

## 5. CONTEXT AND CULTURE IN MISSION

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Jacob Kavunkal is an Indian theologian. He has written a chapter in the book called *Towards an Asian theology of mission*. In it he argues, and I agree, that the main thing that makes Asian theology and missiology different is that it is sensitive to its context. As it reflects on the Word of God it is deeply aware of Asian culture.<sup>1</sup>

Attention to our particular context when trying to understand and share our Christian faith is already a big theme in Asian theology. So for a Westerner to try to talk about contextualisation here in South East Asia is like selling sand to the Arabs. But if contextualisation is so important, and I believe it is, then perhaps me sharing my thoughts and inviting your thoughts will be worthwhile, even if what I say sounds basic to you. The trend towards taking context seriously is one of the most important trends in missiology today.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the time, when I say 'context', I mean 'culture', so I'll begin with a brief discussion of what culture is and how studying culture can help us in Christian mission.

### 1. UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

#### a. Culture Is the Way Our Society Behaves, Thinks and Makes Things

Culture, someone once said, is 'the way we do things around here'. It is how 'we' (our group or our society) think and act and talk and do things. Those who spend their life trying to understand cultures are called anthropologists.

In anthropology 'culture' means a system of learned patterns of behaviour, ideas and products belonging to a society.

#### i. Learned Behaviour Patterns

There are many ways to do things. Taking your hand away from a hot stove is not a cultural action, because it is not socially learned; it's instinct. All humans do it automatically. But kissing, for example, is a cultural action. Many cultures don't kiss. Others kiss by rubbing noses, or by kissing both cheeks, or by the woman offering her cheek. In one tribe in West Africa the first time a visiting Westerner kissed a beautiful tribal girl she ran off screaming because kissing was unknown and she only knew that the snake moistens its victim before it begins eating.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob 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.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Whiteman, 'Contextualization: The theory, the gap, the challenge', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21.1 (January 1997), available at <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/system/files/1997-01-002-whiteman.pdf>, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Paul G Hiebert, *Cultural anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 27.

**ii. Ideas (Concepts, Beliefs and Values)**

We get our picture of reality through culture, which is like a mental map. It's shaped partly by what we learn from others and partly by our experience of the world itself. Our concept of time in Australia, for example, is very different from that in Middle-Eastern cultures. In Egypt, for instance, for two equals to meet 'on time' is for them both to arrive an hour late. Only a servant would arrive on time.<sup>4</sup>

The same with our view of space, manners, customs, what's important, what's right and wrong, what's beautiful or ugly, what is efficient, what counts as rich or poor, what God must be like, what we like in other people and so on.

**iii. Products (Material Culture)**

Humans make things. And we make them differently. Burmese houses are different from Australian houses. Burmese books and films have their own style. We've developed tools, and these have led to the whole area of technology, that is a culture of know-how. We produce houses, cars, fans, jewellery, art, pots, newspapers, temples and palaces, tombs, canals and dams.

Our 'things', or material products, are also closely linked to our actions and our ideas, and are part of the expression of a culture. I know some tribal people who were embarrassed to find out on their first visit to a Western city that the basin they washed in was really a toilet bowl. I have been embarrassed in Indonesia to find out that the trough of water I got into and washed myself in was meant to last for days—we were meant to dip a bowl into it and take out enough to wash in. I'm sure I'll make many mistakes as I stay in your culture for a few weeks, and I ask you to forgive me!

**b. Comparing Cultures Increases Awareness and Tolerance**

There are very big differences between cultures. People from different cultures don't just live in the same world, speaking different languages. They live in different worlds.

Take the idea of personal space. When they're talking, North Americans stand further from each other than Latin Americans, who have smaller zones and feel comfortable standing closer to each other. This is usually unconscious but is very deeply ingrained. So imagine the discomfort when a North American talks to a Latin American. The North American keeps moving back because he feels crowded, while the Latin American keeps moving forward because he feels the other person is moving out of his social zone into the public zone.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hiebert, *Cultural anthropology*, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Hiebert, *Cultural anthropology*, 35.

