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HOW CAN WE AFRICANIZE OUR FAITH: ANOTHER LOOK AT THE CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THEOLOGY

Victor Cole

The term "contextualization" was born in the early 70's within the framework of the World Council of Churches (WCC) Theological Education Fund. The coining of the term has been attributed to Sholei Coe and Sharon Sapseziah.[1] However, in over a decade of debate no clear consensus has emerged as to the meaning, the bases and the process involved in contextualization. The attempt here is to offer a perspective to the on-going discussion in the attempt to contextualize theology.

Meaning

The WCC's third mandate points out that contextualization should not be confused with indigenization. The mandate states "Contextualization has to do with how we can assess the peculiarity of third world contexts. . . Contextualization . . . takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical movement of nations in the Third World." [2] This definition includes many who are currently attempting to contextualize theology. I myself do not see a distinction between indigenization and contextualization. For that reason, many attempts at indigenization that will be presented in this paper are regarded as attempts to contextualize.[3]

When one looks at the western evangelical circles, contextualization is often described as a Third-World Theology. At the same time, contextualization is often limited to its kerygmatic dimension. Some others see it as merely a cross-cultural endeavour. This last view re-closes the paternalistic charges that have been brought against past indigenization attempts.

My definition of contextualization includes several theological disciplines. I define contextualization as:

a theological formulation from exegesis of biblical texts within a socio-cultural context, and a living out of that theology within the given cultural context, utilizing the Bible as the only authority while recognizing the progress of biblical revelation.[4]

In this definition both the kerygmatic and the didactic responsibilities of the church are included. In short, the whole counsel of God is involved. It will be noticed that in this description, faith and practice are not divorced; hence theological formulation is coupled with a living out of theology. Another point worthy of note in this description is the recognition of authority, namely, biblical authority. The next point worthy of note is the implicit catholicity. The phrase, "a given cultural context," cuts across east or west, north or south. I see contextualization as a task that all churches around the world must engage in for themselves as they allow the Bible to speak to their particular contemporary issues. The message of the Bible is a constant; our particular situations are variables. Our theologies must not become inscripturated as though they have been "once for all delivered to the saints." One of the wonders of the Bible is that the diligent and humble learner continues to take out of its treasures "both old and new." This implicit catholicity then calls for local and ethnic efforts in contextualization rather than a service to be performed by one group for another.

Bases

The continuing lack of consensus on the topic is further revealed in the diversities of bases for contextualization that have been advocated. The particular presuppositions inherent in the meaning one attributes to the term underly one's bases for contextualization. In the WCC's third mandate, *Missio Dei* was regarded as a key basis for contextualization. As Sholei Coe describes it, *Missio Dei* is the mission to which the church is called to participate. This mission, according to Coe, is world-directed and it is God at work in the socio-political scene in history, in a revolutionary way. For Coe it is this concept of mission that justifies: contextuality (the critical assessment of the context); contextualization (as described in the WCC mandate) and decontextualization (the process by which contextualization takes place). Coe writes, "Authentic contextualization must be open constantly to the painful process of decontextualization, for the sake of recontextualization." [5] The dialectical implication in Coe's statement is apparent. This dialectical basis is revealed in many of the approaches to contextualization that are found especially in Latin America and to a lesser extent in Asia, Southern Africa and in North American 'Black Theology'.

Other bases for contextualization have been presented. For example, Harvie Conn saw the need for a new hermeneutic as a basis for contextualization. He says that the method of interpreting the Bible thus far has put some cultural blinders on the western Christian, thereby creating an ethnocentric approach to the Bible. He writes:

Exegesis was carried on in basically a western-oriented, monocultural mindset, a "Constantinian cultural captivity." Context then and now in exegesis was defined narrowly in terms of the language of the text Forgetting the unique insight into exegetical method provided by Calvin, the evangelical tradition

began to build on the western Cartesian distinction between truth and its practice, abstract theoretical cognition and concrete application. Therefore, in exegesis and in communicating the results of exegesis a narrow view of hermeneutic has been developed that reduces theology to the ideational and application to the practical. In seminaries it functions by department compartmentalization, exegesis being defined as the relatively detached judgement on the text by Old Testament or New Testament departments, a study of the text's "application" reserved for the practical theology department.[6]

Others, including this writer,[7] have presented some biblical bases for contextualization. The spread of the church from the Jewish to the Hellenistic cultures presents us with biblical precedents for contextualization. Many students of the Bible have observed that the church took on Hellenistic characteristics as it moved from Judea to the Gentile territories. These characteristics included the liturgical and the doctrinal.

