

## Contextualisation

Moreau defines contextualization as “the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content, and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds.”<sup>1</sup> For decades evangelicals debated whether it is possible to separate the supernatural ‘kernel’ of the gospel from the relative cultural ‘husk’ and have largely concluded that to attempt this is inappropriate in the contextualizing process; that our task is to ‘re clothe’ ‘the whole counsel of God’ in new settings.<sup>2</sup>

Some key points made by Moreau include:

1. “...evangelicals are more willing to look positively on contextual models in which general revelation in the context *illuminates, illustrates, or enhances our understanding of* special revelation” but does not put it on a par with special revelation (p67).
2. The proper approach to contextualisation is that of *critical realism* (the Bible’s truth is upheld, but we approach contextualization with humility because we have an imperfect grasp of truth) as opposed to *instrumentalism* (all knowledge is subjective; every culture has its own grasp of truth) and *naïve realism* (knowledge is objective; we only need to bring biblical truth to another setting and insert it) [p79].
3. There are two major approaches to critical realism (both recognising our grasp of truth is imperfect) that result in different contextual approaches: (1) We grow in our understanding of the truth as we check how what is encountered in culture corresponds with truth revealed in the Bible. Meaning is found in messages and forms can be good, neutral or evil (so Hiebert); or (2) Our focus should not be on the *content* of REALITY (only perfectly known by God) but on *the process of God’s ongoing revelation* of REALITY among people today. Meaning is not found in messages but in people and forms are neutral (so Kraft) [pp80-81]. There are major problems with Kraft’s understanding of revelation.<sup>3</sup>
4. If, following Kraft, “forms are neutral and people construct meaning only in their minds, then we have enormous freedom to experiment with non-Christian religious forms” (e.g. Christian shrines in Japan; insider movement adoption of Islamic forms). “If, however, forms are *not* neutral and meaning exists in the correspondence between reality and Reality, then we must approach such experimentation with caution, attending carefully to the possibility of syncretism” (p160).
5. The role of the initiator is crucial in the contextualization process and involves six distinguishable roles: (1) guide (stronger theological constraints); (2) pathfinder (dynamic critical realist orientation; methods are largely neutral; more likely to use local non-Christian religious forms in creative ways; less focused on theology) ; (3) herald (contextualize the way they communicate; a tendency toward naïve realism and relative aversion to dynamic critical realism; focus on propagation, less on theological development or social outreach); (4) facilitator (focus on the marginalized and typically engage – though not exclusively - in

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<sup>1</sup> A. Scott Moreau. *Contextualisation in World Missions. Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Academic, 2012, 36. Moreau observes that most of the literature concerning contextualisation deals with theological contextualisation. He rightly stresses that “good contextualisation is broader than that. It is concerned with the whole of the Christian faith, including the existential realities of those among whom the faith is being contextualized, and including their historical and cultural contexts.” It is not only our faith that must be contextualized, but also ourselves. *Contextualization*, 111.

<sup>2</sup> Moreau, 65.

<sup>3</sup> Kraft believes what the church has historically called ‘heresies’ can validly be classed as cultural adaptations rather than as theological aberrations. Moreau, *Contextualisation*, 89.

developmental types of ministry); (5) restorer (mainly attend to spiritual issues, especially deliverance or spiritual warfare; practitioners may distinguish different types of demons); and (6) prophet (discerning social or spiritual bondage and bringing Christ's truth to bear on them; disproportionately likely to include theological development; more likely to be suspicious of the status quo in their own faith tradition).

### **Content Contextualisation in Communicating the Gospel**

Cultural imperialism is not appropriate - one person or group from another culture dictating to others what they should do. Paul respected and taught the importance of individual Christians determining for themselves what it means to honour Christ as Lord (Rom 14:1-8), although he strenuously opposed anything which flew in the face of gospel fundamentals, e.g., undermining the clear presentation of Christ crucified or the resurrection or the basis upon which people are saved.

Hesselgrave identifies four tasks which are essential to contextualising the gospel message: definition (the need to define carefully the terms we use in explaining the gospel, recognising the distance between divine truth and cultural error – a process that involves a painstaking process of comparison and contrast), selection (sender and receiver select continuously; distortion is inevitable), organization (the communicator of the gospel must make decisions regarding the order in which and the manner in which he will communicate the various points he has selected for presentation), and application (it is necessary to seek to bring the message home to the individual hearers, though we recognise that ultimately this must be the work of the Holy Spirit).

### **“Critical Contextualisation”**

It is necessary to see contextualisation as a process which involves much more than mere content. The meaning of cultural forms, even when they stay much the same, will often change considerably. Further the same cultural forms may be used in very different ways in different cultural settings.

