

The Taiwanese World-view and Evangelism

How do you make sense of the following?

- A mother beats the coffin of her deceased son
- Police and gangsters worshipping the same God
- Teenagers in a religious parade slash themselves until they bleed
- Prostitutes regularly sacrificing to their idols
- Aborted fetuses worshipped by their parents
- Gods paraded through the streets surrounded by demon guards and worshippers

These are just a few of the unusual and elaborate religious activities that can be found in Taiwan. What religion is this? What do these things tell us about people's worldviews, beliefs and values? And perhaps most important, how do we effectively share the gospel with these people?

This article is just a short introduction to some of the key beliefs held by Taiwanese people. What is stated here will be a generalisation that will be more or less true depending upon how much people have been influenced by outside ideas such as secularism, Christianity and other world religions. Amongst the more traditional segments of society, particularly in working class communities, these ideas may be held very strongly and in some cases are even growing in influence and popularity.

Religion in Taiwan

Modern Taiwan looks very similar to other developed countries around the world - an international, technological, consumer society. A visitor to Taipei may see little in the way of religious activity and will be tempted to see Taiwan as a secular, non-religious society, similar to those in North America or Europe. A Christian visitor may then assume that effective evangelism and ministry can use essentially the same methods and approach as at home.

Sometimes only subtle clues such as a lucky charm hanging from the rear-view mirror, or "Buddhist" beads worn on the wrist are the only indication that underneath a sophisticated, pragmatic exterior, a person still maintains a deeply spiritual view of reality. Such people may continue to consult almanacs to identify lucky days, believe strongly in fate and follow a range of behavioural taboos that arise out of a religious worldview. They believe in a supernatural dimension which impacts on the material world.

In recent years a number of cellphone companies have offered ways to worship popular gods using your phone. You can choose the service you require and pay through credit card on your phone without the need to visit a temple or burn incense. Technological advance has just changed the shape of religious expression. It has not replaced the traditional religious worldview.

In fact, well over 90% of Taiwanese people identify themselves as believing a religion. The majority will say they are Buddhist, some will state they are Taoist. However, we should not assume that people have a clear understanding of the religion with which they formally identify. As Christians we expect that a Christian will have an understanding of core Christian beliefs and seek to live out Christian values. Although we recognise that many people will be inconsistent or nominal in their belief we assume that there is a recognised standard (the Bible) by which their faith can be evaluated and which can form as a basis for discussion. However, just because a person identifies himself as Buddhist, it does not mean that he has an understanding of Buddhist teaching or that we should try and evangelise him as if he holds a Buddhist worldview.

The practical reality for most people in Taiwan is that their religion is a mix of belief systems including Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism (footnote: which is not strictly a religion but nevertheless has significant impact on the practice of Taiwanese religion), and Chinese traditional and regional beliefs. This mix is commonly called "Chinese religion". Only a minority of people would be "pure" Buddhists in their practice of a clearly understood Buddhist belief system. That is, most people follow a form of folk religion rather than adhering closely to a classical or high religion.



Thus religion in Taiwan is ubiquitous and complex. However, there is a common worldview that drives much of this religious expression. As Christians, if we wish to clearly share the gospel with Taiwanese people, it is important we that understand this core worldview that motivates and directs Taiwanese religious expression.