In their liturgy, the Hellenists transcribed the Christian message into the Greek context. For instance, they formulated theology with hymns. Philippians 2:6-11 has been recognized by Bible students as bearing Hellenized vocabulary. In this short hymn, christology was briefly taught. It was not accidental that the great apostle to the Gentiles was steeped in Hellenistic culture and he was "all things to all men" in his attempt to win some for Christ. 1 Timothy 3:16 is another hymn that sets forth apostolic doctrine among the Hellenists. In short, the Hellenistic church seemed not to know of hymnology apart from theology.

On the doctrinal side (although the early church did not separate doctrine from liturgy and practical life), we know that there were bodies of doctrines that were passed on from hand to hand. Paul makes this clear in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 when he speaks of passing on what

he had received. The content of that body of doctrines was kerygmatic. However, the Hellenistic colouring given to the doctrines is evident. For examples, the adoption of the Greek *Kyrios* for the Hebrew *Yahweh*; the introduction in Pauline writings of the Greek concept of bond-slave/master to explain the Christian's relationship to Christ; the adoption of the Greek *logos* to refer to Christ as the eternal *logos* - a clear borrowing from Greek culture; and the many illustrations given by Paul from the Hellenistic and Roman cultures in the setting forth of doctrines. Examples include Christ's triumphal nailing of our sins to the cross and making a public show of principalities and powers and the doctrine of the Christian life as set forth in the "Christian panoply" that is reminiscent of Roman gladiators (Ephesians 6).

All the biblical examples set forth here matched doctrine with practice. Theology was formulated and taught in real life situations. Usually it is not so much that Paul presents doctrines and then concludes with application. A careful examination shows applications sprinkled within heavily doctrinal portions and doctrines sprinkled all over the heavily applicational portions.

If churches all over the world are attempting to contextualize in every generation for their particular cultural contexts, one will begin to see hitherto non-salient but highly relevant issues emphasized in theological education - whether in Sunday schools or in seminaries. For example, Christian liberty will not be taught to the exclusion of God's answer to political and economic repression; the Christian's riches in Christ will not be taught to the exclusion of God's viewpoint on materialism; the churches will formulate divine responses to both polygamy and serial marriages and not ignore these matters because they are too sensitive; churches will begin to allow the Bible to deal with both the spirit world as manifested in contemporary scenes and naturalism as represented in our

contemporary mechanistic world views.

How then may one approach the task of contextualization? Before presenting a perspective on the process of contextualization, a summary of some trends in contextualization is in order.

Trends

Attempts at contextualization can be found in one form or another in Africa, Asia, the Americas and Europe. I describe many of these attempts as *Theologies of contextualization* because they are attempts to systematize *local theologies* whose authority base is human culture.

The African Scene. From the African scene the theologies that have been presented include "Political Theology," "Theology of Dialogue" and "Missiological Theology." These theologies have been summarized by John Mbiti.[8]

Political theology involves both theology of development and nation building and theology of liberation. The former concerns itself with the Christian's responsibility in an emerging nation. Topics of interest include church and society, the church and political life, and economic and social change. The latter concerns the church's response to political oppression as represented in Southern Africa.

Theology of Dialogue is, however, mostly emphasized in Sub-Saharan Africa. The emphasis is on religious and cultural points of contact between biblical and African backgrounds. This theology tries to elevate African Traditional Religions to the same level as Christianity and Islam.

