

Doing Theology Among the Zuni

Calvin Conkey

Although the Zuni have been acquainted with the Gospel for some 400 years, they have yet to embrace Christianity. Why is this so? Calvin Conkey here offers an explanation and suggests new approaches based upon a more thorough understanding of the Zuni worldview.

There is a fresh missionary zeal in the American church today. "A Church for Every People by the Year 2000" is the rallying cry. Thousands of young Christians in the United States are answering the call of God to go where the Gospel has not yet been preached. However, while eyes are fixed on the adventures to be found "overseas," the unreached peoples in the U.S. continue to be passed by.

One of the most neglected blocs of unreached groups is the American Indians. Presently it is estimated that 92% of all Native Americans do not attend a church. Some would say that as few as 3-5% are truly Christian (Parvin 1985:58). Of all the Native American groups in the United States, the Zuni are by far the least evangelized, with less than 1% of the population professing Christianity. Nearly all are practicing animists.

Approximately 6,000 Zuni live on a reservation of 407,247 acres along the western border of New Mexico. Although these people have had contact with missionaries for more than 400 years, very few Zuni have become Christians. Why? What are the barriers that prevent them from making a decision to follow Christ? How can the message of the gospel be contextualized to fit the Zuni worldview? Who should present the gospel to them? These are the questions that must be answered before a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating indigenous Zuni church can be established.

Methods of the Past



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Whatever methodology the modern missiologist uses to make an appraisal of mission and to develop an effective mission theology, critical historical analysis must be one of his tools (Starkloff 1985:82). In the case of the Zuni, contact with Christian missionaries has taken place over four centuries.

The history of Christian efforts to evangelize the Zuni is for the most part a story of conflict and failure. American missionary strategy has often been to “civilize” or “westernize” the Indian. The expedition of Francisco Vasquez de Coronado in 1540 was the Zuni’s first experience with Europeans. Coronado entered the Pueblo area with a party of five Franciscan missionaries and several hundred armed horsemen accompanied by Indian servants. Coronado and his party established a reputation for brutality and ruthlessness that later generations of Spaniards were to continue (Dozier 1971:246).

In 1598 ecclesiastical, civil, and military authorities set about “civilizing” the Indians and making demands for labor and tribute. Unfortunately, the Franciscan priests were not like the considerate and understanding Jesuits who brought Christianity to the Yaquis and Mayas. The Franciscans did not learn the native languages or bother to learn about native customs. They were primarily intent on stamping out all vestiges of the native religion and substituting Catholic doctrine and practices by force, and they were aided by the military in the destruction of the ceremonial chambers known to the Zuni as the Kivas. Those Indian leaders who persisted in conducting ceremonies were executed or punished in a variety of ways (Dozier 1971:246). In order to stop native ceremonial patterns and beliefs, missionaries baptized Indians, forced attendance at mass, and made instruction in Catholic doctrine mandatory for all.

After several years of unabated abuses such as these, the Zuni and most of the other Pueblo Indians planned a revolt against the Spanish. In 1680 a successful revolt was led by a Tewa pueblo Indian religious leader who had been publically whipped five years earlier for practicing native religious rites. At the end of the revolt 33 missionaries and 380 colonists were dead, and all of the missions were destroyed. The Western Pueblos—Hopi and Zuni—were rarely visited after this rebellion. While an attempt was made to reestablish the Zuni missions, these efforts were finally abandoned and Spanish missionary activity stopped altogether.

Near the end of the seventeenth century the Zuni were reconquered by the Spanish, but the policies of force gradually gave way to less brutal treatment and a new tolerance of Zuni

traditions. The changed policies of missionaries in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries permitted the Indians to revive and reorganize their ceremonial patterns. Some of the more secret dances began to be practiced in the open again, apparently without opposition. Until the advent of the Anglo-American Protestant missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century, the Zuni were considered to be Catholics, but their religious life actually involved both native and Christian rituals (Spicer 1969:118).

American Protestant missionaries were openly critical of the “obscene” and “immoral” practices of the Indians, and they took steps to stop them. The Zuni reverted to secrecy in their native ceremonial system, and the pattern of compartmentalization achieved during the early years of Spanish oppression was again reinforced. Missionary influence was never as strong at Zuni as among the Rio Grande Pueblos. Despite strong acculturative pressures during the Spanish-Mexican period and during the later American period, much of the ancient Zuni culture persists, although with certain important changes (Spencer and Jennings 1977:281).

