

THE CATEGORY “CHRISTIAN” IN THE MISSION TASK PAUL G.. HIEBERT*

Who is a Christian? The question is an old one in mission. Can a non-literate peasant, tired and hungry after a long day’s work, become one after learning the gospel only once? And if so, what changes have taken place in his or her beliefs and behaviour?

Before we can answer this question, we must look more closely at the way we form words. “Christian” like many other words in English, refers to a category of people, a category we create in our minds. To be sure, God, who looks at the hearts of people, knows who are his. But as human beings we are limited to categories based on observation and communication. How do we create categories, and how does the way we create them affect our view of mission?

TYPES OF CATEGORIES

Modern studies in mathematics have shown us that we create categories in several ways, each of which has its own structural characteristics. Here we shall look at three of these and see how they affect our view of missions - how we think of conversion, of the church, and of the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions.

Bounded sets

Many of our words in English refer to well-formed or “bounded” sets: “apples”, “oranges”, “pencils”, and “pens”, for example. In fact, English, probably borrowing from Greek, uses bounded sets for most of its nouns - the basic building blocks of the language.

What is a bounded set and how does our mind form it? In creating a bounded set our mind puts together things that share common characteristics. “Apples”, for example, are objects that are “the usually round, red or yellow, edible fruit of a *rosaceous* tree” (Random House Dictionary).

Bounded sets have certain structural characteristics — that is, they force us to look at things in certain ways. Let us use the category “apples” to illustrate some of these:

The category is created by listing the essential characteristics that an object must have to be within the set. For example, an apple is (1) a kind of “fruit” that is (2) usually round, (3) red or yellow, (4) edible and (5) produced by a *rosaceous* tree. Any fruit that meets these requirements (assuming we have an adequate definition) is an “apple”.

The category is defined by a clear boundary. A fruit is either an apple or it is not. It cannot be 70% apple and 30% pear. Most of the effort in defining the category is spent on defining and maintaining the boundary. In other words, not only must we say what an “apple” is, we must also clearly differentiate it from “oranges”, “pears”, and other similar objects that are *not* “apples”.

Objects within a bounded set are uniform in their essential characteristics. All apples are 100% apple. One is not more apple than another. Either a fruit is an apple or it is not. There may be different sizes, shapes and varieties, but they are all the same in that they are all apples. There is no variation implicit within the structuring of the category.

Bounded sets are essentially static sets. An apple remains an apple whether it is green, ripe or rotten. The only change occurs when an apple ceases to be one (e.g. by being eaten), or when something is turned into an apple. The central question, therefore, is whether an object is inside or outside the category. Once within, no further change can take place in its categorical status.

“Christian” and “church” as bounded sets

What happens to our concepts of “Christian” and “church” if we define them as bounded sets?

We would define them in terms of essential, intrinsic characteristics. Because we cannot see into the hearts of people, we would choose characteristics that we can see or hear, namely tests of orthodoxy (right beliefs defined creedally) or orthopraxy (right behaviour) or both.

We would make a clear distinction between “Christian” and “non-Christian”. There is an excluded middle. Moreover, a great deal of effort would be given to maintaining this distinction for the boundary is critical to the existence of the set. We need carefully defined membership lists in church, and a distancing from those in the world.

We would view all Christians as essentially the same. There may be old experienced Christians and young converts, but in church matters they would have equal say.

We would stress evangelism as the major task of mission, and define it as bringing people into the category. Once in, there would be essentially (required by the structure of the category) nothing more for them to change. Growth is not an essential part of the set.

Let us return for a moment to the non-literate peasant hearing the gospel for the first time. What does it mean for him or her to become a “Christian”? If we think of “Christian” as a bounded set, we must decide what are the definitive characteristics that set a Christian apart from a non-Christian. If we use beliefs as the criteria and reduce these to so simple a set that we can say the villager has truly become a Christian (has acquired *all* the beliefs necessary to become one), or if we use a minimum change in behaviour, are we not in danger of settling for cheap grace? On the other hand, if we raise the standards high, are we not choosing a costly grace that will keep the peasant out of the church? Is it possible then for a peasant to become a Christian in one hour, or even in one lifetime?

Can it be that our problem with who is a Christian has to do with the way we define the category?

Centred sets

A second way of forming concepts is to use extrinsic rather than intrinsic characteristics to group things in terms of how they relate to other things, rather than to what they are in and of themselves. For our use we will refer to extrinsic or relational sets as “centred sets”.