Missiological theology is concerned with the attempt to bring the expansion of the church under the sole responsibility of African Christians. "Missions" is described in terms that transcend evangelization. The

extended meaning covers all that is implied in the WCC's concept of *Missio Dei* described above. It is within the context of this missiological theology that one hears of the moratorium call. As mission is redefined so is the concept of the church.

The Asian Scene. Asia has had its share of theologies of contextualization as represented in what has been described as syncretistic, accommodational and situational theologies.

Both syncretistic and accommodational theologies are attempts to synthesise Christianity with national religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. These theologies are similar in intent to the theologies of dialogue found on the African continent. An example of syncretism with Buddhism is found in Father Klaus Klostermaier's work.[9] Accommodational theology is represented in Kosuke Koyama's "Waterbuffalo Theology" in which he says,

Every religion has good things as well as bad things; therefore, we must keep good things of Buddhism in Thailand and talk about them. This will change our lifestyle and I consider this as evangelism.[10]

Kasoh Kitamori represents in his work what is described as situational theology. Kitamori is a Japanese theologian who tried to explain Japan's World War II conditions of devastation and suffering in light of what he called God's pain. For Kitamori, pain is the link between God and man.[11]

The Americas. From the Americas the two theologies of contextualization that stand out are: "Black Theology" and "Liberation Theology."

Black Theology was developed in the U.S.A. in response to the socio-political and cultural problems of a society that is colour-conscious. In their response, Black American theologians formulated a theology that

sees blackness in everything: Black God, Black church, Black liberation, Black power, etc.

From Latin America was born Liberation Theology in response to centuries of socio-economic and political oppression. The ground works were laid by reactionary elements of the church and society movement, (ISAL in Spanish initials) and some elements of the Roman Catholic Church. It was Rubem Alves' dissertation from Princeton entitled, *A Theology of Human Hope* that offered the first intellectually-documented response to the situation. However, the systematic theologian of the theology is the Peruvian Jesuit, Gustavo Gutierrez.[12] Liberation theology attempts to utilize socialism inspired by Marxist philosophy to overturn the economic and social oppression imposed by both feudalism and capitalism. The God of the Exodus is seen as the God of history and of political liberation. That Exodus experience is regarded as vital and having contemporary relevance to liberation theology.

The European Scene. The European continent offers more case studies than actual attempts to formulate theologies such as one finds in Africa, Asia and the Americas.

An example is the Mission Academy of Germany.[13] This institution encourages dialogue between German and Third World theologians who are invited to the Academy. The stated goal is not to create theology for the Third World but, through discussions and seminars, to come to a theological understanding with the Third World. German pastors and missionaries are given opportunity to understand the religious, economic and political situations of these overseas countries through the dialogues. The whole endeavour seems to serve the two-fold purpose of creating German awareness of Third-World situations and of providing a way to train German middle-class theologians to relate to the needs of the lower class in Germany.

Britain provides the Sheffield Urban Theology Unit[14] which is an ecumenical institution that attempts to integrate theology and sociology to serve the church and community. The institution writes about contemporary theology and runs courses in "creative theology." The sociological dimension is evidenced in the concern for the contemporary life of man as the institute tackles problems of urbanization and industrialisation. The students are made up of ministers, theologians, church people, sociologists and politicians, who, together, constitute a theological community.

Much of what was presented above from Africa, Asia and the Americas constitutes reactionary movements in an attempt to tackle socio-political and cultural issues that are too often ignored by the church. In our theological endeavours we ought to realize that there is a sense in which theologies are localized even in what passes as "Biblical Theology." In other words, theologies could be both "ethnic" as well as "global"[15]. By ethnicity I do not mean a theology that looks inward and cuts itself off from the community of God's people the world over. Ethnicity here is another term for a localized emphasis in theology. If there is a pressing issue local to any culture of the world, Christian theologians within the community of faith ought to address those issues. In the sense that certain issues may be localized then theologies thus formulated regarding those local issues cannot be other than local or "ethnic."