Paul Hiebert defines *indigenisation* as the preservation of the meaning of the Gospel even when expressed in native forms. Many prefer the term contextualisation (coined in the early 1970s by the Theological Education Fund). Hiebert's term describes a contextualisation which involves more than merely the communication of content, something he also terms *critical contextualisation*. It must be conceded that the terms indigenisation and contextualisation as they stand do allow for models which do not seek to transform culture.<sup>4</sup>

Hiebert outlines four steps to take in effecting critical contextualisation:

1. An individual or church must recognise the need to deal biblically with all areas of life, e.g., to be ready and willing to consider marriage practices and rituals from a biblical perspective.
2. Local church leaders and the missionary must lead the congregation in uncritically gathering and analyzing the traditional customs associated with the question in hand, e.g., analyzing marriage practices, customs and rituals not for the purpose of evaluation but, at this stage, simply for the purpose of understanding their meaning and place in the total context.
3. The pastor or missionary should lead the church in a Bible study related to the question under consideration, e.g., using a wedding to present Christian beliefs about marriage.

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<sup>4</sup> So Andrew Walls points out that “the indigenizing principle will always be in tension with what he labels the pilgrim principle – that we are part of a church which is universal and no human culture will ever completely be our home.” Moreau, *Contextualization*, 124.

4. The congregation should evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and to make a decision regarding their use.

A church protects itself from worldliness when three dynamics are operating: (1) a dynamic obedience to and application of God's word; (2) a dynamic vision for reaching all people, irrespective of cultural background; and (3) engagement in dynamic fellowship with Christians from other cultural backgrounds. In other words, the correctives needed are those which will prevent a church which is pursuing "indigenisation", "contextualisation", and "dynamic equivalence" from becoming locked into the indigenous situation, a particular context, and a frozen equivalence. Churches that slavishly imitate the church model introduced to their culture by cultural outsiders have been called *formal correspondence churches*. Churches which develop their own culturally appropriate ways of ordering and expressing church life, but which remain true to normative biblical principles, may be termed *dynamic equivalence churches*.<sup>5</sup> Churches which are in significant fellowship with Christians from other ecclesiastical and cultural traditions, in which believers are vitally involved in the lives of non-Christians, and which radically and continually re-evaluate whether their life and practices are hindering or promoting the gospel are what may be described as 'in' but not 'of' churches.

### Cultural Values

"Norms are standards with respect to behaviour. They vary from 'One should always...' to 'One should never...', with an area of individual freedom in the middle. Values are beliefs about what is important, beautiful, good and right, and what is not...Values strongly influence what people do or refuse to do, when, how, with whom and to what effect. Values describe the ideal, not actual behaviour..."<sup>6</sup> "Taboos are powerful norms about things one should never do. "Group norms are implicit rules of behaviour. Breaking group norms will be noticed and disapproved of by the group.

Hofstede has carried out the most comprehensive studies of the value orientations of cultures (for work-related situations). He assumes that people are mentally programmed by what he termed a 'software of the mind' at an early age by their culture, which then continues to reinforce these value programs. His research identified five dimensions (or indices) of cultural values<sup>7</sup>: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism and Collectivism, Masculinity and Femininity, Long-term and short-term orientation to life. He later added Indulgence vs. Restraint:

1. *Power Distance* describes the "extent to which members of a culture accept unequal distribution of power in organisations and institutions (and in society generally). High power distance cultures are comfortable with considerable inequality while low power distance cultures favour minimum inequality."<sup>8</sup> Malaysia has a very high index at 104 and Australia a low index at 36.
2. *Uncertainty Avoidance* describes the "extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguous situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these" (Hofstede & Bond

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<sup>5</sup> Kraft has championed dynamic equivalence and he emphasises that he has in mind equivalence not of *form* but of *impact*. This is in keeping with his incorrect assumption that forms are neutral and it leads to unfortunate consequences, e.g. an application of Paul's list of qualifications for an elder (1 Tim 3) which simply looks for unimpeachable social maturity in another cultural context such as to allow for the incorporation of polygamy as a requirement for eldership, plus an approach to spiritual warfare that many rightly see as leading to "new doctrines or practices that are not simply extrabiblical but even anti-biblical." Moreau, *Contextualization*, 153, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Frank R. Oomkes & Richard H. Thomas, *Developing Cross-Cultural Communication*. Connaught Training Limited: Aldershot, Hants., 1993, 275.

<sup>7</sup> Irwin, *Communicating with Asia*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Irwin, 32.