It's natural to think that our culture is the best. It's the centre of the world. We usually judge every other culture against our own. 'Aren't other cultures strange and silly?', we think. I was recently in the United States, and I saw a sign advertising a class for international students to help them understand American culture. It said, 'Why do Americans say "How are you?" and then walk away?'. If you come from a culture where you ask lots of questions every time you meet someone, American culture must seem very rude. If you are American, it can be very hard to know what Asian people are thinking because they seem so polite. Our ways usually seem the best way to us. This attitude is called '**ethnocentrism**', which means we put our ethnic group, our culture, at the centre of our world.

If we experience other cultures, and we learn from them, we can understand that there are many other ways of doing things, other ways of thinking. Comparing cultures tends to convert people from ethnocentrism to a fuller appreciation for the variety of cultures and the meaning behind what other people do.

For example, in Australia the price of things in shops is written down. If I want a shirt, I look at the price and decide whether to buy it or not. I don't argue with the shop assistant, trying to get it more cheaply. But in India, if I see a nice shirt, I have to ask how much it costs. Then I say, 'That's too much'. I need to offer a lower price and in the end we arrive at a price we can agree on. The **meaning** of what is going on is the same: buying a shirt at a price we agree on. The **form** it takes is different. When we compare cultures we learn to distinguish meaning from form. Although the form is important, it is only there to serve the meaning.

To take a Christian example, Christians in Europe often worship in buildings with a tall spire (tower). Its meaning is to make people think of God's greatness. The same meaning is achieved in the desert of Australia for Australian indigenous people through a different form: worshipping without a roof at all, under the stars. Should the indigenous people build spires? No, they express their meaning in a different form.

To take another example, when translating the Bible we need to find, not just the right word but the word that translates the meaning. In Papua New Guinea, one translation says that Jesus is the pig of the world, not the lamb of the world. They don't have lambs there. When there is a sacrifice, it's always a pig. The meaning here is that Jesus is the sacrifice. The form, the idea used to say this in PNG, is 'a pig'. The translators need to find the word that does the same work in the new language.

This distinction between what we mean and in what form we express it is very important for allowing the gospel to take shape in different cultures.

Now that I've said how important culture is, let's see whether the church has been aware of culture and context in its missionary work. The answer is: 'Sometimes'.

## 2. MISSIOLOGY HAS BECOME AWARE OF CONTEXT

From the very beginning the missionary message of the Christian church took shape in the life and world of those who embraced it. The gospel message took account of the context in which it lived and breathed. But sometimes it was more aware and sometimes less aware.

The **early church**, of course, had to decide whether the gospel was Jewish or open to Gentiles, and it opened itself up to the Gentiles. The church Fathers of the first few centuries used either Greek philosophy or Latin culture to express themselves, and the Eastern church became Greek and the Western church Latin in culture. The gospel took new shape wherever it went.

Although the missionaries from the West in the 1700s, such as William Carey, took other cultures seriously, this sensitivity didn't last in the period between **1800 and 1950**.

During that period the church in mission **often disregarded culture**. It saw itself as handing out an eternally unchanging gospel which must destroy other (non-Western) cultures. So, for example, most missionaries to India have accepted the doctrine of the clean slate. They thought they had to wipe away everything in Indian culture before they could build Christianity. They thought they were doing a good thing 'civilising' India as well as 'Christianising' it. But they were very unaware of how Western their gospel was. And so the gospel has come to be seen in many non-Western countries as a foreign gospel.<sup>6</sup>

But missiology has changed a lot. Partly through what anthropology has taught us, we are **becoming very aware of cultural differences** and our respect for them has increased dramatically. Theology now often begins '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 context, understanding reality from our partial perspective in order to change it.<sup>7</sup> In fact, missiologist Stephen Bevans has written 'There is no such thing as "theology"; there is only contextual theology'.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this will come out as we discuss the issues.

## 3. AN EXERCISE IN GOSPEL AND CULTURE

Here is an exercise to illustrate how things change between cultures and times. Each of these things has been considered essential by some Christian groups. Which ones do you consider essential? That is, which ones must be part of every church in every time and place?

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<sup>6</sup> Paul G Hiebert, 'Critical contextualization', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11 (1987), available at <http://www.internationalbulletin.org/system/files/1987-03-104-hiebert.pdf>, 104.

