

MISSION AND CONTEXT

The Current Debate about Contextualization

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The word "contextualization" was coined just over five years ago, and already it is used around the world in many different circles. The Theological Education Fund's program for the Third Mandate (1970-1977), described under the title *Ministry in Context*, has centered around this concept.¹ At the Lausanne Congress (July 1974) one of the seminar groups dealt with the topic, "The Gospel, Cultural Contextualization, and Religious Syncretism,"² and in January 1978 the Lausanne Evangelism and Theological Education Commission will hold a week-long session on "Contextualization and the Gospel" in Bermuda. Avery Willis has written an analysis of the transformation of the Indonesian Baptist Seminary into an extension program under the title, "Moving toward the Contextualization of Theological Education."³ In the U.S. the EFMA Mission Executives Retreat for 1975 dealt with the topic of contextualization. Some evangelical theologians who have written on the subject recently are: Edmund Clowney, Harvie Conn, Samuel Escobar, Stephen Knapp, Charles Kraft, Emilio Antonio Nuñez, Rene Padilla, George Peters, Sam Rowen, and Peter Savage. Harvie Conn indicates that this topic "is certainly at the top of most missiology discussion."⁴

What is contextualization all about? Where did the idea come from? What are the questions and challenges it raises for all of us?

How It Began

Apparently the first to use the word "contextualization" and the ones who gave it its original meaning were Shoki Coe, General Director of the TEF, and Aharon Sapsezian, one of the four Associate Directors. Sapsezian describes what happened:

Shoki and I began to use this word some time in February 1972. Long before that Shoki was famous for using the phrase, "Text and Context," and he was pleading for contextual criticism as a necessary counterpart of textual criticism. In a sense this is the prehistory of the words "contextuality" and "contextualization." The discussions in the house around these two words were that we should go beyond the older notion of "indigenization," in the sense that theology should take into account certain aspects of the culture which had been hitherto neglected, such as the social and economic dimensions. (You will remember that indigenization used to put greater emphasis on the anthropological and religious dimensions of culture.) Both of us also agree that the biblical motif of incarnation was the theological spearhead of this exercise. Maybe Shoki himself favored the word "contextuality" (which, by the way, he continues to use frequently), indicating thereby a sort of inevitability and necessity of the Gospel being expressed in a given cultural setting.

He was already hinting at the fact that there might be a genuine and a false contextuality. I think I was more inclined to the word "contextualization" as a process that had to be provoked more or less consciously, underlining perhaps the fact that even when relating to the social and cultural conditions of a given context theology should always retain a critical and changing stance toward the prevailing cultural values. In other words even in the Third World context the Gospel has this double relationship to culture: on the one hand it accepts and values the cultural components, while on the other hand it judges and changes them. All these discussions were later condensed in the form in which they appear in *Ministry in Context*, pp. 19-20, and this is how I think the word began its history.⁵

Although these two men, one Taiwanese and the other Brazilian, were concerned primarily with theological education in the Third World, it soon became apparent that the concept of contextualization is relevant for other aspects of the church's life and mission and that it should be applied in all six continents. It expresses a timely, vital concern of church leaders in many different situations. As the TEF staff stated it, "Contextualization is not simply a fad or a catch-word but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word."⁶

The Central Concern

The current debate about contextualization is concerned primarily and fundamentally with the mission of the church. Our mission is based on God's mission, and God's mission to the world was carried out through incarnation. God so identified Himself with mankind as to take upon Himself human nature; Jesus, the incarnate Word, lived and died as a Jew in a particular, concrete, historical situation; the church was commissioned to go into all the world not just geographically but in a sense analogous to the incarnation. God's Word, His love, His message of salvation is to be extended to people of every tongue and tribe in the language and in the living demonstrations that they can understand and receive without stepping out of their cultural clothing.

Throughout the modern missionary movement this concern has been expressed time and again by the word "indigenization." Missionary statesmen such as Roland Allen, Melvin Hodges, and Eugene Nida have challenged missionaries and younger church leaders to present the Gospel and build their churches in ways that are compatible with each cultural setting. In recent years many missionaries have found anthropology to be an invaluable tool in enabling them to understand cultural patterns and make necessary adaptations. The importance of indigenization should not be underestimated, for if we fail to present the Gospel in terms that are fully understandable to our hearers, we fail to present the Gospel. If we as missionaries and our churches as missionary churches fail to penetrate the cultures to which we are sent, we deny the incarnation itself.

The spokesmen for contextualization are seeking to go beyond indigenization in at least two ways. They want to clarify the process by which the Gospel not only takes on the forms and idiosyncrasies of different cultures but also maintains a critical stance and seeks to transform them. They point out the need to explore not only the anthropological and religious but also the social and economic dimensions of each situation in order to discover the full significance of the Gospel in that situation. They are concerned about the fact that the Christian religion has so often been domesticated and used to further interests that are patently or subtly contrary to God's purposes. They raise questions that are as basic for the mission of the church in the U.S. and Europe as they are for the mission of the church in Afghanistan or Zaire.