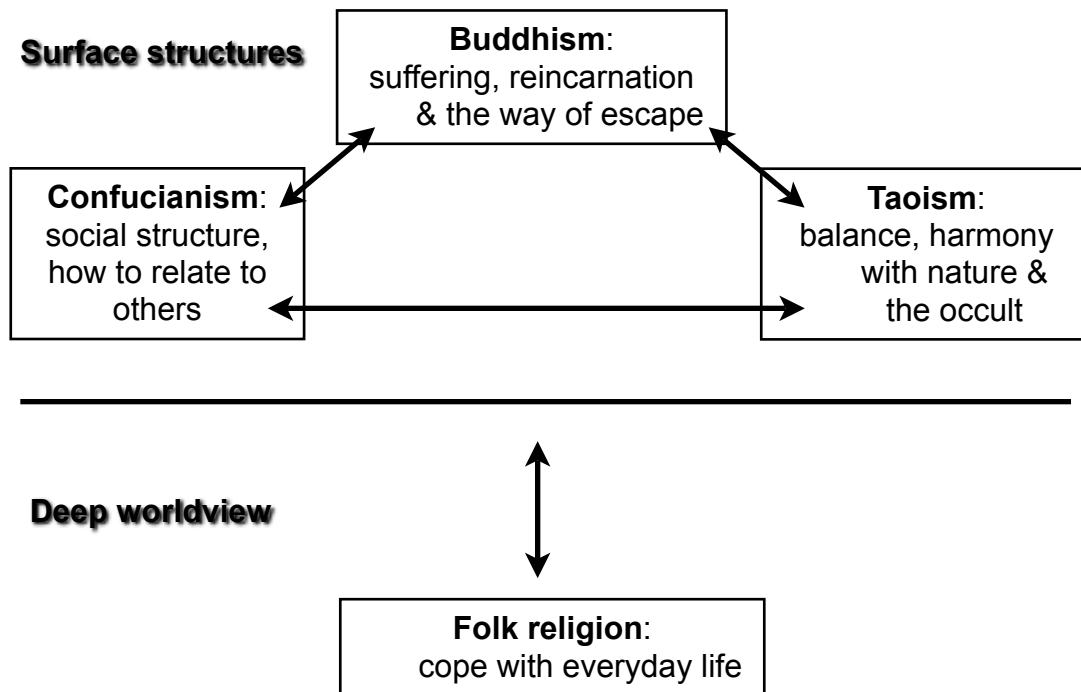
Taiwanese Worldview

Most Taiwanese people are animists. They are not atheists, either secular or Buddhist. They are not monotheists. They are not even just polytheists, believing in lots of different gods. They are animists.

Animism is the belief that there is a supernatural world which is related to the natural world. Therefore all life has a spiritual dimension and events in this world are influenced by beings and forces which exist in the supernatural realm. The essence of animism is power. A key concern of an animist is to understand and to control the powers of the supernatural realm in a way which ensures blessing, safety and prosperity - in Taiwan this is often summed up as "peace".¹

The nature of Taiwanese animism will be examined below. But first, how does this relate to the formal religions which Taiwanese people claim to believe? It can be illustrated as below.

¹ See Van Rhee, G., 'Defining Animistic Worldview' who says animism is "the belief that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and that humans, consequently, must discover what beings and forces are impacting them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power." <http://missiology.org/folkreligion/chapter1.htm> 8/04/2008



The various religious views interact with one another creating syncretistic forms of these formal belief systems. The result beliefs may be often not fully reconciled or logically consistent. However, underlying this is the animistic folk religion. To a large extent these are just surface structures which provide rituals and customs through which the animistic worldview can be expressed. That is why a person who may not identify himself as religious (i.e. doesn't follow a formal religion) may still be an animistic at heart. On this analysis, it is the folk religion which is closest to the heart of the Taiwanese religious worldview. This involves the worship of various gods, spirits and ancestors, all with the concern to control the powers of the spiritual realm and to obtain peace.

So what does Taiwanese animism look like?

Ancestors

As with all animists, Taiwanese people believe all people have spirits and that when you die your spirit continues to exist in disembodied form. There are a number of different explanations for what takes place, but most people believe some variation of the following.

Taiwanese people believe that everyone goes to hell after death. (This is closer to the Christian idea of purgatory than of hell.) In hell you are punished by demon guards for the wrong things you have done in this life. During your time in hell you depend on the living to supply your needs by burning money and objects that can be used in hell. These include houses, cars and a wide range of consumer items that can make existence in hell more comfortable or can be used to pay off the guards in hell. At the end of the punishment you are reincarnated.

However, ancestor worship does not finish here. It is believed that only one of a person's three souls is reincarnated, another remains with the grave and a third is located in the family ancestor tablet in the home.

However, depending upon how a family worships the deceased after their death, their spirit will become one of two kinds of ghosts.

Happy ghosts - these are spirits who are cared for, fed and worshipped. The spirit remains in the ancestor tablet and helps care for the family.

Hungry ghosts - these are the spirits of those who are not worshipped. This can include those who are neglected as well as those who have died in unfortunate circumstances. They are unhappy wanderers and can cause mischief and disaster.