Often we hide behind the label "Biblical Theology" when we push off a global emphasis. There are theological categories that will be common to all the communities of faith the world over. Many such categories include the body of doctrines that have been passed down through the ages. However, even when considering those great doctrines such as the Trinity, Election, the Atonement, etc., we ought not to forget the interpretive frame of reference. In interpreting those doctrines, we often betray our particular cultural and

philosophical bents. And so, in areas we call "global," we still betray "ethnicity." When we begin to come to this realization, we will begin to appreciate the import of contextual theologies. We will then begin to acknowledge that a particular cultural expression of our Christian faith might not have said the last word that needs to be said concerning those great doctrines. We will all then look at the body of believers from cultures other than our own with anticipation that the good Lord could still teach us all through one another.

One might then ask, what are the crucial differences between what was described above as "theologies of contextualization" and contextualized theology that is here advocated? Four differences are perceived.

Crucial Differences

Contextual theology as here advocated takes a different view from the theologies of contextualization described above in four areas: the view of theology, the data base for theologising, the authority base in theologising, and the hermeneutical principles employed.

As to the view of theology, most of the theologies mentioned above adopt a purely discourse view. Quite often theology does not go beyond ecclesiastical discourse: once a churchman speaks formally on issues, it constitutes theology. Hence you have political theology, cultural theology, etc.

However, I am looking at theology as the reverent task of collecting, interpreting and arranging materials pertaining to God's self-revelation and living in obedience to that which God has revealed.[16]

As to data base, I am advocating two separate and legitimate sources. The one constitutes an absolute data base and the other a relative data base. The one absolute source of data for theologising is the Bible,

God's inscripturated Word. The other, which is relative, is man's contemporary social and cultural setting. The distinction constitutes a marked difference between the theologies of contextualization and contextual theology that I am proposing. In the former, the data base is primarily found in the area I termed relative, while very little is drawn from the absolute. I must also point out that the marked tendency in our evangelical theologies is to draw our categories solely from the absolute data base to the neglect of the relative data base. However, I think a contextual evangelical theology ought to let the absolute data confront the relative data. Thus we will allow the absolute Word of God to speak to our contemporary social, cultural, economic and political situations. Too often we confuse legitimate distinctions that exist between data base and authority base. These two are not the same. I think the confusion of the two is what has led to the neglect of the relative but legitimate data base. Hence we continue to be labelled, "theologians who are answering questions nobody is asking."

As to the authority base, we again see a very sharp distinction between theologies of contextualization and contextualized theology. In contextualizing theology, the Christian theologian ought to have as the supreme court of appeal in matters of faith and conduct, the absolute Word of God inscripturated. However, in many of the theologies described above, man in his subjectivism serves as the final authority. For the evangelical theologian, a careful distinction ought to be observed between data and authority. It is true that in one sense, what constitutes an absolute data base also serves as authority base. Here we see a dual role which we will do well to observe.

As to hermeneutical principles, a clear distinction could also be observed. For some of the theologies described above, the allegorical method pervades their hermeneutic. Often there is manifested a flagrant disregard for the historicity of the portions of the

Bible under investigation. In contextualizing theology as I am advocating, due regard must be given to the immediacy of the Bible message. In so far as the Bible came to us through particular cultures in the original context due regard ought to be given to the meaning from that original context and then how that meaning is transmitted into our particular cultures of today. Here Pike's emic-etic distinctions could help us in hermeneutics. After we have taken the first two steps indicated above - deriving meaning from the perspective of the original context and faithful transmission of that meaning to our particular contemporary cultures - can we then seek to apply the meaning derived to our contemporary situations.

Contextualized theology ought to confront the fruits of the faithful interpretation of the Word of God with our contemporary life settings at the level of application. At the same time a contextualized theology ought to be open constantly to new situations either calling for a re-thinking of theological emphases or the categories employed. We must realize that much as the church ought to continue to benefit from the lessons and teachings of previous generations, each generation ought to be able to identify the relevant issues that the church's theology must address. At the same time the community of faith the world over ought to recognise and appreciate differences as well as commonalities of theological emphases across cultures.

Attention is now shifted to the process of contextualizing theology within our particular cultures the world over.