Jesus not only lived within a particular cultural setting, fully identified with his people, sharing their situation and ministering to their needs. He announced the coming of God's Rule and worked to transform the values and structures of their society. Through his death on the cross he bore the sins of the world. He also bore the brunt of the religious and political powers of his day. In like manner Jesus' followers are to minister to the needy and to fight against evil in all its forms. We are called to be "in" but not "of" the world, just as He was in the world yet not of the world. This will "normally" bring us into conflict with the values and structures of our contemporary societies.

Crucial Issues

1. Both ecumenical and conservative theologians agree that *the current debate about contextualization is not merely concerned with the communication of the Gospel but with the nature of the Gospel itself.* We have long recognized that it is absolutely essential to read and interpret each Bible passage in terms of its literary and historical context. "Text out of context is pretext." Similarly, if we take the Bible seriously as God's Word for us today, we must read and interpret it in terms of our own context. "The Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other." This is not to say that our reading of the present situation stands on a par with the Bible but rather that God always speaks to us in terms of concrete, living situations. The Gospel is His Word of judgment and grace for our lives and our world today. If we do not interpret and apply it in our own particular context, we cannot say that we understand it--or believe it--at all.

Not many years ago thousands of historical, evangelical, and fundamentalist congregations in southern U.S.A. were fervent in their worship and in their support of missionaries to Africa, while practising segregation in their churches, homes, businesses, schools, and social life. They could even "evangelize" black people without granting them justice or dignity. We all realize now how distorted that understanding of the Gospel must have been. Today the U.S. churches are sending more missionaries than ever to Third World countries, while maintaining a standard of living which requires our business interests to continue exploiting those peoples and driving them to the brink of starvation--by

the millions. We are eager to "evangelize" them, but we do not demand any major redistribution of the world's wealth, energy resources, or power. In 1974 our GNP was \$1,294,900,000,000 or \$6155 per person; the 47 poorest countries of the world (with 1,330,924,620 people) had a total GNP of \$217,147,000,000 or \$163 per person.⁷ What does the Gospel mean to our Third World audiences--or to us? We must be reading the Bible⁸ out of context!

2. In some circles *the debate about contextualization focuses upon the question of syncretism*. We have said that the Gospel must infiltrate each society, taking on the language and forms that will enable local people to understand and embrace it without alienating themselves from their own culture. But this process incurs the risk of distorting, weakening, or compromising the Gospel itself.

In Latin America we all know how the Catholic Church has for 500 years promoted or condoned or accepted a vast confounding of Christianity with native animism and superstition. At nearby Chichicastenango the Mayan witchdoctors still swing their incense burners and pray with their clients on the steps of the Church of St. Thomas in full view of the public. We Protestants denounce all that and would flatly deny any such syncretism, which we call Christo-Paganism, in our own ranks. But there is another story to tell, and this example again demonstrates the need for socio-economic analysis of our situation and of our mission.

At the time of the Sixteenth Century Conquest the Spanish and Portuguese explorers brought priests and monks as well as soldiers, the cross along with the sword. After raping the Native Americans of their lands, their gold and silver, their dignity, and their independence, the conquerors imposed on them the Christian religion. They taught the subjugated peoples to obey their masters in obedience to God, to keep the Ten commandments, especially the eighth ("Thou shalt not steal"), which meant to reverence the rights of the conquerors over the land they had expropriated, and to work hard and peacefully--for the benefit of their lords.

The second conquest began in the Nineteenth Century, took the form of modernization and liberalism, and led to the internal and international dominance of capitalism. At this time Protestantism invaded Latin America, in some cases at the direct invitation of liberal, reforming governments, who saw in the new religion both a counterweight to reactionary Catholic power and a moral force to promote the new ideals and enterprises--with its personal piety and discipline, its concern for medical and educational services, and its teachings about hard work and private property.⁹ The growth of Protestantism, especially the Pentecostals, has been very rapid in recent years, and now there are congregations in every town and village, every slum, and every plantation in Latin America. But almost all of them preach a "gospel" which is internal, cultic, and futuristic; they say nothing and do nothing about the horrendous injustices and exploitation and poverty of the people; by and large they still teach that Christians should not engage in political action; in fact they serve the interests of the wealthy classes by directing the attention of the oppressed toward "spiritual" matters instead of dealing with their miserable life

situation. Is not this another form of syncretism?

3. *Contextualization is also concerned about tradition and renewal in the churches.* On the one hand the Gospel as revealed in the Bible is essentially one and the same for all people of all ages. The churches have endeavored to capture and protect the central teachings of the Bible through doctrinal statements, ecclesiastical structures, and theological education. On the other hand the Gospel is ever new as it speaks to new situations in the church and in the world. In fact history provides many examples of the ways in which the churches' traditions have obscured the Gospel necessitating renewal.

