own conscience, and need help in distinguishing scruples grounded in transcendent biblical moral truth from scruples shaped, at least in part, by conventional cultural meanings.
20. The missionary must seek to understand native conscience.
21. The missionary must seek to live an exemplary life in terms of the virtues and norms stressed by the people he or she is attempting to reach.
22. In initial evangelism the missionary should stress sin, guilt, and repentance principally with reference to native conscience, particularly that aspect of their conscience which is in agreement with Scripture.
23. With conversion, the content of conscience is not instantly changed. But under the tutelage of a new authority—the Word of God—the conscience of the believer who is growing in sanctification will be gradually changed in certain needed areas toward greater conformity with the written Word.
24. After conversion the believers' relation to their own conscience (which still differs from that of the missionary) remains central to their own spiritual well-being.
25. The methods used by missionaries to disciple native converts must be grounded in:
  - a. a radical eschewing of any authority but that of Scripture.
  - b. a deep humility which recognizes that, as a cultural expatriate, one is not in a good position to authoritatively and unilaterally declare how biblical principles should be applied to cultural particulars. **IJFM**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Priest, p. 293. For Robert Priest's full online text of "Conscience and Culture": <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/22/3/291.full.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Priest, p. 293.

<sup>3</sup> For the full text of "Towards a Cross-Cultural Definition of Sin": <http://mis.sagepub.com/content/4/1/27.full.pdf+html>. See Priest, p. 293.

<sup>4</sup> Priest, p. 293.