Historical records clearly show that conditions were placed upon the Indians as prerequisites to salvation. These prerequisites required the Christian Zuni to leave his culture, clan, and people and instead dress and act like Anglo-Americans. Very few early missionaries ever bothered to learn the Indian languages; thus, the Bible could only be understood by the younger individuals who had learned English. An old Indian woman, when asked why she did not want to become a Christian, said, “I have only heard one white man ever speak about Jesus in my own language, so he can’t be that important.”

It is quite obvious that the early missionaries thought that an Indian could not be a Christian in his own native culture. This was and still is a strong deterrent to the Indian desiring to become a Christian. It is not that the Zuni have been historically resistant to the gospel message itself—the popularity of syncretistic movements would seem to rule out that possibility. Rather, it is the package in which that message has been presented that causes them to reject Christianity. They have rejected a gospel that requires social and cultural suicide.

The Zuni have been victims of brutality and cultural insensitivity. Their presence today is a continual reminder of past Spanish and present Anglo-American Christianity’s inability to break free of “cultural pride” and present the message of Christ’s love in a way that makes sense to people of another

culture.

The Zuni Response

Most Indians are actively involved in either their own traditional religions or one of the fast growing "Nativistic" movements such as the Peyote Cult, sometimes known as the Native American Church. Anthony F. C. Wallace defined these movements as "a deliberate and organized effort of members of a society to produce a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956:265).

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Three of the most common elements in these new religious movements are: 1) they are truly new, belonging neither to the primal religion nor to the Christian churches; 2) they are products of the creativity of the local people; and 3) they belong to the Christian tradition, arising from an interaction stimulated by the Christian faith, especially by the overarching belief in one supreme Creator God (Turner 1981:46,48).

However, although some of these characteristics do carry over into the Zuni context, the Zuni are primarily concerned with a return to the traditional practices of the past. While they are no longer angry at the Christian church, they see it as unable to fulfill their needs. They believe that ultimately all religions seek healing and new life and that the true religious life of the Zuni people depends on recovering and following the meaningful traditions handed down from the elders. This type of a movement is commonly referred to as "neo-primal" because of the attempt to remodel the traditional religion (Turner 1981b:49). The Zuni are making a conscious organized effort to revive and perpetuate their traditional ceremonial practices.

The essence of the Zuni ceremonies is to recreate the harmony symbolized at creation. Month by month and year by year, the old dances of the gods are danced in their stone villages, life follows essentially the old patterns, and what they have taken from Anglo civilization they have molded to fit their own beliefs. The ancient homes of their ancestors, the cliff-dwellings and great planned valley cities of the "golden age," are still standing all around them as a constant reminder that this is where life really began. The cliff-dwellings were dug into the face of the cliffs, or built on a ledge hundreds of feet from the valley below (Benedict 1934:53). The underground ceremonial chamber, the Kiva, was hewed out to accommodate a man upright, and was large enough to serve as a gathering-room.

The Zuni are a ceremonially-oriented people, a people who

value sobriety and inoffensiveness above all other virtues. No other aspect of existence seriously competes in Zuni minds with the dances and religious observances. Their society is essentially a theocracy in which religious factors dominate the entire social pattern. At no point can missionaries touch the social setup without becoming immediately involved in religious matters.

Unlike the economically stratified Anglo-American culture, the Zunis consider social ranking primarily a religious affair largely determined through inheritance by birth, with privileges and honors accorded those ranked highest (Nida 1986: 46,128). These privileges require the memorization of word-perfect ritual and the performance of detailed ceremonies determined by the calendar and interlocking all the different cults and the governing body in a seemingly endless formalism. These rituals demand the time of all the members of the village, and strict attention is given to perfection. If one eagle feather of a mask has been taken from the shoulder of the bird instead of from the breast, it is a major concern. Since every detail has magical efficacy, if something is out of place the entire ritual could be ineffective.

This ceremonial life that occupies so much attention is organized like a series of three interlocking circles. Each of these circles represent one of the three major groups or "cults" which make up the "trinity" of the Zuni religious worldview. The first of these three institutions is the *Priesthoods*. They have their sacred objects, retreats, dances, prayers, and a year-long program which is annually initiated by the great winter solstice ceremony. Secondly, there is the tribal *Masked-God Society* that has similar possessions and calendric observances culminating in the great winter tribal masked-god ceremony, the *Shalako*. Lastly, the *Medicine Societies*, with their special relation to curing, function throughout the year but also feature an annual ceremony for tribal health. These three major groups make up the structure of the Zuni religious system. Each of these groups has its own role and function in the Zuni society, and they are interdependent.