<sup>7</sup> David J Bosch, *Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in theology of mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Stephen B Bevans, *Models of contextual theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), 1.

All Christians everywhere and at all times MUST ..

1	Greet each other with a holy kiss.	Rom 16:16
2	Avoid eating meat used in pagan ceremonies.	I Cor 8:12
3	If they are women, wear veils when speaking in church.	1 Cor 11:6
4	Wash each other's feet at the Lord's Supper.	Jn 13:14
5	Lay on hands when ordaining someone.	2 Tim 1:6
6	Sing without musical instruments.	
7	Avoid eating meat with blood in it.	Gen 9:4
8	Share the Lord's Supper regularly together.	Lk 22:19
9	Use only real wine and unleavened bread for the Lord's Supper.	Ex 13:6
10	Use only grape juice for the Lord's Supper.	
11	Anoint with oil for healing.	Mk 6:13
12	Avoid women teaching men.	1 Tim 2:12
13	If they are men, keep their hair short.	
14	Avoid wine.	
15	Remain single.	1 Cor 7:8
16	Seek the gift of tongues.	1 Cor 14:5
17	Seek the gift of healing.	1 Cor 12:9
18	Lift your hands when they pray.	Ps 134:2
19	Work if they are to eat.	2 Thess 3:10
20	Pray and read the Bible privately each day.	
21	Say 'Amen' at the end of prayers.	2 Cor 1:20
22	Elect the leaders in every congregation.	Titus 1:5
23	Confess sins one to another.	Acts 19:18
24	Confess sins regularly to a priest.	
25	Give at least ten per cent of their income to the church.	Deut 14:22
26	Construct a building for worship.	
27	Confess Christ publicly by baptism.	Mt 28:19
28	Be baptised by immersion (going fully under water).	Mt 3:16
29	Be baptised as an adult.	
30	Be baptised as an infant.	
31	Not be married to more than one wife.	Mt 19:5
32	Never divorce.	Mk 10:11
33	Only divorce for adultery.	Mt 19:9 <sup>9</sup>

(When you've gone down the list, add up how many you think Christians must always do. Get into a small group and say how many you marked. Discuss what made you decide 'always' and 'not always'.)

#### 4. WORDS FOR CONTEXTUALISATION

It would be easy to be confused by the words missiologists use for the process of interaction between the gospel and a particular culture.

<sup>9</sup>Adapted from Paul G Hiebert, *Anthropological insights for missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 57-58.

### a. **Indigenisation**

Let's take the first family of words. 'Accommodation', 'adaptation' and 'indigenisation' are three words which mean similar things. The word 'indigenous' refers to the culture of those who were there first. Indigenous culture is the local culture, what was there already.

These words were used a lot over the last hundred years. They meant changing Christianity in flavour to suit a culture when introducing the gospel. (In fact these three words still express the official policy of the Catholic church.<sup>10</sup>) The local language was used, and perhaps local dress and some local customs. But the structures of the church stayed Western, and the new church was linked to the old church in the West, which still controlled things.

Unfortunately indigenisation was only shallow. It was a good start but didn't go far enough. There needed to be a deeper, two-way process.

### b. **Contextualisation and Inculturation**

The term 'contextualisation' was introduced in 1971 by a Taiwanese scholar in the World Council of Churches, Shoki Coe. It is the process where the gospel takes a fresh shape in each culture, because the Good News is incarnational—it takes flesh, it is particular, it is deeply rooted in the human situation.<sup>11</sup>

Put simply, contextualisation is the dynamic, ongoing encounter between Word and world in a particular context, at some cultural depth, taking new shape in each situation. It happens not only in tribal or traditional situations but also in secular and urban situations. It includes not just worshipping in culturally appropriate ways or using 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', or a home brew.

Roman Catholics tend to use the term 'inculturation' for the same deep encounter between gospel and culture.

### c. **'Contextual Theology' and 'Local Theologies'**

There are two more phrases which refer to the same process of contextualisation. One is 'contextual theology', which can be used to refer to all theologies which are sensitive to context.<sup>12</sup> The other is 'local theologies', used by Robert Schreiter in his book *Constructing local theologies*.<sup>13</sup> I like both of these terms because they are simpler.