A centred set has the following characteristics:

It is created by defining a centre, and the relationship of things to that centre. Some things may be far from the centre, but they are related to or moving *towards* the centre; therefore, they are part of the centred set. On the other hand, some objects may be near the centre but are moving *away* from it, so they are not a part of the set. The set is made up of all things related to or moving towards the centre.

While the centred set does not place the primary focus on the boundary, there is a clear division between things moving in and those moving out. There is an excluded

middle. An object either belongs to the set or it does not. However, the set focuses upon the *centre* and the boundary emerges when the centre.

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Centred sets reflect variation within a category. While there is a clear boundary, within the set there is variation in nearness to the centre. Some things are near to it, and others far from it, although all are moving towards it. There is no simple uniformity within the set.

Centred sets are dynamic sets. Two types of movement are essential parts of their structure. First, it is possible to change direction — to turn from moving away to moving towards the centre, from being outside to being inside the set. Second, things may move closer to or away from the centre even though they remain headed towards or related to the centre (cf the old term “back-sliding”).

Illustrations of centred sets are less obvious in English. A technical example is the term “electrons” that refers to atomic particles attracted by a positive magnetic pole. Other examples are kinship terms. “Children” are related to a common parent, and, in polygynous societies, “co-wives” are related to a single husband.

“Christian” and “church” as centred sets

How would the concept “Christian” look if we were to define it as a centred set?

A Christian would be defined in terms of a relationship to a centre —in terms of who is her or his God. The critical question is one of allegiance and worship. A Christian is one for whom Jesus Christ is both Lord and God. In other words, he or she is a follower of Christ. From the nature of the centred set, it is clear that there are those who are near the centre, but are headed away, namely the Pharisees. On the other hand, there are those at a distance who know little about Christ but are his disciples.

There is a clear division between Christians and non-Christians, but less stress would be placed on maintaining the boundary and more on reaffirming the centre in order to preserve the category. There would be less need to play the “boundary games” that often emerge in human institutions.

There would be a recognition of variation among Christians. Some are seen as closer to Christ in their knowledge and maturity, others with little knowledge and a need to grow. This recognition of variation in maturity and growth avoids the dilemma of choosing between cheap or costly grace. Growth after conversion is an intrinsic part of what it means to be a Christian, and discipleship the other half of salvation.

Two important dynamics would be recognized. First there is conversion, or turning towards a new God. Second, there would be maturation, or the movement towards that new God in knowledge and obedience.

Returning to the village peasants, they could become a Christian with a minimum knowledge so long as they make Christ the Lord of their lives. But then nurture and growth also become central concerns in the mission task.

Fuzzy sets

As Zaide (1965), Cohen (1966) and others have pointed out, there is a third type of category, namely “fuzzy set”. Unlike bounded and centred sets, both of which are well-formed (have clear edges), fuzzy sets have no sharp boundaries. Rather there are degrees of inclusion within them. Things may be a quarter, a half or two-thirds inside the set. For example, a mountain merges into the plains without a clear boundary, and red into orange. Using well-defined sets Americans can divide people into “whites” and “blacks” and so on. In fuzzy-set terms there is a range between blacks and whites with many who have varying numbers of black and white ancestors. In fuzzy-set terms, there is no sharp boundary between races.

All cultures seem to use all these ways of creating categories, but each seems to focus on one or another as the basis for building its view of the world. American culture places a premium on clear, well-bounded sets: on well-defined roads with curbs and marked lanes, well-edged lawns with no weeds or flowers in the grass, with sharp lines separating paint from glass in the windows, and with fixed prices. Other cultures such as the Indian culture appear to organize the world more in fuzzy-set terms: with roads having no clear edges, music characterized by glides and few fixed prices.

Fuzzy sets have the following characteristics:

They may be defined either in terms of what things are intrinsically or how things relate to some external centre or reference point. There are, in fact, two types of fuzzy sets that parallel the two types of well-defined sets. For our purposes here we will lump them together.

The boundary of the categories is fuzzy. There are degrees of inclusion within the set. Things may be 30%, or 55% or 90% within the category

Because of the fuzzy boundary, a thing may belong to two or more sets at the same time. A paint may be the mixture of three different pigments, or a person one quarter black and three quarters white. There is, therefore, no excluded middle in fuzzy-set algebra or fuzzy-set logic. Rather than a sharply divided “either-or” world, there are continuums that run from one form to another.