The motives behind Zuni ceremonialism are quite practical. If a Zuni is asked the purpose of the religious observances, he will have a ready answer: "It is for rain!" (Benedict 1934:58). Fertility is above all else the blessing within the bestowal of the gods, and in the desert country of the Zuni plateau rain is the prime requisite for the growth of crops. The retreats of the priests, the dances of the masked gods, even many of the activities of the medicine societies are judged by

whether or not there has been rain. To “bless with water” is the synonym of all blessings. The Zuni believe that the dead come back in the rain clouds, bringing universal blessing.

The highest level of sanctity and power goes to the priest-hoods. The four major and eight minor priesthoods all possess “sacred medicine bundles” wherein resides their power. In their retreats they must sit motionless before their medicine bundles, with their minds fixed upon ceremonial things—eight days for the major priesthoods, four for the lesser. All Zuni await the granting of rain during these days, and the priests blessed with rain are greeted and thanked by everyone on the streets after their retreat is ended. Priests are also responsible to initiate the great ceremonial events of the year, make ritual appointments, and judge cases of witchcraft.

Though the priesthoods may be considered the most sacred of the Zuni religious cults, by far the most popular is the masked-god group. There are two kinds of masked-gods: the masked-gods proper, the *Kachinas*, and the *Kachina Priests*. These kachina priests are the chiefs of the supernatural world and are themselves impersonated with masks by Zuni dancers (Benedict 1934:62). However, because of their extreme sanctity, they are kept separate from the dancing gods proper. A man, when he puts on the mask of the god, becomes for the time being the supernatural himself. However, this seems to be little more than symbolic to the Zunis as there is no sanctioning of spirit possession in their religion.

The Zuni have an extremely high regard for imitative magic. Their ceremonies are much more than times of celebration; every detail of ritual must be scrupulously observed in order to acquire the desired blessing of the gods (Hopfe 1983:36). This is because each activity represents some action or communication in the spiritual realm, something like a spiritual telegraph system. The dances of the masked-gods are administered by a tribal-wide society consisting of all the adult males.

The medicine societies are primarily responsible for the individual and corporate health of the tribe. Their main power is that of healing.

A Theology for the Zuni

When one begins to consider the subject of doing theology among another culture, two questions must be addressed: (1) How should the message of the gospel be presented?, and (2) What will the new church look like in that cultural context?

When speaking of unreached people groups, much of the work of theology regarding the first question will be done initially by the missionary. However, after a group of believers is established, it will be primarily their responsibility to decide what should be prescribed, permissible, or rejected (Conn 1984:210). The missionary may offer guidance in Biblical study and evaluation, but ultimately it must be the national Christians themselves who, led by the Holy Spirit, allow Christ to build His church through them.

This kind of approach has, for the most part, not existed in missionary work among the Zuni. The Zuni's own religious beliefs and organization have fit better with their own folk culture and have carried more meaning for them than the form of Christianity they have been shown:

The Zuni religion is founded on the belief that supernatural forces control daily activities and that such forces must be placated and propitiated to obtain the needs of existence (Dozier 1970:50).

Special rituals and institutions exist in the Zuni culture for a successful hunt, a bountiful harvest, warding off illness, thwarting the enemy, and achieving harmonious social relations. Christian theology will have absolutely no impact on these people unless it can offer an effectual means by which these basic requirements of life can be met. Zuni traditional religion has, for the most part, been quite effective in meeting the "felt needs" of the society for centuries. By contrast, the Christian faith has provided no institutions for relief from the immediate and pressing anxieties of daily life. Instead, the new religion has dwelt more on incomprehensible rewards or punishments in the life after death—an emphasis resulting from the propagation of a "naturalistic" Western Christianity.

If we ever hope to present the gospel message to the Zuni people in a way they will understand and embrace, we must break free from our own "culture boundness" and pride. The gospel we proclaim must have the power to answer any social, cultural, spiritual, or physical need the Zunis may have. It must be a gospel for the "here and now" and not only for the great "by and by."

It should be understood that the Zunis have a face-to-face social organization. Eugene Nida lists four principles which should be kept in mind when working in such a society:

- 1) effective communication must be based upon personal

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friendship, 2) the initial approach should be to those who can effectively pass on communication within their family grouping, 3) time must be allowed for the internal diffusion of new ideas, 4) the challenge for any change of belief or action must be addressed to the persons or groups socially capable of making such decisions (Nida 1960:110).

