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The theological prospects and religious movements in Africa resemble the world of the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian era. There was a time of doctrinal strifes which called for ecumenical effort to formulate creeds and a positive Christian apologetic. Likewise, evangelicals in Africa need a system which will express theological concepts in terms of African situations. Theology in Africa should scratch where it itches. Such problems as polygamy, family structure, spirit-world, worship and the Christian's responsibility to the government need to be tackled by evangelical African theologians, and Biblical answers presented. Also we need Christian apologists like Tertullian, who will, without compromising, uphold the uniqueness of the Biblical faith and present a defense to the intellectual world. To accomplish such an objective, sound and advanced theological training becomes imperative. The price can never be too high. **p. 14**

In closing, it needs to be said that whatever organisational programs we decide to undertake must reflect our priority, perspective, and objectives.³⁰ We must, individually and corporately, do our utmost in the power of the Holy Spirit for God's highest and the good of mankind.

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Contextualization: Asian Theology

by BONG RIN RO

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IN THE first part of the paper Dr. Ro asks: 'What does contextualization mean?' He quotes from the Theological Education Fund Report *Ministry in Context*:

'Contextualization is not simply a fad or catch-word but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word. What does the term imply? It means all that is implied in the familiar term "indigenization" and yet seeks to press beyond. Contextualization has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the processes of secularity, technology, and struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical movement of nations in the Third World.'¹

Bong Ro comments:

³⁰ The late Dr. Kato's suggested programs are still up-to-date and very appropriate. See (a) 'Theological Trends in Africa Today', in *Perception*, April 1973, March 1974. (b) 'Africa's Christian Future', *Christianity Today*, October 25, 1975, pp. 12-16. (c) 'Theological Issues in Africa', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133:530, April-June 1976, pp. 143-52.

¹ Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context: the Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund 1970-1977* (Biomley, England: TEF 1972), pp. 19-20.

‘With the trend of rising nationalism and upholding traditional values, modern evangelical missionaries have supported the concept of indigenization and now they are discussing whether they should support contextualization. John Nevius’ indigenous principles of self-support and self-propagation stimulated Korean Christians and contributed to rapid growth within the Korean church.’ p. 16

The author then points out some of the distinctive differences between East and West today in the areas of pre-occupational barriers; political systems; philosophy; traditional religious heritage; philosophy of history and theological beliefs.

TWO ASPECTS OF CONTEXTUALIZED THEOLOGY

I. Methodology

Contextualization can be applied in the methodology of presenting the Gospel. For example, the Christian message must be expressed in national, cultural patterns, liturgical setting, church music, dance, drama, and building structures. An Asian student in one of my classes said, ‘We national Christians lack a cultural identity. For too long the de-cultured zombie image has stood, so much so that we tend to believe that this ought to be natural. Christians tend to divorce themselves from their own culture. The mission made a type of “evangelical robot” out of us.’²

In 1972, I visited theological schools in Burma where there has not been a single foreign missionary since 1966. While I was in Rangoon, the Burmese Council of Churches sponsored a three-day crusade. I attended the last meeting in a hall packed with 2,000 people. The Rev. Thra Mooler, Vice-Principal of Karen Theological Seminary, known as the ‘Billy Graham of Burma’, presented a program with nine of his students. The service included an interesting drama about Ko Tha Byu, the first Burmese convert who had been a gang leader killing more than 30 people before his conversion. Through the ministry of the Rev. Adoniram Judson, he became a Christian. I have never seen a Gospel drama presented so effectively, yet with such simplicity. About 20 people responded to an invitation to accept Jesus Christ as one’s Lord and Savior.

