# FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALISATION

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**Category:** Observations

For much of history, the gospel was embodied in one cultural context: Europe. When the first cross-cultural missionaries left Europe in the C16 they encountered a situation not known since the monks of the medieval period. How does the gospel relate to new situations?

This is made more complex by the assumption (still held by some) that European culture is superior to others.

Today the church is planted in every culture and the gospel takes on many cultural forms. The myth of Western superiority has been exploded, but the link between culture and gospel is still problematic.

# THE URGENCY OF THE ISSUE

This issue is crucial for Christians in all contexts and arises from the nature of the gospel itself. The question is not whether the culture will shape the gospel, but if the contextualisation is faithful or not.

The gospel must be communicated to all and embraced by a Christian community in all situations.

â€œJesus made provision for the communication of the gospel by choosing and forming a community to bear the gospel in every nation to the ends of the earth. The significance of this initial act of Jesus stands in contrast to Islam. In Islam, provision is made for the communication of the prophet Mohammed's message by committing the revelation to writing. The Koran is the apostle and bearer of the message. By contrast, Jesus did not write a book; he formed a community. To be sure, the Bible plays an authoritative role in unfolding God's story of redemption. Nevertheless, Jesus formed a com-munity to be primary bearer of the gospel. Not only is a book the bearer of the message in Islam, but also one must learn Arabic in order to embrace its message. It cannot be translated into another language or culture for fear that the message will be altered and contaminated. Conversion to Islam is cultural as well as religious: to be Muslim, one must welcome the culture of the Koran. In contrast, the church is sent to the ends of the earth to embody and com-municate the gospel within each culture of the world. The nature of the gospel and of the church's mission requires that it be translated into the idiom of many cultures. The question of the relationship of this one gospel to the various cultures into which it has come is the issue of contextualizationâ€ .

Things like the question of Church architecture, the adoption and christianisation of pagan rituals and such are all part of the question.

These questions are not just relevant outside of the west. The question of how we relate to strands of post-modernism is key here.

Real life questions about how to relate Christian faith to life in the C21 are part of this issue.

# THE GOSPEL AND CULTURES: ETHNOCENTRISM AND RELATIVISM

There are two sets of bars that can imprison the gospel and limit its power:

- **Ethnocentrism** â€“ one cultural expression of the gospel is considered as normative. The gospel and its cultural forms are not distinguished. The classic example is of western Christianity.
- **Relativism** â€“ The opposite problem. This happens when people refuse to judge cultural expressions of Christianity against Scripture. Western colonial guilt has led to this happening.
- **Syncretism** comes from the attempt to make the gospel relevant to a culture and involves the gospel being absorbed into idolatrous forms, structures and categories.
- **Irrelevance** results from attempting to be faithful to the gospel by holding on to older or foreign forms which do not speak into a culture.

# THE GOSPEL AND CULTURES: SYNCRETISM AND IRRELEVANCE

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTEXTUALISATION

## The Model of Johnâ€™s Gospel

The translation of the Gospel into Greco-Roman already occurred within Scripture. Dean Flemming has given a very good history of this (Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission).

In the Synoptic Gospels, the Kingdom is the main theme, this was an important things for Jews at the time. John however picks up a different theme to cope with the pagan Roman world into which it was written.

John and Paul both (in their own ways) translate the gospel into the setting of the Greco-Roman world. John subverts the categories of contemporary philosophy by combining *logos* and *sarx* in the person of Christ.

He did not compromise the gospel, he used pagan terminology and challenged the worldview that the terminology emerged from.

All cultural forms, not just language, can be transformed and filled with new meaning by the gospel.

# The Experience of Christian Missions

By its nature the Gospel is translatable. During the first three centuries, the gospel found home in a number of cultures. As the European church gained in power the move was towards an embodiment of the church in one mono-cultural setting. However, we should not forget the long history of the church in Asia and North Africa.

The C15 and C16 opened up new opportunities for the expansion of the church. Jesuits in particular raised issues they discovered in new cultural settings. They sought to indiginise the faith, through the use of local languages and local expressions. The spread of the gospel and the translation of the Scriptures all raise questions of how the gospel interacts with culture.

Equally the conversion of people to Christianity raises questions; e.g. what do you do about polygamy in a new church?