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<sup>10</sup> Louis J Luzbetak, *The church and cultures* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1976), 7

<sup>11</sup> *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 and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 1989), 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen B Bevans, *Models of contextual theology*, Rev. & Exp. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 5-6.

## 5. WHY CONTEXTUALISE?

The reasons for doing missiology in a contextual way are to follow Jesus, to allow us to be Christian and culturally at home, and to allow the gospel to challenge our culture.

### a. To Follow Jesus 'Taking Flesh' in a Culture

Jesus is the model for mission, and in the incarnation we have the perfect model for emptying oneself and taking on a particular culture. Jesus was a poor Jew at one point of history. He both spoke through that culture and yet transformed that culture. The gospel must always be enfleshed in a culture. It does not float, disembodied above particulars, or independent of human understandings and meanings.

From the very birth of the early church the gospel was being adapted to local cultures. In Acts 2 we read that on Pentecost people heard the message in their own tongues. In Acts 10 and 11 we read that 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. In Acts 17 Paul spoke to the Athenians in terms of their own philosophy and labelled God 'The Unknown God'. Before long, the Good News, which was probably first preached in Aramaic, was being proclaimed in common Greek, then Latin and so on. From the incarnation to the present day, the gospel message has always been 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.

### b. So We Can Follow Christ and Remain in Our Own Culture

Most of our identity is formed by our culture. Yes, we have humanity in common, but culture shapes us greatly. Yes, we are individuals, but culture shapes us greatly. The gospel, if it is to be liberating, must be expressed in our language, our music, our ways of doing things. The gospel must allow us to be Christian and still belong to our tribe or society. God's mission includes every nation and tribe gathering with their different ways before God. We don't have to become the same as each other. The kingdom of God is multicultural.

If the gospel is not expressed in ways that deeply interact with our culture, it will remain a foreign gospel. Our deep world views will not be challenged. This means that we may appear Christian on the surface, but when we face sickness or death we may turn to our old cultural ways, perhaps to the spirits and witch doctors we used to consult. This mixing of Christian faith and the old religious ways is called 'syncretism'. It happens when the gospel has not taken shape properly in the new culture.

### c. To Allow the Gospel to Challenge Our Culture

But the gospel also challenges all cultures. It will throw light on practices and beliefs which are evil or which bind people. In Australia, for example, the gospel clearly warns us of the evils of materialism and greed. Even Christians

get caught up in the desire to earn more and buy more. The gospel says that these desires will never satisfy us. One of the tasks of contextualisation is to work out when the gospel affirms culture and when it challenges it.

## 6. FACTORS IN CONTEXTUAL MISSION

Contextual mission is complicated because there are many things to keep in mind in the ongoing task. I'll just list a few.

### a. The Gospel

We naturally try to find the pure gospel. We talk of taking off the husk and finding the kernel. But it can't be done. Biblical revelation comes fully clothed in Middle-Eastern culture. There is no such thing as a non-cultural gospel. 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

First we need to understand the cultures in which the biblical revelation occurred. Biblical studies is an essential tool in contextual theology. Recent biblical theology has been helpful in uncovering some of the social and cultural factors behind the scriptures.

### c. 'Our' Understanding of the Gospel

The understanding of the gospel held by those who are sharing it cross-culturally is often the most difficult factor to identify. Most of us think we have the real gospel, not just an angle on it! We need to become aware of other ways of understanding the gospel so we can understand that we have only a partial understanding of it.

### d. The Culture We Live In

How is our own culture similar to the gospel and, on the other hand, how does it resist the gospel? In Australia, for example, social class is not important and we like to think we are all mates. So the gospel message of caring for each other can be heard easily in Australia. On the other hand, we're very individualistic, so it's hard for Australians to really open up to each other in Christian community. I wonder if you can see things in your own culture which influence your understanding of the gospel as you understand and practise it?

Our own culture can be big or small. It can refer to an ethnic group or a whole nation. 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 culture of those hearing the gospel for the first time will have elements that distort the gospel and elements which express the gospel more adequately than the culture of those sharing the gospel.



