

MISSION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

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I'd like to begin with a quotation from Jacob Kavunkal, who writes a chapter in the book called *Towards an Asian theology of mission*:

The leading characteristic of Asian theology is its sensitivity to the Asian context. Asian missiology flows from a profound reflection on the Word of God in the context of the Asian reality. Both collective as well as individual theologizing in Asia begins with an analysis of the context, and is firmly grounded in the context. It is this rootedness in the Asian reality that gives Asian theology and missiology its uniqueness.¹

Attention to our particular context when trying to understand and share our Christian faith is already a big

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theme in Asian theology. So for a Westerner to try to talk about contextualisation here in N E India is like selling sand to the Arabs. But if contextualisation is so important, and I believe it is, then perhaps my thinking aloud about it and inviting discussion on it, is worth doing, even if what I say sounds basic to you.

1. A major shift has occurred in our awareness of context.

From the very beginning the missionary message of the Christian church incarnated itself in the life and world of those who embraced it. It took account of the context in which it lived and breathed. But the extent to which it did this varied a great deal.

Although the early church and the first modern Catholic and Protestant missionaries from the West in the 1700s took other cultures seriously, this sensitivity withered away in the period between 1800 and 1950.

During that period the church in mission more often than not disregarded culture and saw itself as handing out an eternally unchanging gospel which must destroy other (non-Western) cultures. So, for instance, missionaries to India have, to a large extent, accepted the doctrine of the *tabula rasa* (clean slate), the missionary doctrine that everything in the foreign culture must be erased before you can build Christianity. Of course, there was a breathtaking unawareness of the Westernisation of the gospel interwoven into the missionary enterprise. And consequently, the gospel has come to be seen in many non-Western countries as a foreign gospel.²

There were historical reasons, of course, for this disregard of other cultures. The West was unaware of its ethnocentrism, the attitude that one's own culture is superior, the centre of the universe, while other cultures are inferior and uncivilised. Colonialism expressed this attitude

economically, politically, socially, and too often, religiously. It was felt by many that non-western people needed to be “civilised” (for that read “westernised”) in order to be Christianised. A second reason was the intellectual climate generated by the European Enlightenment, so called, of the 18thC. The rise of science, the age of reason and the growth of critical history led many to believe that western culture had come of age, throwing off the superstition of the past and of so called primitive and exotic cultures. The west was fully engaged, so it thought, in searching for universal and objective truth, with the help of science and reason. Culture, community, difference, the world of the spirit - these things were devalued in the Enlightenment framework. Technology, efficiency, the individual, the material world - these were the things that drove, and still drive, the western world.

But the intellectual, political and cultural climate has changed dramatically. Our awareness of cultural differences and our respect for them has increased dramatically. Theology now proceeds “from below”, starting with our own situation and asking how the gospel addresses it. We now understand theology, not as a way of understanding the whole of reality in order to grasp it, but as reflection on our committed action, understanding reality from our admittedly partial perspective in order to change it.³ The reasons for this will come out as we discuss the issues.

2. More than indigenisation is needed

It would be easy to be thoroughly confused by the various ways missiologists use terms for the process of interaction between the gospel and a particular culture. Let's take the first family of words. Accommodation, adaptation and indigenisation are three words which mean similar things. This group of words, the first two used more by Catholics and the last used more by Protestants⁴,

usually refers back to the process of changing Christianity in non-essential ways to suit a culture when introducing the gospel. In fact these three words still express the official policy of the Catholic church.⁵

To **accommodate** the gospel meant taking the ready-made European gospel and all its structures and rituals and language and flavours, and to adjust some of them to accommodate cultural differences in a new culture.⁶ The Catholic missiologist Luzbetak defines it approvingly in this way:

*[Accommodation is] the respectful, prudent, scientifically and theological sound adjustment of the Church to the native culture in attitude, outward behaviour, and practical apostolic [that is, missionary] approach.*⁷

To **adapt** the gospel meant something very similar.

The call to **indigenise** the church came as early as late last century when missionary statesmen Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson called for churches in missionary countries to be 'indigenous', expressed in the three 'selves': self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating.⁸ By the turn of the century nearly all major missionary organisations subscribed to these goals, at least in theory.