As with well-formed sets, inclusion in a fuzzy set may involve either a change in the intrinsic characteristics of things, or a change in the direction of their movement depending upon which of the two types of fuzzy sets one is forming. But characteristic of all fuzzy sets is that the change may take place in steps. There need be no single complete transformation. An apple becomes “ripe” by degrees, and night creeps up by stages.

“Christian” and “church” as fuzzy sets

If we were to define Christians and the church in fuzzy-set terms we would find the following:

A Christian would be defined either in terms of beliefs and/or practices, or in terms of

a relationship to Christ, depending upon which of the two types of fuzzy set we are using.

In either case there would be no sharp boundary between Christian and non-Christian. It would be possible for people to think of themselves as a quarter, half or two-thirds Christians. Consequently there would be no clear membership lists in churches.

People could belong to two or more religions at the same time. They might participate in both Hindu and Christian services, or combine Buddhism and Confucianism in responding to the needs of life. They would be less likely to understand or accept the exclusive claims of any one religion.

Conversion to Christianity in fuzzy-set terms might not be a decisive event. It could also be a gradual movement from outside to in, based on a series of small decisions

SETS AND THE MISSION TASK

Who then are the real Christians? And can a peasant become a Christian after hearing the gospel only once? In answering these questions, it is clear that we must first clarify what we mean by the word “Christian” whether we are defining it in bounded, centred or fuzzy-set terms. If we do not make clear what type of category we are using, we will often talk past one another and our disagreements will arise out of unexamined presuppositions and deep linguistic structures rather than out of theological differences.

A centred set approach seems to correspond most closely with the Hebraic view of reality found in the Bible. In the Old Testament the central issue is the worship of and obedience to YHWH. The Israelites had to learn the hard lesson *that they were to have no other gods* (Ex. 34: 14; Lev. 26:1 ; Is. 44 8; I Kings 18: 39, etc.). In the New Testament, although Peter, James, John and the others may have heard about Jesus before they became disciples, Jesus did not ask them to pass a theological test before inviting them to follow him. Faith is defined not so much in terms of knowledge, although some of that must be present, but in terms of obedience. Eugene Nida writes (1981:16),

From the biblical viewpoint ...truth is not an abstract definition of reality or being but is essentially right thinking about moral behaviour, and wisdom is not intellectual capacity to formulate philosophical questions and provide cogent systems but rather the ability to decide moral and human issues with justice.

The key question in a centred-set approach to Christianity’ is who is your God? And God is defined as the one whom you worship and obey.

A centred-set approach, however, creates some problems for westerners who are used to thinking primarily in bounded-set terms. How, for example, does one deal with church membership lists, and with a recognition of differences of maturity in the power structures of the church’?

A bounded-set approach creates a well-ordered world with few ambiguities, but it has its implicit dangers. It can lead to an over-emphasis on defining orthodoxy in terms of a body of beliefs or practices, while overlooking the basic relational nature of the gospel. The Good News of salvation is first the restoration of fellowship between sinners and a holy God. This approach, because it focuses on characteristics intrinsic to the Christians themselves, too easily loses sight of the centre. The church, then, is in danger of becoming (as Durkheim put it) a group of people who look to their corporate body rather than to a transcendent God, and who replace worship with fellowship.

A fuzzy-set approach raises even more serious theological and missiological problems. How does one deal with religions such as Hinduism based on fuzzy sets that deny our claims of the uniqueness of Christianity? The Bible makes a clear distinction between the children of God and the children of darkness (Josh. 24: 15; Luke 16:13; Col. 1:21-22; and 1 John), and to Christ as the Saviour. If we contextualize the gospel into fuzzy-set terms, have we not lost an essential part of the gospel?

On the other hand, we must recognize that from the human point of view we often see “through a glass darkly”. God, who sees the hearts, knows who are his. But we, who must depend upon verbal statements and behavioural changes, often see the boundary as fuzzy. There are those who are clearly followers of Jesus, and those who reject him. But there are many in the church whose commitment is not all that clear. It may be for this reason that we are cautioned about passing judgements (Matt. 7:1 1 Cor, 4: 5).

Ultimately the question of whether we should use the terms “Christian” and “church” as bounded, centred or fuzzy’ sets must be decided on theological, not linguistic grounds. But an awareness of how we form categories can make explicit what we too often leave implicit and unexamined, and clarify our discussions.

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