II. Content

Contextualization is also applied by some theologians in dealing with the content of the Gospel. They argue that God’s revelation p. 17 came to us in the Scriptures through a specific form. In the New Testament, God revealed his truth through Christ of Nazareth who lived at a particular time in history. These scholars contend that the form of Christianity before A.D. 50 was Jewish and after A.D. 50 Hellenistic and that Paul, being a Hellenist, introduced a Hellenistic Christianity. In the same way, the Gospel must be also translated today into a particular form of culture. Consequently, we hear much emphasis on Asian Theology in major ecumenical denominational seminaries in Asia. More conservative evangelicals are reacting sharply against the concept of Asian theology while others are insisting on the necessity for it. Therefore, we must carefully define what it means and how it must be used.

It is essential that we carefully distinguish liberal and syncretistic Asian theologies from Biblically-oriented Asian Christian theology. Syncretism contaminates the Biblical message of the Gospel with other religious beliefs, but Asian Christian theology represents systematized Biblical theologies relevant to the Asian situation.

² Reginald Ebenezer, *A Study of Church Mission Tensions and A Proposal for a Better Relationship*, Research paper by a Ceylonese student at Wheaton College Graduate School, May 1975, p. 9.

I categorize Asian theology under four different approaches: (1) syncretistic theology, (2) accommodational theology, (3) situational theology, (4) Biblically-oriented theology relevant to Asian needs.

1. *Syncretistic Asian theology*: There are Christian theologians and other religious thinkers who have tried to syncretize Christianity with a national religion (Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam) in an attempt to contextualize theology into the national situation. The Commission of World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches has sponsored a number of religious dialogues with the leaders of other living religions. Many of these dialogues have resulted in a mutual recognition of each other's beliefs. The scope of Hinduism and Buddhism is large enough to accommodate all other religions including Christianity. Sri Ramakrishna, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission, meditated on Christ, recognized Christ's divinity as an *avatar* (incarnation) of the Supreme, like Krishna and Buddha, and encouraged his disciples to worship Christ.³ p. 18

Keshub Chunder Sen of the Brama Samaj, an ardent Brahmin and Hindu loader, highly regarded Christ and his influence:

'You cannot deny that your hearts have been touched, conquered and subjugated by a superior power. That power, need I tell you, is Christ. It is Christ who rules British India, and not the British Government ... none but Jesus, none ever deserved this right, this precious diadem, India: and Jesus shall have it.'⁴

Two notable Christian theologians can also be mentioned here: Father Klaus Klostermaier, a Roman Catholic theologian from Germany, who visited Vrindaban, one of the Hindu sacred places in India, to have dialogue with Hindu theologians. After his spiritual experiences with Hindu scholars, he testified:

'The more I learned of Hinduism, the more surprised I grew that our theology does not offer anything essentially new to the Hindu ... When we transpose the knowledge of Christ into the depth of *Brahmavidya* (knowledge of the Supreme and union with the Absolute) we begin to understand that, essentially, the stipulations set down by Indian theologians for the attainment of *Brahmavidya* are a first step towards knowledge of Christ ... Christ does not come to India as a stranger; he comes into his own. Christ comes to India not from Europe, but directly from the Father.'⁵

Dr. M.M. Thomas, Director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore, India, and former Chairman of the Central Committee of the WCC, interprets salvation in terms of humanization by which man finds his true humanness which has been oppressed by social injustice, war, and poverty. He is very much horizontally oriented in his contextualization of the doctrine of salvation at the expense of the vertical relationship to God. Dr. Thomas says: p. 19

'I cannot see any difference between the accepted missionary goal of a Christian Church expressing Christ in terms of the contemporary Hindu thought and life-patterns and a

³ Swami Prabhavana, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta* (India), p. 14.

⁴ Cited, Stephen Neill, *The Story of the Church in India and Pakistan* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1970), p. 121.

⁵ Klaus Klostermaier, *Hindu and Christian in Vrindaban* (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 109–112.

Christ-centered Hindu Church of Christ which transforms Hindu thought and life-patterns within.’⁶

This concept of humanization in salvation underlined the WCC gatherings in Uppsala in 1968, the Salvation Today Conference in Bangkok in 1973, and more recently in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1975. Evangelical Christians around the world expressed their concern at Lausanne, in 1974, about the concept of salvation, and made a joint Declaration in the Lausanne Covenant.