Unfortunately in practice this often led, yes, to more intense training of indigenous leaders, but in the western style.⁹ There was often nominal autonomy of missionary churches, but they were often puppets of western churches. And furthermore, these 'three-self' goals have simply not been attained in practice by missionary societies.

But a deeper critique has emerged in the last 20 yrs or so. Indigenisation (or accommodation or adaptation) seems unaware that the gospel in the sending country is culturally clothed. It tends to think only in terms of taking

the 'pure' gospel and tinkering with it to suit new cultures. It is often a one-way process, inserting the gospel into another culture, and helping it to fit by adapting it. There is no challenge back to the originating culture.¹⁰

It also tends to be superficial, adapting the peripheral things such as vestments, or recruiting local priests, or encouraging indigenous music forms. Many critics have more recently talked of the need to go deeper, to look at central meanings within culture and look at more than the externals, seeking what Kraft calls a functional indigeneity.¹¹

Indigenisation was a good start but doesn't go far enough. They need replacement by a deeper and more organic process.

3. Contextualisation and inculturation

a) 'Contextualisation' defined in 1972: The concepts of contextualisation and contextuality were introduced in 1972 by a Taiwanese scholar in the World Council of Churches, Shoki Coe. He argued rightly that it was a theological necessity for the gospel to take a fresh shape in each culture, because the Good News is incarnational - it takes flesh, it is particular, it is rooted in the human situation. "Contextualisation", as Shoki Coe defined it, presses beyond and deeper than indigenisation.¹²

Put simply, contextualisation is the dynamic, ongoing encounter between Word and world in a concrete context, at some cultural depth, taking new shape in each situation. It applies, not only in tribal or traditional situations, but also in secular and urban situations. Its idea of the encounter of the Good News and a culture includes not just "doing worship in a culturally sensitive way" or witnessing in a language people can understand. It also includes justice and social transformation and the

development of a local theology, local church structures and what we in Australia would call a “grassroots Christianity”, a home brew.

b) Inculturation: The term “inculturation” means much the same as “contextualisation”, but is used more in Catholic circles. Gerald Arbuckle says:

*Inculturation is the dynamic relation between the Christian message and culture or cultures; an insertion of the Christian life into a culture; an ongoing process of reciprocal and critical interaction and assimilation between them.*¹³

The features of inculturation to notice are the critical interaction, both ways, between faith and cultures and between cultures, and the sense of ongoing process in time.

We have to admit that although Catholic missiologists define it as two-way, with the missionary culture receiving and learning from the receiving culture as well as the other way around, the word 'inculturation' gives the impression that it's only one way, the insertion of the gospel into cultures. Aylward Shorter notes this unease about the term, and suggests yet another term, '**interculturalism**', to safeguard the reciprocal nature of mission, the partnership and mutuality. But he doesn't press the idea, sensing (I think) that even missiologists can have enough of ugly big words!¹⁴

The real point here is that inculturation and contextualisation (in its broader use) refer to basically the same ongoing process of critical and dynamic interaction between faith and culture. Perhaps the only difference is that Catholics talk much more of the life to come while in WCC circles, at least in the 70s and early 80s the talk was

far more about humanisation and a secularised approach to salvation. These emphases affect the contextual talk.¹⁵

c) 'Contextual theology' and 'local theologies': There are two more options in the dazzling array of terms for contextualisation, and these two are certainly in this family, along with inculturation and the broader use of contextualisation. One is the slightly simpler '**contextual theology**', which can be used to refer to all theologies which are more sensitive to context, allowing a sense of degree in the discussion.¹⁶

The other is '**local theologies**', chosen by Robert Schreier in his book *Constructing local theologies* because it is the best English translation of a Latin term used in Vatican 2, *ecclesia particularis*, meaning the local church in its cultural particularity.¹⁷

4. The bases for contextualisation

The two grounds for engaging in theology and missiology in a contextual way are the nature of people in society, and the nature of the gospel.

a) Who we are is profoundly shaped by culture: We differ between cultures on just about anything, from what is proper to do, to how we view time, to whether we see the world out there as inanimate or full of spirits, to how authority is best exercised, to the rituals we feel comfortable with, to the way we dress, marry and work, and so on.