The implications of this are as follows:

- Nobody wants to become a hungry ghost. Your eternal happiness depends on people worshipping you after you are dead. So it is important to ensure that there will be those who maintain this worship. Worship typically is the responsibility of the first-born son and his descendants. So having a male heir and maintaining the family line is not just a matter of earthly pride. It is critical to your eternal happiness
- Nobody wants their ancestors to be hungry ghosts as they may return to trouble the family. There is strong family pressure for all members to participate in appropriate worship rituals to ensure that those family members who have passed on are worshipped.
- Ancestor worship is seen as an integral part of filial piety. Morally upright people worship their ancestors. This is the right thing to do. It is obvious that Taiwanese folk religion has been greatly influenced by Confucian thought and its concern for filial piety. The strength of this belief can be seen in that a male child who is *hurt* or *dies* before his parents is considered *unfilial*. In some cases the parents of a son who has died will beat the coffin with a stick to symbolically punish him for his failure to remain alive and worship them as it is right to do.

There are a number of social implications for both men and women arising out of this worldview. It is very difficult for sons, especially first-born males, to give up ancestor worship or to become Christians. They also have a family duty to marry and to have sons to continue the family worship. This worldview also lies behind the traditional prejudice towards sons (重男輕女). A female child is never truly part of your family. Her purpose is to marry and produce sons for the worship of her in-laws. Her name will be recorded on the ancestral tablet of the family she marries into. So until she marries she may be regarded as a burden to be fed and placed in secondary importance to her brothers.



Ghosts

Apart from the worship of their own ancestors, most people will also offer worship to other ghosts. These are other spiritual beings who must be appeased to ensure the safety and prosperity of the family. This is most obvious during the 8th lunar month of the year which is known as Ghost Month. It is believed that the ghosts are released from hell and free to roam on the earth during this month. Intense worship is offered by most families and businesses to ensure that these hungry ghosts are satisfied and to appease them so they will not cause trouble. However, apart from during Ghost month, regular offerings are made by families and businesses to avoid trouble and ensure blessing. The motivation of ghost worship is fear. If it is not done then an unhappy spirit may bring disaster.



In times of trouble a person will often seek an explanation from a spirit medium who will often attribute it to spiritual causes and make suggestions about how to resolve the problem. One unusual example of this phenomenon is the worship of aborted fetuses. Families that have had an abortion will often attribute any future misfortune to haunting by the spirit of the foetus. A period of worship is prescribed in order to help this spirit to find peace and escape the fate of being a hungry ghost.

Gods

Finally, Taiwanese people worship a range of different deities. These include Buddhist figures such as Guan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy), historical figures like Matsu (the most popular deity in Taiwan) and other traditional Chinese gods like the earth god (Tu Di Gong). Some temples will specialise in the worship of one particular god but most have idols of a number of different gods that people can worship according to their preference and particular need. Different gods are believed to have different specialities.



The worship of gods is eclectic and pragmatic. Some people will develop a special relationship with a particular deity and children may be dedicated to a god for protection. However, most people worship whichever god is known to be effective and to answer prayer. People will go from god to god and temple to temple looking for answers to their specific needs.

There is evidence that worship of traditional gods has been increasing over the last couple of decades. More and larger temples are being built, more people are making pilgrimages to major temples and there is an increasing number of elaborate processions held each year. Hundreds of thousands of people take part in the annual process of the Goddess of the Sea, Matsu which takes place over eight days throughout central

Taiwan. This was recently described by Discovery Channel as one of the three major religious festivals in the world today. The worship of the gods is a major social and economic factor in Taiwanese society.

Worship of ancestors, ghosts and gods involves the burning of incense and the offering of foods and drinks. There are also differences in the worship offered to the gods from that offered to ghosts:

- The gods are named and their particular characteristics are known.
- The gods are worshipped for blessings whereas ghost are worshipped to avoid trouble.
- The gods are worshipped through representative idols in temples and in family god-shelves.
- Prayers are made to the gods and specific requests for guidance or blessing are given.
- Mosts gods have priests or other devotees who play the role of mediator, offering worship services, explaining communications from the gods, etc.

Christian Misconceptions about Folk Religion



When Christians observe folk religion it is easy for us to look at it from the perspective of our experience of God. We may imagine that, although they worship different gods and supernatural beings, their worship is of these beings is similar to the type of worship that Christians offer to the LORD. However, there are some fundamental difference between Christian worship and animistic worship.

