Christ Among the Maasai

A Framework for Theological Reflection

The mission field provides unique places for the life of Christ to play out in new contexts and places where He has never before. Every situation is unique and Christ is continually reincarnating Himself among the people the missionary is working with. A missionary’s primary task is to ask, “What does Jesus Christ look like here?” Often this looks far different than the missionary’s home culture and forces missionaries to ask questions they have never asked. The questions presented by Harold and Betty Cummins is one such case. Polygamy, corporate decision making, tribalism, and pastoral societies are foreign to most American Christians.

The Cummins will need to serve as interpretational guides for the Maasai communities, and must look at Scripture along with the work of the risen Christ in order to interpret Christ among the Maasai. These missionaries are attempting to form a “hermeneutical community” of faith and practice to interpret Christ in light of His current presence in the Maasai community and in light of his historical presence revealed through Scripture.¹ To form an appropriate response, I would like to propose a fourfold theological framework for discernment based on Richard Osmer’s four tasks: the descriptive, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic.² These four tasks should attempt to shed light upon the situation socially by asking, “What is going on? and “Why is this going on?” Next, the process will reflect Biblically upon the situation by asking, “What ought to be going on?”, and finally missionally by answering the question, “How might we respond?” After reflection, the Cummins will most likely have to repeat the process again as


theological reflection often provides more questions than answers, and tends to circle back on itself.³ While the process may never finally “arrive,” it does provide a launching point for the ministry of Christ among the Maasai through the Cummins.

The Descriptive-Empirical and the Interpretive Task

The first question the missionaries ought to ask is “What is going on and why?” Only in understanding the Maasai worldview may they interpret Christ in the context. The Maasai are have been shaped by a rich history and whose relation with the outside world is tense at best. In 1904, the Kenya government moved the Maasai from the rich pastoral land of the Rift Valley where they had lived for years to the inferior Laikipia plains.⁴

The Maasai’s withdrawal from society is a key point in the tribe’s culture. They are wary of outsiders (and with good reason), and extremely proud to be Maasai. A Maasai man’s masculinity is highly ritualized with complex initiation processes, and his place in the culture is a driving force for Maasai men. They are known as proud “noble savages” who defiantly persist their outmoded traditions in the face of a changing world.⁵ It is possible the Cummins’ school is seen as a ormeek (a derogatory name for non-Maasai) structure. The males may be wary of associating too closely with an outside institution and thus losing their standing in the community. In the past, some men who embraced some aspects of ‘modernity’ and did not conform to the dominant view of masculinity were ostracized as ormeek.⁶

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³ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, p. 11.
⁶ Ibid., 12.
Differing gender roles might also be a source of the Maasais’ reaction to the school. Men do not work in buildings but out in the pastures while women stay back and maintain the only buildings the Maasais own. The studies are done at schools which the males may view as the realm of women and children. The Cummins need to wonder what a change in locale might suggest to the Maasai and what sort of response they might receive were they to go out with the Maasai men. Maasai women also have a unique role in daily meditating with Eng’ai, the Maasai God. A major social hurdle for the Cummins would be to show the Maasai men that they have a need for a relationship with Eng’ai while at the same time endorsing the women’s role of meditations with God.

The decision making process is fairly egalitarian. Both men and women share responsibility in deciding household affairs, and the elder men (often in consultation with their wives) decide for the “village.” The wives have little freedom to make decisions that are not sanctioned by their husbands. This is not only characteristic of the individual family unit but also indicative of the entire tribe. Major decisions are not made apart from tribal endorsement. The Maasai have been characterized as “democratic to the extreme” and make decisions as groups and only in groups. According to Vincent Donovan, one of the first missionaries to the Maasai, “[Maasai] Groups adopt changes as groups, or they do not adopt them at all.”

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9 Ibid., 8.
11 Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 16.
12 Ibid., 66.
decision making process should give the Cummins caution when making decisions with individuals or small sections of the Maasai community.

Over 60% of Maasai are in polygamous marriages by the age of 40. Within the system of polygamy the women are treated with dignity equal to other monogamous systems of marriage, so much so that Joseph Kahiga, an African author, writes some women who are second wives might wonder what all the fuss is about. Cultures steeped in poverty view wives and children as assets to assist in the division of labor. Furthermore barrenness is a cultural stigma, and polygynous marriages may be seen as a relief for the first wife. Sam Owusu, a native Ghanian, writes of a first wife who was mocked by the community because she was barren and asked her husband to find a second wife to provide children. The man’s first wife then assisted in the search of the second wife. In Africa, polygamy is not only culturally acceptable but also fills a cultural necessity. Whether or not the practice is Biblical is the question to be considered, as well as can the Cummins in good conscious baptize polygamists? Furthermore, should the Cummins push for the women’s right to be baptized, or is there another solution?