At the present moment one of the major developments in the churches around the world is the search for alternatives in theological education. We have come to see that the Western approach to ministerial preparation, which was intended to uphold the biblical and theological foundations of the churches' life and provide competent leadership for the churches' ministry in the modern world, has actually become a hindrance in many situations, perhaps even in the U.S. The ministry is now a profession, the function of an elite caste, and theological education is the highly specialized and well guarded monopoly of the seminaries and their associations. As Third World churches "upgrade" their institutions, seeking to emulate our "standards," they discover that the doors to accredited, ordained ministry close to the vast majority of the natural leaders and the actual pastors in their communities. Theological education by extension is an attempt to reverse this trend, to open wide the doors of theological education and ministry to the whole people of God, to provide an on-going process of renewal through ministerial training at the local level. Extension education is a process of contextualization not simply because it takes place in the context of congregational and community life but because it penetrates and seeks to transform the structures and traditions of the churches and of society.¹⁰

4. *Another crucial issue is the apparent conflict between biblical theology and contextual theologies.* When we first began to hear about Black Theology, many of us questioned its validity. Then came "the critical Asian principle" in theology, Latin America's Theology of Liberation, and African Theology. And there are other currents related to women's liberation, poverty, and the impending world crises. Some evangelical theologians continue to insist that biblical theology is the only legitimate Christian theology--whatever they mean by "biblical" and "Christian." Others, such as Rene Padilla,¹¹ insist that theology which is truly biblical--and thus incarnational--must take shape within the cultures and problems of the people of God in every place. They affirm that the contextualization of theology is a top priority for the mission of the church.

The process of developing contextual theologies should include the same elements that were mentioned earlier. 1. The biblical message must penetrate and adopt the cultural forms of the people and also stand in judgment upon them. 2. The full meaning of that message for each people requires the application not only of religious and anthropological insights but also of social and economic analysis. When this happens, each local church will discover the meaning of the Gospel for her people and also add to the worldwide church's understanding of

God's revealed will.

Additional Observations

The current debate about contextualization offers a significant, new focus upon the mission of the church, but it is not without antecedents. The traditional theological disciplines provide ample material, procedures, and tools for our task. Hermeneutics, exegesis, and inductive study are intended not only to help us understand the Bible intellectually in terms of its original context but to experience it existentially in our own modern contexts. Church history is the cumulative experience of the contextualization of the Gospel in innumerable, diverse settings. The task of systematic theology is to redefine and reformulate and reteach biblical truth in every age and culture. And the many fields of practical theology--homiletics, Christian education, pastoral psychology, etc.--are concerned with the appropriate working out of the eternal Gospel in the concrete ministries of the contemporary church.

The concern for contextualization also brings to the fore the vital importance of the human sciences--especially anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology--for our understanding of the nature and ministry of the church. If space permitted we should discuss the invaluable insights that are being drawn from the derivative fields of communications, education, and development. And we must note in passing the important recommendation of Charles Kraft¹² that theology no longer be formulated so rigidly in an abstract, philosophical framework but rather take on the more flexible, incarnational forms of the humanities.

Finally contextualization is not only a young movement; it is a dynamic process; it should by nature present us with an unending, ever changing challenge to renewal and mission. Life is not static. Human needs and sin take new forms in each cultural and historical setting. As the body of the incarnate Christ we are called throughout our lives to discover anew the meaning of the Gospel as we respond to these changing missionary frontiers--proclaiming God's grace and judgment, planting and building churches, ministering to human suffering, and struggling against the false gods and unjust structures of this present world.

¹The three major publications of the T.E.F. staff during this period have been *Ministry in Context* (October, 1972), *Learning in Context* (1973), and *Viability in Context* (Bromley: Theological Education Fund, 1975).

²J. D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), pp. 1216-1228.

³*Asian Perspective* No. 8 (Taipei: Asia Theological Association, 1976).

⁴Personal letter. Conn has written but not yet published a lengthy paper on "Contextualizing Christianity: How Far Do We Go?"

⁵Personal letter.

⁶*Ministry in Context, op. cit.*, p.19.

⁷*The World Almanac and Book of Facts* (New York: Newspaper Enterprise Association, 1976), pp. 681-682.

⁸The reader is invited to read over the following passages, as a random selection, in the light of the statistics presented: Mark 9:34-36, 10:21-25, 42-45, 12:29-31, 38-40.

⁹José Híquez Bonfío, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 2-20.

¹⁰F. Ross Kinsler, "Extension: An Alternative Model for Theological Education," *Learning in Context, op. cit.*, pp. 27-49.

¹¹"The Contextualization of the Gospel," Unpublished paper (Available along with other materials on this topic from Partnership in Mission., 1564 Edge Hill Road, Abington, Pennsylvania 19001, U.S.A.).

¹²Charles H. Kraft, *Dynamic Theologizing: Studies in Christian Theology from an Anthropological Perspective*, Prepublication Draft (Pasadena: November, 1973).