**f. Growing as a Contextualising Community**

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 it is the whole community which acts as 'theologian' in a well-contextualised understanding of the faith. Theology is by the community and for the community.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

**g. New Generations**

The shape of the gospel for the fathers and mothers may have to change to be suitable for the sons and daughters, as culture changes, especially today.

**h. Cross-cultural and ecumenical Interchange**

The members of the worldwide church are called to dialogue and to question other members, so that we are exposed to wider horizons and understandings of the gospel. If we are isolated from each other, we are danger of misunderstanding the gospel.

**7. AN APPROACH TO CONTEXTUAL MISSION**

I can't tell you how to go about contextual mission, because it is different in every context. It's something we all have to do all the time, continually. But Paul Hiebert is helpful in suggesting ways to encourage the process. He talks about 'missionaries', which means any Christians who share the gospel, and the 'new Christians', who are hearing for the first time what Christian faith is about. How do they work together to contextualise the gospel?

**a. Recognise the Need to Deal Biblically with All Areas of Life.**

We will need to talk about every part of life. It will take time. We need to be patient. We need to accept that the Bible addresses all aspects of life together.

**b. Understand the Old Ways.**

This is like the work of the anthropologist, even it is done simply. We need to understand the culture of those who are receiving the gospel. Good missionaries have always learnt the language and the customs and have taken years to analyse the culture. We need to try to get inside the culture. This is best done with the people, listening to their myths, watching their rituals etc.

**c. Study the Bible in Relation to the Issue at Hand**

We can have confidence that God still speaks through the Bible if we study it with open minds. The 'missionary' can help in this study, but we need to be

<sup>14</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies*, 18-19.

aware that we as leaders are also culturally-biased. Those coming freshly to the Bible may teach us a lot, and they will be the best at seeing how the gospel takes shape in their culture.

**d. Allow the Congregation to Critically Evaluate Their Own Culture**

Local people will best understand their past customs or beliefs in the light of their biblical understandings, and they ought to decide themselves what they think and will do. They will sometimes reject old practices, sometimes modify them and sometimes keep them. There are important theological reasons for trusting them and not imposing our beliefs: The priesthood of all believers, the authority and effectiveness of the Bible, and the work of the Spirit through the church.<sup>16</sup>

**8. A FEW QUESTIONS FOR CHRISTIANS IN MYANMAR**

As a visitor, I don't know what issues are important to you in the process of contextualisation. But here are a few questions that come to my mind as I try to imagine what you face in Myanmar, a country with many different cultures, a country with a long and wonderful history, and a country with challenges and difficulties like any country.

- a. Does the Bible translation in your language read naturally?
- b. Do you feel your worship is foreign or 'local'?
- c. Are Christians in your country mostly from two or three ethnic groups, such as the Karen or the Chin people? How would you go about expressing the gospel in ways that feel more at home for other ethnic groups where there are few Christians?
- d. In some Asian countries, those from tribal backgrounds become Christian more easily than Buddhists. To what extent is it true that to be Burmese is to be Buddhist? How could Christians work towards a situation where it is also Burmese to be Christian?
- e. Could it be that through deep dialogue between Christians and Buddhists we might learn something and might be able to take on some of the cultural flavours, without giving up our faith?
- f. In every culture and society there is injustice and poverty. How does a Christian church challenge its culture and work toward a culture where people feel free and safe? Does it shout like the prophets from the mountain tops or work quietly and constructively with all groups? Does it identify with political movements or always keep a critical distance from them? In all countries these are urgent and practical questions.

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<sup>16</sup> Hiebert, *Anthropological insights for missionaries*, 191-192.

- g. How far is too far in contextual theology? If we have very different ways of being Christian for each ethnic group in Myanmar, how do we express our Christian unity?
- h. Do you face any issues of syncretism, where adopting local customs, rituals or beliefs seems not Christian but (perhaps) animist?

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 is central to the mission of God: God became flesh in a time and a place in the Jewish man Jesus two thousand years ago. God seeks now to 'take shape' in our different contexts today, allowing us to be deeply Australian Christians, and deeply Burmese Christians, each doing things our way and each enriching the other.

I encourage you to take risks and to be adventurous. This is an important and urgent task for the church and we can trust God's Word in guiding us and the Holy Spirit in empowering us.