- Christians worship a God with whom they have a stable relationship based on God's promises. This pre-existing relationship is the foundation of Christian worship and prayer. Prayer looks in faith to a heavenly Father who loves to bless us. There is no corresponding relationship in animism. Animists seek to obtain power through worship and devotion and occult practices. The Taiwanese gods need to be convinced to bless. It is not based on a personal relationship with a god or driven by love. If a god consistently fails to answer prayer people feel free to turn to another god for help. There are no guarantees, no promises. In theological terms it is purely a works based religion. Young men in god parades will slash their bodies to show their devotion. Other devotees will kneel or crawl before the idol as it is carried. Large, expensive gifts are offered and donations are made to temple building projects. The underlying motivation is to earn the approval of the god and obtain its blessing.
- The gods are worshipped primarily for power. This is a pragmatic "I'll scratch your back of you scratch mine" arrangement. This explains why both the police and

gangs worship the same god, Guan Gong, the God of War. They are seeking the power he offers but he is not bound to either group in any type of ongoing relationship. Just as both groups may shop at the same market, so they feel free to worship before the same god.

- Many gods are not concerned with morality. Since we worship a holy God we naturally think a religious person should be a moral, righteous person. Many Taiwanese gods are amoral or even immoral and are not interested with personal morality. Thus prostitutes will worship the pig god who is known for his greed and lust. They ask him to put his spirit into men to draw in customers.

- Folk religion seeks power, not truth. The question that most interests people is "Does it work?" not "Is it true?" The religion is pragmatic and concern immediate concerns, not with issues of ultimate meaning or providing a coherent explanation of the purpose of life. Many devout worshippers have little understanding of **why** they do perform certain rituals or of the belief system that lies behind their religion. They are more concerned with the results than the theory or theology that lies behind it. It is therefore often not helpful or possible to have a rational discussion regarding the truth our respective belief systems.



For those of us who come from Western societies we can also sometimes misunderstand animism by looking at it through secularised eyes that dismiss or downplay the supernatural. We need to be aware of how this can affect our attitude to folk religion.

1. Do not call it superstition. To describe their religion as superstition is to suggest that it is illogical, unreal and foolish. Most Taiwanese people will claim to have seen ghosts or had some type of supernatural experience. Whether or not their interpretation of an experience is true, the religion is real to them and makes sense within their worldview.
2. We should also consider that there is a real supernatural realm with both good and evil powers. Often when we dismiss folk religion we do so out of a Westernised secular perspective not from a biblical worldview. Folk religion involves the worship of powers that truly exist.
3. Even most non-religious people are animist. They will hold many of the assumptions about the nature of reality even if they themselves do not actively take part in religious activities. They may not feel the need to be religious but still have an animistic worldview.
4. Worship is motivated by fear not love. Most animists live in fear - fear of the supernatural, fear of the unknown, fear of the future. They live in a world bound by fate, luck, taboos and rules. Animism is a religion that leads to bondage. It promises power and peace but results in a cycle of increasing fear. We can

sometimes have the view that all religion is uplifting and helpful and fail to see the destructive demonic influences and results of animism.

Apart from the worship of ancestor, ghosts and gods, Taiwanese animism is also expressed in various occult activities (spirit mediums, fortune-telling, magic), the observance of taboos (foods, medicine, fengshui, propitious days and times), the use of amulets and charms. These are an integral part of daily life for most Taiwanese people.

Evangelism amongst Taiwanese Animists

How does this affect the approaches we use as we seek to bring the hope of the gospel to Taiwanese people? We need to consider both the specific content of the gospel as well as the methods we use to communicate.

The Content of our Gospel

The gospel remains the same to all people everywhere. However, as we preach this gospel to animists there will be certain truths we need to emphasise to communicate clearly.

- *Creation* - Since animists worship many different gods and spiritual beings, it is easy for them to consider the God of the Bible as just another God to worship alongside all others. It is extremely important to take time to introduce God as the creator of all things. He is due our worship because we owe our existence to Him. This is the approach Paul uses in Athens (Acts 17:24-31). These truths help to establish the uniqueness of the LORD and his absolute authority. He is not just another small god with limited powers. He is the all powerful creator and ruler of the heavens and the earth.
- *The one and only God* - closely related to this is taking time to share the unique character of God. He is not only powerful but also unique in love and faithfulness and wisdom and holiness. The OT stories are a particularly good source of material for communicating this truth. In fact much of the OT is concerned with showing to people that the God of Israel is different from all the other gods of the surrounding animistic peoples. We can use these same stories to express this fundamental truth to animists today.
- *The spirit world* - it is usually not helpful to speak negatively about the various ghosts and gods worshipped by Taiwanese people. However, it is important to have a biblical explanation of the place of these beings. This can be done through discussing the creation (and fall) of the spiritual beings and through stories showing God's interaction with the gods of the nations in the OT. The weak and evil nature of these beings can be communicated without directly criticising people for worshipping idols.
- *Sufficiency of Jesus* - when introducing Jesus it is important to spend time looking at Jesus' miracles and teaching. The gospels clearly show Jesus as a person



with unique authority and power to meet all human needs. To people who look for a religion who works, this is a helpful bridge to the gospel. Whatever their needs are, Jesus is able to supply all that is needed.