What forms of worship are acceptable in a new setting?

Theological questions are also raised.

# Contextualisation Today

There are at least six points of consensus around contextualisation:

- No single expression of the gospel stands above history and culture and therefore is universally normative. The gospel must be at home in and at odds with all cultures. (I wrote a series of blog posts on this about six years ago which you can find here).
- Contextualisation is a process that is concerned with every part of life.
- Contextualisation is an issue for all cultures.
- Contextualisation is an on-going process.
- Constextualisation is constitutive of the gospel. The question is not whether or not we contextualise, but how.
- It is the gospel which must be contextualised, not a theological system or religious teaching.

# Models of Contextualisation

Bevans mentions six models; here we will look at two of them.

**Translation Model:** characteristic of evangelical and traditional Roman Catholic approaches. The heart of this model is that the unchanging message must be translated into various cultures. The gospel is the essential â€˜kernelâ€™ which is encased in a disposable, non-essential cultural husk.

This model takes the gospel and Bible very seriously. Revelation is considered to be truths and doctrines that transcend culture and history; reflecting a Greek view of truth, rather than a Biblical

one which sees truth as bound up in events within history. There is also the question of whether an essential â€˜kernelâ€™ is a viable image.

**Anthropological Model:** revelation is the personal, loving and sustaining presence of God in every culture. The missionary is a treasure hunter rather than a pearl merchant.

This model recognises that God has not left himself without a witness in any culture and that the good news can only be heard when we understand the concerns of the hearers. However, it ignores the fact that the gospel is a proclamation of something which has happened. It has to be proclaimed, not discovered.

- Translation model redemption-centred: anthropological is creation centred.
- Translation model stresses Jesus coming from outside: anthropological, stresses its relevance from within culture.
- Translation model stresses special revelation: anthropological, general revelation.
- Translation model fears syncretism and tends towards irrelevance: anthropological fears irrelevance and tends to syncretism.
- The translation model stresses the message to be contextualised: the anthropological, the culture into which the message will be contextualised.

## Macrocontextual Differences

**Africa:** the problem of cultural estrangement created by the suppression of their cultural memory and identity by European racism and ethnocentrism in the colonial period. The crucial issue is to recover and faithfully embody the gospel in the traditional culture of Africa.

**Latin America:** Poverty and injustice are the big issue. Need a contextualisation which will lead to an analysis of culture and a search for justice.

**Asia**: Church is in a surrounded by other ancient religious traditions. Need a contextualisation which helps the church work through the issues linked to this.

**West**: Need to recover the countercultural aspects of a gospel which has been tied to western culture for too long.

# FAITHFUL CONTEXTUALISATION

## The Church at the Crossroads of Gospel and Culture

â€œThe gospel calls for faithful living in all of life. Yet each culture shapes all of human life by a different set of beliefs. The church is part of the cultural community and the people of God. As such,

it indwells two irreconcilable storiesâ€¦ There is a missionary encounter between the two ways of life that meet in the very life of the Christian community. The struggle is to find a faithful way embodied and expressed, as it always is, within the culture.

Andrew Walls talks about the indigenising and pilgrim principles which capture this.

## The First Commitment is to the Gospel and the biblical story

The churchâ€™s first commitment and loyalty must be to the gospel, to faithfully embody and life it out in every department of human life.

The biblical notion of truth as historical (rooted in Godâ€™s acts), personal (relieved in Jesus) and narratival (expressed in a story which is true for all) clashes with western societyâ€™s view of truth as abstract and propositional.

## A Missionary encounter with culture

Viewing culture through the gospel sees both affirmation and critique. Every aspect of culture shows something of Godâ€™s creational design, but also something of fallen human nature.

## Discernment by way of a three-fold dialogue

If you want to know about water, donâ€™t ask a fish.

In order to avoid syncretism and relativism, we need a three-fold dialogue

- **Interconfessional**: we need to hear from others in the Christian family who see things differently to us.
- **Cross-Cultural**: we need to dialogue with churches in other parts of the world who have a clearer view of our situation than we do ourselves.
- **Cross-historical**: we need to learn from how the people of God have struggled to be faithful over history.

## The On-going Process of Contextualisation.

It never stops, because culture is always shifting.