We have evangelised individuals at times when we should have approached groups. We have put up buildings when we should have been sitting on the grass. We have made people think that Christianity is to do with black robes, or candles, or wearing bras, or getting rid of some of our wives, or playing brass instruments, or giving up smoking and drinking, or learning to read English.

We should do contextual theology because our contexts are overwhelmingly important in who we are.

b) The incarnation is the paradigm for contextualisation: But even more central is that Jesus is the model for mission, and that in the incarnation we have the perfect model for emptying oneself, taking on the particular and culture-bound existence of a poor Jew in one point of history and then both speaking through that culture and yet transforming that culture. The gospel must always be enfleshed in a culture. It does not float, disembodied above particularity, or independent of human understandings and meanings.

From the very birth of the early church the gospel was being adapted to local cultures. On Pentecost people heard the message in their own tongues (Acts 2). Peter soon had to grapple with whether Christians were bound to Jewish ways of eating, and broke through to a new liberating understanding, which then had to dawn painfully on the Jerusalem Council (Acts 10 & 11). Paul spoke to the Athenians in terms of their own philosophy and labelled God "The Unknown God" (Acts 17). Before long the Good News, which was probably first preached in Aramaic, was being proclaimed in common Greek, then spliced with Aristotelian philosophy, Gnosticism, Latin thought and so on. Heresy was just the name for the contextualisation that was declared unacceptable. Orthodoxy was the blending of Christianity with the ongoing cultures it became a part of. The Western theologies of the last two centuries have all been developed in partnership with philosophy. Some have been more useful than others. But all the time, from the incarnation to the present day, the gospel message has always, without exception, been inculturated, contextualised, and has always been dynamically interacting

between the message and the situation, between text and context, seeking to be authentic and relevant, seeking to be faithful to revelation and reality as we experience it, relating faith and existence.

5. Factors we should keep in mind in doing contextual theology

a) The gospel: We naturally try to distill the essence of the gospel. We talk of taking off the husk and finding the kernel. But this is known through the written word, which is in turn expressed through words that have meaning in particular cultures, with both Jewish and Graeco-Roman backgrounds. The image perhaps ought to be, instead of a kernel-and-husk, an onion.¹⁸ Biblical revelation comes fully clothed in culture. There is no such thing as a non-cultural gospel. Another metaphor we could use is that of dogs. We can see an alsatian dog and a poodle dog. Dogs only come in actual breeds of dog. We can't ever see pure dog, apart from alsatians, dalmatians, bassets and poodles. They come packaged. The gospel comes only in culturally expressed forms. We can't strip it back and see it in its purity, because it only comes in incarnational form, enfleshed in particular places, times and people.

b) The cultures of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament: One of the first things we need to understand is the cultures in which biblical revelation took place. Biblical studies is an essential tool in contextual theology. Recent biblical theology has been exciting in directing attention not only to literary forms, but also socio-cultural factors in the writing.

c) 'Our' understanding of the gospel: The understanding of the gospel held by those who are sharing it cross-

culturally is usually the most difficult factor to get at. Most of us think we have the real gospel, not just an angle on it! As Baptists sometimes say, "You follow your church traditions if you like, we'll be like the NT church" - as if nothing has happened in 2000 years and we have the full and pure gospel.

To communicate sensitively in a cross-cultural context, we need to become aware of our own limitations, and be humble about the partial understanding we have. The more we learn about other ways of seeing the gospel, the more we can assess our own limiting cultural and sub-cultural factors.

d) The culture we live in: How does our own culture throw light on the gospel and, on the other hand, in what ways is our own culture anti-gospel? In Australia the myth that we are a classless society and that we are all mates can be a window on Christian community, particularly if we widen mateship to include women and children and others who are different from us. On the other hand, our extreme individualism makes it hard to actually practise Christian community, because to receive support we need to first open up and be vulnerable to each other, and we find it hard. I wonder if you can see things in your own culture which influence the gospel as you understand and practise it?