1984). "The higher the index on the UAI scale the more uncertain and unknown situations and ambiguity are felt to be threatening."<sup>9</sup> Greece has a high index at 112 and similarly Japan at 92, with Australia having a relatively low index at 51.

3. *Individualism and Collectivism*: "In individualistic cultures people look after themselves and their immediate family, while in collectivist cultures people belong to in-groups or collectivities which look after them in exchange for loyalty" (Hofstede & Bond 1984).<sup>10</sup> "Cultures...vary in their tendency to encourage people to be unique and independent, or conforming and dependent."<sup>11</sup> Australia has a very high index at 90 and Indonesia a very low index at 14.
4. *Masculinity and Femininity*: "Masculinity predominates where dominant values relate to 'success, money and things', while femininity predominates where dominant values relate to 'caring for others and the quality of life'. Cultures high on femininity have more flexible sex roles and place greater emphasis on cross-sex interaction....People in the achievement-oriented masculine cultures tend to be assertive, competitive and to take tough approaches to decision making while those in nurturance-oriented feminine cultures have a greater concern for co-operation, good working relationships and a more sensitive approach to decision-making for both men and women."<sup>12</sup> Japan has a very high index at 95 and the Netherlands very low at 14 (Australia stands at 61).
5. *Long-term versus short-term orientation to life*: "In countries with high LTO indices, considerable emphasis is placed upon the Confucian virtues of persistence and perseverance, ordering relationships by status and observing this order, thrift and having a sense of shame; relatively less emphasis is placed upon personal steadiness and stability, protecting face, respect for tradition, and reciprocation of greetings, favours and gifts."<sup>13</sup> China has a very high index at 118 and the Philippines a very low index at 19 (Australia stands at 31).
6. *Indulgence versus restraint*: Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms. Australia scores a very high 71 on the indulgence index above the US and Sweden (cf. Bangladesh 20).

### Honour and Shame Across Cultures

Neyrey explains<sup>14</sup> "Honor refers to the claim of worth, value and respect which must be publicly acknowledged. The claim may be made either by the person demanding respect or by others on his behalf, usually family or fictive-kin (co-citizens, co-members of the army) and the acknowledgment must always be public approval of this claim." Shame could be construed either positively or negatively. As a positive value it meant sensitivity towards one's reputation. Negatively, it is humiliation, the loss of status. Hiebert<sup>15</sup> distinguishes between *shame cultures* (a societally driven feeling) and *guilt cultures* (a feeling resulting from violation of absolute moral standards).

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<sup>9</sup> Irwin, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Irwin, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Irwin in reference to Lustig & Koester, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Irwin, 35.

<sup>13</sup> Irwin, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, "Prayer, In Other Words: A Social Science Model for Interpreting Prayers" in *Social Scientific Models for Interpreting the Bible: Essays by the Context Group in Honor of Bruce J. Malina* (ed. John J. Pilch,, Leiden: Brill, 2001) 349-380. Also: <http://www.nd.edu/~jneyrey1/Prayer.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1985, 212-213.

Cultural anthropologists and sociologists often discriminate between two basic types of honour. *Ascribed honour* refers to the publicly recognised status one has by being born or by being deputised by a superior – it “derives from one’s kin-group, gender, order of birth, or delegated authority” (Hanson). Such honour is not based on anything the individual has done. In the Bible it is very common for people, especially men, to be identified as being “the son of x.” By contrast, *acquired honour* refers to the public recognition one receives because of competitive action, because of deeds one has done that are regarded as virtuous by society. Since ascribed honour is family and birth oriented, we need a third category – *positional honour* – to describe that public recognition a person receives by virtue of the position he or she holds, irrespective of performance.

The concern to make sure the other does not lose face has many implications, e.g. avoiding the shame of direct confrontation through recourse to a mediator; not trying to outclass others in the classroom or on the sports field; ‘cheating’ to avoid the shame of failing or as one helped by others concerned for his/her social standing; doctoring facts or toning down grave news.

Especially in socially stratified societies the giving of honour to those whose position in society warrants it, is an obligation built into the whole fabric of relationships through the process of enculturation. Therefore, normally honour is given automatically and spontaneously. Only the foreigner, living in a strange culture, has to think about how to honour people appropriately.

A man can be sexually promiscuous and yet not damage the family honour, whereas a woman’s sexual promiscuity not only brings shame on herself but on the entire family. If a woman is unmarried her honour and that of her family depends on her virginity. When she attains a marriageable age her honour depends on being married, particularly at a young age. A woman of honour is fertile and nurtures her family.