The Process

In contextualizing theology there are four crucial factors. These factors will enhance contextualization if they are adequately taken care of. The discussion that follows is not necessarily according to the order of importance.

The Philosophical Factor. By philosophy I mean the total world and life view as well as the thought patterns of both the original contexts in which the Bible was given as well as those of the interpreters of the Bible today. Bible scholars are no strangers to what is referred to as Hebrew thought forms or Graeco-Roman thought forms. Occasionally as one reads the Jewish writers of the New Testament, one comes across "Hebraisms." Thought forms as well as world views are essential to the understanding of customs, habits, behaviours and messages intra- or interculturally.

A Christian theologian must combine an understanding of the thought patterns, world and life views of the biblical settings with those of his own contemporary culture. The understanding of the former will likely enhance the understanding of the original message in thought forms that are familiar to the latter.

A casual acquaintance with western Christian theologies soon reveals the heritage that is rooted in Aristotelian logic. Neither Thomistic nor Augustinian theology is free from the influence of Greek thought forms. Depending on which communion one belongs to in the Western church, either one of these two theologies has left its indelible print on theologies as known today.

To successfully contextualize theology within a given culture today, both the thought forms, world and life views of the Bible as well as those of the contemporary culture must be well understood by the theologian. Should a theologian then seek to go across cultures, those third thought patterns, world and life views must also be taken into account. In the final analysis, it does not really matter in what thought pattern theology is presented as long as the thought pattern is that of the recipient of the theology. The real issue is not whether theological postulates are presented a *posterior* or a *priori* as long as the original Bible meanings are faithfully reflected. It seems to me that God allows us freedom in thought forms so long as the

original message is kept intact.

Cultural Factor. Culture has been described as the total way of life of a people. In that regard, it embraces thought patterns, and world and life views. However, culture is here delineated to emphasize this fact that there are differences in cultural appreciations of particular teachings of the Bible. The degrees of appreciation often have to do with the degree to which there are cultural points of contact between the biblical context and a particular contemporary culture. At other times, the appreciation stems out of a greater awareness or a greater need in a particular contemporary culture over another one.

If theology is to be also live and not just a matter of mental assent, the contemporary social-cultural factor must come to the foreground. The social-cultural factor must then provide the theologian with the constantly changing data which represent man's situation in life. These relative data must then be interfaced with the absolute Word of God inscripturated. To engage the Word of God in a face to face confrontation with our situation in life is to strive to apply the absolute Word inscripturated to our lives. The cultural diversities of our world necessitates differences in emphases hence the ethnicity discussed above.

Linguistic Factor. Language is a vehicle of communication. It is also included in a comprehensive approach to the meaning of culture. However, language is singled out because of the importance it holds in communication. At this stage the reader will begin to sense that the essence of contextualization is adequate communication.

Language conveys concepts and thought forms. Concepts are in turn reduced to symbols and codes. When we get into the realm of symbols and codes we are presupposing the need for communication and the ability to communicate. When we use symbols and codes, we are necessari-

ly dealing with meanings. Interpretation is therefore a quest for meaning which must be traced back to its context. The quest for the meaning of symbols out of the context in which the symbols were originally employed is likely to introduce alien thought.

The Christian theologian who wants to contextualize ought to be able to work with the biblical languages, so he can have a feel for word concepts as close as possible to the original context. However, this feeling for word concepts is no excuse for purely lexical studies that too often pass for exegesis. Meaning of concepts must be traced back to their original context. Hence, contextual use of language ought always to take precedence in the process of theologising.

Hermeneutical Factor. Without trying to give the impression that evangelical hermeneutics have arrived, one must commend some of the principles already laid down. In the quest for meaning, priority ought to be given at all times to the context of the passage in question. Also vital in the quest for contextual meaning is the principle of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture.

Underlying the two points mentioned is respect for the historicity of the Biblical records. Due consideration ought to be given to the primary recipients of the Word. An understanding of the context of writing enhances our own understanding of the message of the Bible. Consequently, such an understanding enhances our ability to apply the message of the absolute Word of God inscripturated to our particular contexts and cultures.