The Normative Task

Drawing upon both Biblical Scriptures and the traditions of the church, one may conclude not to forbid the polygamous marriage within the Maasai community, and allow a polygamist is eligible for baptism. Whether or not this is the wisest decision is one for the community to

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decide for itself with the minister guiding the conversation. As I approach the text, I approach with the theological commitment that the Bible serves as a source of normative practice for the Christian community, however the text must always be looked at in its entirety. Furthermore Christians look forward to the world Christ is bringing and where He is moving a specific community towards, and then ask what does the text speak to that movement.

The issue of polygamy must be framed properly. German theologian Helmut Thielicke writes, "The task of the mission is not to preach monogamy, but rather the Gospel."\(^{17}\) The question then is monogamy essential for adherents to the Gospel? Paul writes, “Each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him/her and to which God has called him” and continues, “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you; although if you can gain your freedom, do so.”\(^{18}\) The Gospel promotes liberation, and Paul seems to be in favor of abolition. Why then does Paul not exhort the church to free their slaves? Obviously the abolition of slavery is to be desired, yet for Paul the task is not to “preach social revolution. The first thing is to be a Christian, and that is possible in all situations.”\(^{19}\)

There are many cases of polygamy within the Old Testament and no outright condemnation of the practice anywhere in Scripture, however the practice of the New Testament is monogamy. When Scripture seems to contradict, ministers need to ask if Christ changes the practice. Christ was unmarried, and he never directly addresses the topic. The pastor then needs to look at cultural practices in order to interpret a norm. While monogamy seems to be the New Testament norm, this is due to the New Testament’s Greco-Roman background. Monogamy was

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 195.

\(^{18}\) 1 Corinthians 7:17, 7:21

primarily a Greco-Roman institution,\(^\text{20}\) which would explain the shift from a tradition of polygamy found in the Patriarchs of the Old Testament. Therefore polygamy seems to be morally ambiguous while monogamy is preferred as it more accurately reflects the Creation ideal of one man and one woman.\(^\text{21}\) Western culture tends to allow a different form of polygamy by condoning divorce and creating "successive polygamy."\(^\text{22}\) Would the Cummins allow a divorcee to be baptized? I imagine the answer would be yes. Thomas Aquinas acknowledges that baptism is a simple obedient acknowledgment, even if other knowledge is lacking.\(^\text{23}\) The requisite for baptism is not a present righteousness, but is a new beginning in Christ’s way. Since polygamy while not ideal is not sinful, the women should be commended to stay with their husbands.

The next question is then should these women be baptized? This question should be couched within the cultural dynamics of the situation. Are there other ramifications in which Christ might recommend the postponement of baptism? Considering the communal decision making hierarchy of the Maasai, the Cummins should seek to baptize the whole clan and not to divide the clan. There is Biblical precedent for such a practice.\(^\text{24}\) In the ancient world, households followed the religion of the head of the family.\(^\text{25}\) This is a practice which is accepted by Paul and practiced in early culture of the Church. “Household baptisms were practiced across the spectrum of people turning to Christ, mirroring the Jewish practice of incorporating families

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\(^{21}\) Genesis 1:27

\(^{22}\) Kahiga, “Polygamy: a Pastoral Challenge,” p. 121.


\(^{24}\) Several examples of household baptisms: Acts 8:18, 10:48, 16:33; 1 Cor. 1:16.

as proselytes through baptism.” However it is key to note that there was an individual faith within the household members although the decision was made as a community rather than individually.

**The Pragmatic Task**

After reflection on what is going on in the Maasai *enkang* and through reflection upon the Christian normative ideal, the Cummins are ready to move towards answering the final question of, “What shall we do?” The minister’s role in this context is to not make decisions for the community but to act as a guide for the members of the community asking him/herself what is Christ saying to these people? As Donovan writes, “Christian communities belong to the people, indeed they are the people.” The minister’s ultimate goal is to hand leadership back over to the community. In introducing Western concepts of women’s equality and monogamy, are the missionaries taking away part of the Maasai’s culture, something which they have fought vehemently to protect. If these women proceed with baptism, would these women be honoring and respecting their husbands as Christ would call them to do? If they were to proceed with baptism, they might push the men of the community away. Are monogamy and equality of sexes the Christian ideals? Yes. However the Maasai need to be given the opportunity to choose that path in light of Christ and should not have it forced upon them. If these women were oppressed or mistreated, then Christ would be working differently, however Christ might be using these women’s response as a launching point for the community. Furthermore, the Maasai are already moving away from polygamy as the Maasai’s socioeconomic situation improves.