- *The love of God* - animistic religion is driven by fear. Biblical religion is motivated by God's love. The Bible reveals a God who chooses to have a relationship with us, who is faithful, who blesses us unconditionally and who will never let us down. These truths which are found throughout the scriptures help to show the uniqueness and attractiveness of the gospel.
- *The cross* - this is the heart of the gospel and needs to be clearly explained if people are to respond with true faith. The particular aspects of the cross that will have greatest impact on Taiwanese animists will be:
 - victory over evil powers and over death through the resurrection.
 - freedom from fear, taboos and fate that comes through Jesus.
 - the message of forgiving grace and the opportunity of a new start.

Methods of Evangelism

Many conversion stories in Taiwan recount clear evidence of God working in unusual ways to draw people to Himself. For example, a young man who suddenly finds himself so physically weak he is unable to bow down before his idol to worship; a women who sense the presence of an especially powerful spirit around a church building; a fortune teller informing someone that only Jesus can help their problems. These are all true incidents that contributed to people coming to faith in the gospel. As we seek to share the gospel we need to consider God's sovereign grace. He is at work preparing people to trust in Jesus. We cannot control how God chooses to work or what methods He will use. We can, however, pray and expect that God will act in whatever way is needed to bring people to himself.

However, the methods we use should also consider the animistic religious background of most Taiwanese people. Since animists are looking for power, rather than truth, it is often not effective to use traditional apologetics which appeal to the reason to show that the gospel is true and believable. Rather, we can take actions that will help to reveal the unique power of the gospel.

- *Pray with people* - prayer is essential in all evangelism as only God can open a heart to receive the gospel. Apart from praying privately for people, we can also pray with them. A large number of Taiwanese Christians first become interested in the gospel after they see God answer prayer. When people face trouble or sickness or worry of any kind we can offer to pray for them trusting that our God is able to answer. In this we show that the LORD is powerful and cares for them.
- *Testimony* - the gospel does work. It changes our life. It is important to show that our Christian faith is not a matter of intellectual assent but a life changing experience of God's power. Through sharing our own testimony of conversion or of

some other significant experience of God, we can point people to see how the gospel works.

- *Love* - a unique power in the gospel is the power to love. This is something lacking in animism. Many people become Christians after they experience the practical love and care of believers or observe the way Christians love one another in church. Showing respect for people, taking time to listen and to serve them is often the starting point in leading them to Christ.

All of these methods should be seen as forms of pre-evangelism. There is still the need to carefully share and explain the truths of the gospel to people as they show an interest in our faith. If we fail to do this there is a danger of syncretism as they treat Jesus as just another god who will meet their needs. Animism is a human centred religion and true conversion will mean not just accepting Jesus as someone who can help but recognising their need to repent and submit to Jesus as Lord.

On the other hand it is usually ineffective to immediately start sharing the gospel and expecting people to respond to Jesus the first or second time they hear. For most people, conversion is a slow process. Through prayer and seeing Christian love they become interested. As they hear about the one and only Creator God who loves them they start asking questions. Then as we introduce Jesus they come to trust in Him.

Finally, as we explain the gospel we may need to use simple practical methods to communicate. Animistic religion is colorful. Animistic rituals use music and action and pictures. We need to think of how we can use indigenous methods of communication to explain the gospel in an accessible way. Rather than just preaching or reading the Bible these may include drama, music, picture stories, traditional art forms like puppets or story telling.



Conclusion

Animists live in a world where religion, gods and the supernatural are daily realities. But they live in fear and bondage and their religion does not provide lasting peace or hope or love. The darkness of animism should make us even more thankful for the grace of God we have received in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This article seeks to give a short overview of a very complex religion, Taiwanese animism, and makes some suggestions about how we can help these people to come to know Jesus also.

Discussion

- List some of the traditional religious activities you have observed in Taiwan. What do these activities tell us about the worldview of the people who take part?
- Look at the suggestions made above regarding how to share the gospel with Taiwanese animists. Can you think of any other methods we could use? Can you think of other biblical truths we should emphasise?