It is of paramount importance, therefore, for any missionary working among the Zuni to begin by learning their language and culture, and to do this while developing trusting relationships. These people must see our desire to learn from them and understand their ways. We must show respect for them as a people made in the image of God. The Zuni have not seen much of this kind of Christian love. Often the Christian concern they have witnessed has been marred by culturally destructive intentions.

The apostle Paul tells us that he became like one not having the law, so as to win those not having the law. He did this even though he himself was not free from God's law but was under Christ's law. He goes on to say, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:21,22 NIV). When he communicated the gospel to the Athenians, he built on their knowledge of God and the universe. He did not try to destroy their culture, but he looked for redemptive keys to open their hearts to the truth of God's Word. We, too, must be willing to lay down our own cultural biases and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in how the gospel should be presented.

Secondly, if one's initial approach should be toward those who can effectively pass on the message of the gospel within the family unit, then a natural target among the Zuni would be the wife/brother relationship. The Zuni follow a matrilineal descent pattern which is ceremonially united in its ownership and care of the sacred fetishes. The women of each household care for their sacred objects. Their husbands are outsiders, and it is their brothers who are united with the household in all affairs but economic. This blood relationship group, rooted in the ownership of the house and united in the care of the sacred objects, is the most important group in Zuni society (Benedict 1934:58), and it has been in this particular group that Catholic missionaries of the past have found the greatest degree of success (Spears 1986:90).

Finally, the Zuni hold a concept of corporate personality which is difficult for most Westerners to understand. They see

themselves not so much as separate individuals, but as units or groups. Therefore, new ideas would probably be more effectively introduced at retreats than in public revival meetings. Group-oriented retreats have parallels in Zuni religion and have been used with some success by Catholic workers.

The prospective missionary to the Zuni would do well to present Christ as the “peace-maker” and the one who heals relationships because of the great value they place on harmonious relationships within the community. Also, the Zuni emphasis on “imitative magic” might prepare them to better understand Christ as the “mediator” between God and man; the idea that “Jesus has paid for our sins” or “in my place He died” would probably be very clearly understood.

Effective contextualization of the gospel among this people must address the culturally-defined priorities of successful hunting, bountiful harvests, protection from illness and enemies, and achievement of harmonious social relations within the community. A strategy of evangelization cannot deny, ignore, or uncritically accept the old beliefs, rituals and customs of the people. It must critically evaluate the traditional religious practices by first gathering information about events and then evaluating those events in light of Biblical teaching. Only then can one be effective in creating a new contextualized Christian practice (Hiebert 1985:188). Christianity must provide culturally appropriate, Biblically-based rituals and institutions that speak to the demands of daily life.

Unfortunately, this is where the Western missionary has failed the worst. Hiebert’s concept of the “flaw of the excluded middle” has great relevance here (Hiebert 1982). The Western worldview tends to dichotomize between the supernatural and the natural, and Western Christians have concerned themselves primarily with the natural realm and failed to adequately recognize supernatural activity. Since the Zunis do not make this same distinction, it may be more effective to send missionaries to the Zunis who are from a more closely related cultural background.

In particular, I would suggest that missionaries be recruited from some of the Polynesian cultures. They are not only better equipped for Zuni ministry in terms of worldview, but they also hold a high regard for dance, music, and other ceremonial expressions. Other cultures that might commission effective Christian missionaries to the Zuni include South American Indians and peoples of Asian tribal groups. Missionaries from these groups would probably be more readily accepted by the Zuni than would Westerners for cultural as well as historical

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Finally, Christian missionaries to the Zuni must present God as "Living and Powerful." The God of the Bible must be recognized as the Source of all life, the Creator of the Universe. The gracious Lord shows himself powerful by sending the rain, making crops grow, giving food to all the creatures of the earth, and fulfilling every need of man and beast, and the Father also demonstrated his power over death by raising Christ from the dead.

We must also emphasize that God is the great Healer. The missionary should be actively involved in praying for the sick and expecting God to show Himself mighty to the Zuni. Emphasis should be placed on culturally appropriate "power evangelism," for any missionary who aspires to have an effective ministry among the Zuni must desire to see signs and wonders take place in their midst.

The church must partake of Zuni forms while avoiding the traditional Zuni meanings ascribed to these forms. The missionary must be careful not to confuse the two even though they are sometimes closely linked (Spears 1986:106). In order for the church to be truly indigenous, Zuni Christians themselves must decide which forms are permissible and which are not. This is the goal of contextual theology, i.e., to see a fully-understood expression of the supra-cultural message of the gospel presented in a culturally appropriate way. God desires to communicate His love and power to the Zuni. It is our job to be His "living letters."

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