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28 Coast, ”Maasai Marriage,” p. 412.
women are choosing baptism, the pastor should help them think missionally towards the men of
the *enkang*. The Maasai became great by their conquest over many nations and “walked proud
and unafraid across the plains.”\(^\text{29}\) However these proud people now live on the fringes of
Kenyan society relegated to the barren and unwanted areas of the nation. It is quite possible
some of the elders remember or remember stories of the better days when the Maasai ruled the
Savannah. Losing their wives to a “foreign” religion might further induce shame upon a group
of people already steeped in it.

In other incidences where monogamy was forced upon a group a writer comments, “The
Gospel, which is breaking up their families, is not regarded as good news.”\(^\text{30}\) This question
could be shifted to ask is the breaking up of their societal structures and tribal decision making
good news for the Maasai? In a culture where one person offends not only that person but his
family, friends, and clan,\(^\text{31}\) it is not wise to risk alienating one *enkang* of Maasai men and thus
alienating the rest of the Maasai community. The ideals of monogamy and independence of
women are decisions the Maasai must make for themselves *after* Christ has worked in their
hearts. Missionaries need to remember Christ is at work among the Maasai and that it is Christ’s
ministry not theirs and show patience as the slow work of the Kingdom proceeds.

In response to the women’s desire to be baptized. For the above reasons, their desire
should be differed, but not denied. The missionaries should engage the women and ask if they
are making the best decision for their clan or are there better alternatives? In the Anglican
church’s work in areas outside the Maasai, they ran into the problem of women being ostracized

\(^{29}\) Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, p. 39.

\(^{30}\) Owusu, “Towards a Theology of Marriage and Polygamy,” p. 196.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., 196.
from their communities and becoming financially dependent on the mission. This is not ideal, and the Cummins must consider with the Maasai if these women will be able to retain their position within the community in order to influence the community.

If through baptism, people are called into a new community and Kingdom, then what sort of community are they going to baptize the women into? This community would be one which disrupts their morally ambiguous social institutions. Is there another approach which embraces the proud Maasai and shows them that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of their Eng’ai? The Cummins have made a mistake by building a foreign school in a nomadic community which rejects the culture they find themselves in. Schools may be associated with the very structures which are oppressing the Maasai. Furthermore, are they approaching them as a community or are they reflecting American Individualism in the way they are evangelizing the community? The Cummins might be undercutting the established social hierarchy already established. A missionary should work within the culture to redeem it, not create one which destabilizes the culture. When encountering culture which does not stand in contrast to the Gospel, a missionary should seek to find and acknowledge truth where they find it. The Cummins seem to be addressing needs (education, a church building...) which the community does not see as a need. This might be why the men are uninterested in Christianity. The missionaries should communicate to the Maasai leaders how the fulfillment of being Maasai is in Jesus Christ. They could highlight Christ’s loyalty, his subversive movement towards an oppressive government, or discuss themes of Christ as a mighty warrior against spiritual forces, all of which would connect with their culture. Furthermore, the Cummins are attempting to study the Bible as a text with a

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predominantly illiterate and oral culture. The Maasai are “utter conservatives, afraid of change of any kind,”\textsuperscript{33} and the school could be seen as a place of encroaching change. It is the belief of this author that the Cummins’ efforts are more reflective of a foreign worldview rather than a native theology.

The Cummins should take the women’s baptism as a great beginning for the Maasai church, however it reveals a defect in their presentation of the Gospel. They should delay the women’s baptism in hopes of reaching the whole community. They should begin to reflect on what parts of their approach are an American ideal and represent a Western/Outsider influence. They need to begin to engage themselves and guide these Maasai women in the process to understand what Christ looks like in their communities. If they baptize the women now, they run the risk of alienating themselves from the Maasai culture at large. In their work, the Moravian Church found their missionaries’ “religious influence remained restricted to a small circle of outsiders who found land, work, and shelter in mission community,”\textsuperscript{34} an end which the Cummins seem headed towards. The Cummins task at present is to engage the Maasai women in a learning attitude and ask the Maasai women why the men do not come, and furthermore how can the Maasai women be co-workers in reaching these men. They are the key to reaching the rest of the community. Instead of simply baptizing a small sect which will be on the fringes, the Cummins should seek to reach the community in its entirety and use the Maasais who are interested as allies in the Kingdom of God. Christ is moving, and the Cummins need to discern where He is moving towards and shepherd the Maasai women in joining Christ in His work.

\textsuperscript{33} Donovan, \textit{Christianity Rediscovered}, p. 17.

Bibliography