Our own culture can refer to that of a tribal group, or a region, such as N E India, or a whole nation, such as India. People even talk of Asian culture as opposed to European culture. Culture, as a concept, can refer to different levels of generality.

e) The culture of the people receiving the gospel: The 'receptor culture' will have elements that distort the gospel and elements which express the gospel more adequately than the culture of those sharing the gospel. For example, a

Western missionary may see in another culture widespread corruption and bribery which makes life deeply unfair, with some people holding great power over others. But equally there may be a sense of community that resonates with the gospel far better than Western culture does.

We are not very good at respecting, learning about and re-casting the gospel into other cultures. This is true even of sub-cultures within our own culture. In Australia there are many groups of people who cannot fit into our churches because we make no cultural allowances: street kids, bikies, smokers, indigenous people, the disabled, and so on.

f) The way the receivers 'hear' the gospel: If those who hear the gospel already see those who share it (e.g., Westerners) as rich, beautiful and blessed, they may not hear the gospel undistorted, but may respond in order to imitate the West. Perhaps, in a tribal society, if one tribe shares the gospel, another tribe finds it hard to hear the gospel because it comes from a rival tribe.

g) The growth in understanding and practice that occurs over a period of contextualisation: If we share the gospel for the first time, those who hear it will have one understanding of it. Years later, they may revise their understanding. This is natural. We need to have more trust in those with whom we share the gospel, allowing the gospel to transform culture as well as the culture modifying what we think the gospel is. And in all of this, it should not be only the professional theologians who grow in understanding but the community as a whole. Robert Schreiter says it is the whole community which is the theologian in a well-contextualised understanding of the faith. Theology is by the community and for the community.¹⁹ He also says that the poets and the prophets

are central in helping us to understand our culture. So listen to the songs, laugh at the cartoons, watch the plays, hear the social critics.²⁰

h) The changes in time in a culture, which necessitate a continual 'rebirth' of faith for each generation and new sub-culture: These changes may be due to the influence of the gospel on culture in time (e.g. the abolition of slavery, or equal status for women) or due to external cultural changes, such as the rise of science and technology or the growth of Eastern meditation.

i) Friendly and critical cross-cultural and ecumenical interchange: Although there is no universally valid gospel-in-culture, the world church is called in its parts to dialogue, to question and probe other branches, in order that we be exposed to widening horizons and understandings of the gospel. Isolated contextualisation and fragmentation of the Christian church are dangers.

6. Three approaches to contextualisation

Paul Hiebert outlines three approaches that have been taken to contextualisation.²¹

a) Rejection of contextualisation: This is the view that the gospel is above culture and needs little adaptation between cultures. Few Christians take this point of view now. Even the most conservative missiologists, who would want to say that revelation is largely supracultural, that is, above culture, agree that it must find its expression within various cultures.

As Hiebert points out, there can be two bad results of non-contextual mission. The first is that Christianity is seen as a foreign religion, and is therefore rejected. Secondly, local customs, condemned by missionaries, go

underground, and we have a problem with a hidden parallel religious expression, which is syncretistic. For the moment let's define syncretism as any theologically unacceptable mixture of religious beliefs.²²

b) Uncritical contextualisation: The opposite approach is to uncritically accept traditional practices into the church. This stems usually from a very high respect for other cultures, and from a relativist viewpoint, in which it is thought that truth is almost impossible to state universally, and the attitude is 'who are we to judge'.

Hiebert points out that there are problems with this approach. First, it forgets that the gospel addresses cultures as well, that there are corporate and cultural sins as well as personal ones, and that oppressive structures such as slavery, widow-burning, foot-binding, caste, human sacrifice are clearly areas where the gospel calls for cultural transformation.

Second, it also leads to syncretism because people continue with old practices and beliefs unchallenged and eventually mixed into their new Christian beliefs, perhaps in a form of Christopaganism.