#### *Honour and Shame in the Biblical World*

##### *Honour, Shame and Relationships*

In many cultures, honour and shame are a function of one’s position, as male or female, in society. This is also clearly the case in the Bible though here there is a much stronger correlation between honour and righteous character and between shame and wickedness (e.g., Gen 49:6; 1 Sam 20:30; Job 8:22; Prov 10:5; 14:35; Jer 2:26; Hos 2:7). For ascribed honour see Matthew 1:1-17. For threat to honour see Matthew 1:18-1). See too: 2 Kings 19:26; 2 Chron 32:21; Ps 69:19; Ezek 32:30; 2 Sam 10:1-5; cf. Isa 20:1-5; 47:23; Gen 34. Jesus’ motivation was not that of winning social honour and prestige, for example, defending a socially recognised position as a prophet or Rabbi. Rather, we see him moved by zeal for God’s glory, by a hatred of evil and by his love for people and, therefore, angered or provoked by their hard-heartedness, legalistic self-righteousness, and desire for public recognition as the true spokesmen for God (see Mt 9:1-8, 9-13, 14-17; 12:1-14, 22-37, 38-45; 15:1-11; 16:1-4; 19:1-12; 21:14-16, 23-27; Jn 2:12-19; 7:14-24; 8:12-30, 31-59; 10:22-39).<sup>16</sup> Daube<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jesus challenged the culture-bound system of honour, e.g. Matthew 6:2. See John 5:44; Matthew 23:6; Luke 14:8-10. For Jesus one’s position before God is more important than one’s position in society. Being honoured or subjected to shame before God is a much more critical matter than being honoured or humiliated in public. If necessary one must be prepared to endure public humiliation in order to honour God and to receive the honour that comes from God. Jesus exemplified this on the cross and was accordingly honoured by God in his resurrection and ascension, being exalted to the supreme position of glory and honour.

<sup>17</sup> "Shame Culture in Luke", Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C.K. Barrett. Ed. M.D. Hooker & S.C. Wilson; London: SPCK, 1982.

identifies around two dozen examples from Luke that have a shame-cultural flavour and he locates Wisdom elements in most of them. See, for example, Luke 11:5ff.

### **Time and Culture**

Attitudes to time can vary considerably among individuals within a particular cultural setting and between cultures. In many cultures what matters is the event and not the time at which the event happens. Time-oriented people often have the following characteristics: (1) concern about schedule and punctuality; (2) specific objectives to accomplish within a given period; (3) stress on efficiency; (4) find it hard to cope with sameness; (5) quickly weary of long discussions about problems or crises and will call for a vote. By contrast event-oriented people often are characterised by: (1) concern about details of what is going to happen rather than when it begins and ends; (2) “let come what may” outlook; (3) regard participation and completion as the central goals; (4) ‘playing the game’ is more important than ‘winning’; (4) exhaustively consider problems and deliberate till they reach a unanimous agreement; (5) the present is more important than the past or future. Jewish culture during the life of Christ was predominately event-oriented.<sup>18</sup>

In the West time is linear and abstract. John Mbiti maintains that for Africans time has two dimensions, a past and a present, but virtually no future. In Buddhism and Hinduism the notion of a world that ‘flows’ in time is illusory. In non-Western worldviews time may be viewed as cyclical, a never-ending repetition of seasons and life cycles. In religious thought time is divided into sacred and profane time.

### **Hospitality and Culture**

The gospel was first communicated in cultural settings in which hospitality was central. In many Western cultures the extending of hospitality may be regarded as nice, but is often peripheral to peoples’ way of life. Yet in the Scriptures hospitality is not merely a cultural attachment but is essential to the nature of true Christianity. Within the church community hospitality is of cardinal importance (1 Pet 4:9; Rom 12:13; Heb 13:1-2 cf. Gen 18:1ff; 1 Tim 3:2; Tit 1:8; see esp. Acts 2:46).

In most cultures the host’s sense of obligation to extend hospitality is not based on the hunger or thirst of his guests. It has more to do with expressing honour and acceptance.

Some basic knowledge of the culture of those to whom one intends to extend hospitality is essential, e.g. the importance of *halal* and avoidance of alcohol for Muslims and avoidance of beef for Hindus, Sikhs and meat for some Buddhists.

**QUESTION:** *Identify a migrant people group in your city or community which is not well represented in your church. Imagine that you are part of a team that is seeking to reach these people for Christ. What changes in your lifestyle will or may be required of you and your team mates if you are to be effective in reaching these people?*

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<sup>18</sup> So Lingenfelter and Mayers (op. cit. 43-44). Though there are problems with the examples cited by Lingenfelter and Mayers their basic thesis holds good.

## Bibliography

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