Amidst the on-going discussion about the need for a renaissance in evangelical hermeneutics[17] I am proposing for consideration what I have called the "uncertainty factor." This is the need to keep our hermeneutical door ajar at all times hoping first for improvement in methodology and, second, for improvement in our

understanding of some of the portions of Scripture whose meanings are not yet clear to us. In short, we ought to readily admit ignorance or uncertainty where we are really not sure. Those areas may involve particular portions or even an entire hermeneutical system.

Conclusion

The marks left behind in any theology by the four factors discussed above form the characteristics of that theology. In as much as there are differences in philosophies, cultures, and languages, theology will necessarily reflect particular local colour. However, local emphases do not preclude common assumptions or emphases, even if the commonalities also betray localities. One's hermeneutic will make or break one's theology. However, through all of these the theologian must humbly realize that it is the absolute and inscripturated Word of God that is inspired and not his own theology.

Notes

- 1 Ross F. Kinsler, "Mission and Context: The Current Debate About Contextualization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 14 (January, 1978) p. 24.
- 2 "Ministry in Context: The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund" (1970-77), Bromley: T.E.F. Fund, October 1972, p. 20.
- 3 The reason for making the distinction seems to be because indigenization has been seen as a paternalistic relationship between the western and the non-western churches. Much of the recent attempts to contextualize have, however, been carried out by non-westerners. For more discussion of this point consult the article by James Oliver Buswell III, "Contextualization: Is it only a New Word for Indigenization?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 14 (January 1978), p. 16.
- 4 Some examples from western theological circles include positions expressed by Harvie M. Conn, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-cultural Hermeneutic," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 14 (January 1978) p. 44. Here, Conn describes contextualization as a "cross-cultural hermeneutic." Also in the same journal, Ross F. Kinsler, "Mission and Context: The current debate about contextualization," pp. 28ff. Kinsler sees contextualization embracing all that indigenization stands for and more - including the relation of the gospel to the social and economic areas of life.
- 5 Sholei Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education*, 9 (1973) p. 243.
- 6 Harvie M. Conn, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-cultural Hermeneutic," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 14 (January 1978) pp. 40-41.
- 7 For a more comprehensive discussion of the biblical basis for contextualization consult Victor B. Cole, *A Biblical Approach to Contextualization of Theology*, Th.M thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979. The biblical basis presented in the fourth chapter.

- 8 John S. Mbiti, "Theology of the New World: Some Current Concerns of African Theology," *The Expository Times*, 87 (March, 1976), pp. 164-68.
- 9 In Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 109-12.
- 10 In Kosuke Koyama, "Syncretism and Accommodation," *OMF Bulletin*, (Singapore: OMF, October, 1972), pp. 101-8.
- 11 Kasoh Kitamori, *Theology of the Pain of God* (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 10.
- 12 Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. by Ina Caridad and John Eagleson (New York: Orbis Books, 1973).
- 13 "Learning in Context: The Search for Innovative Patterns in Theological Education," *Theological Education Fund* (Bromley, England: New Life Press, 1973) pp. 139ff.
- 14 *Theological Education Fund*, p. 117.
- 15 Writers on "African Theology" such as Fashole-Luke, "An Indigenous Theology: Fact or Fiction?" Seminar Paper on Christianity and the Non-Western World, University of Aberdeen, 1970, have eschewed ethnicity in theology, and have maintained that African Theology must take on a global perspective.
- 16 I am adopting here the *Logia* distinction according to evidences from Adolf Deissman, *Bible Studies* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1903), p. 143 and Friedrich Blass, *Grammar of the New Testament Greek* (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 376. See also Deissman, *Light from the Ancient East* (New York: Hodder and Stoughton, 1911), p. 104. This position is in contrast to the more popular but etymologically indefensible *Logia* view that has led to definitions such as "A discourse of (about) God."
- 17 Conn, pp. 40-41, has pointed out some of the assumptions in evangelical hermeneutic necessitating a re-thinking of our hermeneutical system.