Third, the opportunity to grow through struggling to test their beliefs and norms against Scripture is missed.

c) Critical contextualisation: Obviously we can't answer, in a general overview like this, the question of how much contextualising ought to go on. As I read book after book, I see the evangelicals saying, "Yes, we ought to do it, but don't throw away the eternal and universal aspects of the gospel."²³ The ecumenical writers say, "How do you isolate these universal aspects of the gospel, when it comes to us fully clothed in Middle-Eastern culture and even that is 2000 years ago? We walk with no rules, except to trust God and people in their culture."

Hiebert addresses this well by suggesting an approach, a way for missionaries or indigenous leaders to tackle the specifics.

- i) Recognise the need to deal biblically with all areas of life.
- ii) Understand the old ways. Gather information uncritically. This is the phenomenological method, suspending belief as you try to get inside the other culture. This is best done with the people, listening to their myths, watching their rituals etc
- iii) Study the bible in relation to the issue at hand, aware that we as leaders are also culturally-biased.
- iv) Allow the congregation to critically evaluate their own past customs or beliefs in the light of their biblical understandings, and decide themselves what they think and will do. They will sometimes reject old practices, sometimes modify them and sometimes keep them. The theological foundations for this trust are three fold: The priesthood of all believers, the authority and effectiveness of the Bible, and the work of the Spirit through the church.²⁴

I believe that there is a great deal of work to be done in the area of contextualisation. I'll start with the Australian situation. Is the way we understand and practice our faith culturally suited to the various sub-groups that make up our society? Is the gospel Australianised? Do we actively and critically examine the meaning of the Christian message for the ethnic groups around us, or do we sell Anglo-saxon Christianity and wonder why it doesn't take?

What does it mean for you in your situation? That's the million dollar question. Is Christianity now reasonably

well Indianised? Is there further work to be done in this region of India? Is there a general tribal perspective on the gospel? Or perhaps quite different perspectives from each tribe, whether the Mizos or the Nagas?

The issue of contextualisation, or to put it more simply, developing a local theology or a theology for our own context, is an ongoing quest. It is absolutely central to the task of the church because it was central to the mission of God: God became flesh in a time and a place in the Jewish man Jesus two thousand years ago.

While there is no general answer to the question of how far we have to go in contextualising the gospel, I believe it is a road we have to take, under the authority of the Bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

End Notes

¹Jacob Kavunkal, 'Asian mission theology: An overview', in *Towards an Asian theology of mission*, eds. Michael T Seigel and Leonardo N Mercado (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1995), 95.

²Paul G Hiebert, "Critical contextualization," *International Bulletin for Missionary Research* 11 (1987): 104.

³David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

⁴David J Bosch, *Transforming mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 448.

⁵Louis J Luzbetak, *The church and cultures*, (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975), 7

- ⁶Gerald A Arbuckle, *Earthing the gospel*, (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1990), 13-14.
- ⁷Luzbetak. *The church and cultures*, 341.
- ⁸Johannes Verkuyl, *Contemporary missiology: An introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 184-186.
- ⁹Charles H Kraft, "The church in culture - A dynamic equivalence model," in *Down to earth: Studies in Christianity and culture*, ed. John Stott & Robert Coote (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 213.
- ¹⁰Arbuckle, *Earthing the gospel*, 14.
- ¹¹Kraft, "The church in culture", 213.
- ¹²*Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Program of the Theological Education Fund (1970-1977)*, (Bromley, England: Theological Education Fund, 1972), 20-21; reproduced in David J Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, *Contextualization*, (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1989), 31-32.
- ¹³Gerald A Arbuckle, *Earthing the gospel*, (Homebush, NSW: St Paul Publications, 1990), 17.
- ¹⁴Aylward Shorter, *Toward a theology of inculturation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 13.
- ¹⁵Arbuckle, *Earthing the gospel*, 21.

¹⁶Stephen Bevans, *Models of contextual theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992).

¹⁷Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 5-6.

¹⁸Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 8.

¹⁹Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 16.

²⁰Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 18-19.

²¹*Ibid.*, 184-190.

²²Luzbetak, *The church and cultures*, 239.

²³e.g. Bruce J Nicholls, "Beyond contextualisation".
(Editorial) *Evangelical Review of Theology* 9.1 (Jan-Mar 1985): 7.

²⁴Hiebert, *Anthropological insights for missionaries*, 191-192.