Another syncretistic Asian tendency is illustrated in Professor Sung Bum Yun’s theology, *Vestigium Trinitatis* (trace of the Trinity). Dr. Yun, who is a professor of theology at the Methodist Seminary in Seoul, tried to relate the doctrine of the Trinity to the Korean mythology of creation. According to him, in the beginning there was a heavenly emperor, Hang-in, whose son was called Hang-ung. The father gave his son three royal seals to rule the world. The son descended into the world near Teaback Mountain in the central part of Korea by a divine tree with his 3,000 tribesmen to erect a divine city. He married a female bear who bore a son, called Tang-gun Wang-Kum. He built the first Korean dynasty, Tang-gum Chosen. The Supreme God, Hang-in; God’s Son, Hang-ung; and the female bear, a terrestrial goddess, were united to produce a human being.⁷ Professor Yun says:

‘This is my interpretation: that the Tang-gun mythology may be an indigenized form of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity which was spread to northeast Siberia through the Eastern Orthodox Church and finally reached Korean soil ...’⁸

Evidence of syncretism with Buddhism has also been observed in Asia. A Christian bishop in Hong Kong was quoted by the p. 20 *Buddhist Digest* as saying, ‘I feel more and more that Kakyamuni is the nearest in character and effect to him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.’⁹

2. *Accommodational theology*: Accommodation is another subtle form of contextual theology. It considers prevailing customs and religious practices and accommodates good ideas from other religions. Matteo Ricci, Roman Catholic Jesuit missionary to China in the 16th century, chose the words *Tien Chu* (‘Heavenly Lord’) for God, which was the popular Chinese concept of God in the same way the Thailand Bible Society picked the word *Dharma* (law, duty, virtue, teaching, gospel) for the word *logos* in [John 1:1](#).

Dr. Kosuke Koyama, a former Japanese missionary professor at Thailand Theological Seminary and former Executive Director of the Association of Theological Schools in S. E. Asia, was invited to speak to my students in Singapore on his *Water-buffalo Theology*. He said, ‘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

⁶ M.M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation* (Madras, CLS, 1971), p. 4; cf. Bruce Nicholls, ‘What is the Contextualization of Theology?’ *Theological News* (Oct. 1973), p. 7.

⁷ Most Korean historians believe that this story has its origin in Shamanism.

⁸ Sung Bum Yun, ‘Tang-Gun Mythology is Vestigium Trinitatis’, *Christian Thought* (Seoul: CLS, Oct. 1963), p. 16.

⁹ ‘Buddha is the Way’, *Buddhist Digest* (Singapore, Buddhist Society, Oct. 6, 1972), p. 8.

¹⁰ Dr. Koyama’s lecture was given at the Discipleship Training Centre in Singapore, 1974. Cf. Kosuke Koyama, ‘Syncretism and Accommodation’, *OMF Bulletin* (Singapore, OMF: Oct. 1972), pp. 101–108.

I personally am able to accept this accommodation concept to a certain extent as long as the Biblical interpretation of God and the Word is understood about these words, *Tien Chu* and *Dharma*. I also do not have any objection to accepting some positive ethical teachings of other religions like Buddhism, and yet the basic question which evangelical Christians must ask is, 'Do these Buddhists need to be converted to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins?'

3. *Situational theology*: Another type of indigenous theology is what I call situational theology. This theology is exemplified in the 'pain of God' theology from Kazoh Kitamori, a Japanese theologian. His book, *Theology of Pain of God*, was written in p. 21 1946, right after World War II when Japan went through a time of devastation and suffering. And there, out of that context, he developed a Japanese indigenous theology. To him the 'pain of God' theology is central to the Christian Gospel. He started with [Jeremiah 31:20](#): 'Ephraim, my dear son? Is he a delightful child? Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still remember him; Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him,' declares the Lord. Here the context of the passage is God suffering for Ephraim his son. Another translation goes: 'My bowels are troubled for him,' saith the Lord. The key word in the phrase is the Hebrew verb *hamah* which Kitamori interprets as 'pain'. He believes that God suffered for Ephraim and he suffers for his people. To him, the entire Christian theology is the theology of suffering.

There are four constituents in the pain of God. First, the fact of God's forgiving and loving of those who should not be forgiven and loved brings about pain in him. God's love for the sinful person creates the pain of God. He says, 'When the love of God bears and overcomes his wrath, nothing but the pain of God takes place.'¹¹

The second constituent of the pain of God is simply the suffering: he brings out the thirst, hunger, exhaustion, fears, and excruciating sensation of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Third, since Jesus Christ is God, historical suffering is, therefore, a part of God's plan. The Father suffered when he sent his beloved Son to suffer and die. Fourth is the pain suffered by his creatures by virtue of his immanence. This is borne out by Jesus' last sermon ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)) in which he identifies himself with one of the least of those who thirst, hunger, and suffer poverty and imprisonment.

After explaining these four constituents in the pain of God, he goes into the relationships between God's pain and man's pain. Man's pain is the reality of the wrath of God against sin and is the result of man's estrangement from God. It also symbolizes God's pain; therefore, the linking bridge between God and man is pain. The phrase 'love rooted in the pain of God', appears more than p. 22 thirty times throughout his book.¹²

Two important factors in his 'pain of God' theology are observable. First, Dr. Kitamori took the tragedies of World War II sufferings and pains of the Japanese people very seriously and contextualized the Gospel to the living situation in Japan at the crucial time. He thus created an indigenous situational theology. In fact, an astounding statement he makes is that the Christian Church through the centuries had failed to discover the centrality of the Gospel until the Japanese Christian discovered the truth through the 'pain of God' theology.¹³

¹¹ Kazo Kitamore, *Theology of the Pain of God* (London, SCM Press, 1966), p. 10a. Translated from *Kami No Itami No Shingaki* (Tokyo, Shinko Press, 1946).

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 20, 27, 33, etc.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-35.

Second, Dr. Kitamori is also influenced by the dominant Buddhist concept of *Dukka* (suffering) and its role in solving human suffering and pain in order to reach *Nirvana*.

The key issue in the whole argument of contextual theology is whether the Biblical and historical doctrines of the Christian Church can be preserved without compromise in the process of contextualization. It is comparable to the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament. In Old Testament times, the ark was carried by ox-cart. Today in several Asian countries, it could be carried by rickshaw, horse, motorcycle or car. Yet the message of the ark must not be changed. Syncretistic theologians are trying to change the ark itself.

4. *Biblically-oriented Asian theology*: Theology in Asia has been taught by Western missionaries. The West has its own theological thoughts derived from its own cultural background, i.e. Calvinism, Arminianism, Death of God, etc. Yet in Asia we are facing different circumstances from the West. We must let the Bible control our theological reflection and work out its relevance for the living situations of Asia. Some of the main issues we are facing in Asia are Communism, poverty, suffering, war, idolatry, demon possession, bribery and cheating. Our theological emphasis must bear these problems in mind.

CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind the differences between East and West, we **P. 23** Asians desperately need to formulate Asian theologies which are relevant to Asians and yet based on Biblical doctrines. Syncretistic theologies which dilute the Gospel message are becoming more popular in seminaries throughout Asia.

There is a need to establish research centers where Asian theologians and missionaries can spend their time in research and in the production of materials that deal with situations prevalent in Asia today. Hopefully, our newly formed theological research centers in India, Hong Kong, and Korea will produce men able to tackle some of these issues in Asia. We need an Asian apologetic, not one transplanted from the West. Let us listen, evaluate, and be open-minded to different theological views in contextualization, and yet without compromise be faithful to the Gospel and proclaim it in love as the apostle Paul exhorts us:

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love ([I Corinthians 16:13-14](#)).

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The Christian Task in the Arts: Some Preliminary Considerations

by D. L. Roper