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Doing Theology in Context

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(The following article by the former Executive Secretary of WEF Theological Commission is part of a book to be published by IVP. With his vast experience of contextual theologians in all parts of the globe, Bruce Nicholls is eminently qualified to do the following analysis. Also his monograph on Contextualization entitled 'Gospel and Culture' (a paper presented at the Gospel and Culture consultation in Bermuda, 1978) has become a bestseller. Concentrating primarily on the hermeneutical side, Nicholls clearly brings out the dynamics of the text, the context and the church in the process of contextualization.)
Ed.

Contextualization is a dynamic process of the Church's reflection on the interaction of the Text as Word of God and the context as a specific human situation in obedience to Christ and His mission in the world. It is essentially a missiological concept. The interpreter or one engaged in this process may be part of the context or as a cross cultural communicator represent a second context in a three way process.

Contextualization is not a passing fad or a debatable option. It is essential to our understanding of God's self revelation. The incarnation is the ultimate paradigm of the translation of the Text into context. Jesus Christ the Word of God incarnate as a Jew identified with a particular culture at a limited moment in history though transcending it. In his life and teaching he is the supreme model of contextualization. His every command was *de facto* a command to contextualize whether to love one's neighbour or to disciple the nations. The implication of this process is seen in the apostolic witness and the life of the New Testament Church. The difference in theological emphasis and preaching methodology of Paul between his address to the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16–41) and his address to the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22–31) is but one notable example of the sociological and theological inevitability of contextualization. In the history of dogma the affirmations of the truths of God's revelation in Scripture have always involved a selection of themes and contexualised language in response to the particular theological and ethical issues confronting the Church in that moment of history. The creeds, confessions and statements of Faith reflect this process.

With the rapid expansion of the western missionary movement in the 19th century missionary strategists Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson and others, developed the concept of indigenization, whereby the unchanging Gospel was transplanted into the static and generally p. 102 'primitive' cultures of non-Christian peoples. This movement was primarily concerned with indigenising the forms of worship, social customs, church architecture and methods of evangelism. This emphasis is still valid as the current interest in cultural anthropology and the church growth movement indicates. The failure to indigenize has resulted in the perpetuation of colonialism and the growth of a ghetto mentality among Christian communities. However in recent years the adequacy of the indigenization principle has been seriously questioned. Since World War II the rise of nationalism, the overthrow of western colonialism, the spread of political revolution leading to military dictatorship or socialistic and marxist governments have engulfed an increasing number of nations. The explosion of human knowledge, science and technology, the spirit of materialism and secular humanism which has permeated all

modern societies, has resulted in a crisis of faith and a search beyond indigenity for truth and relevance.

The need to move from indigenization to contextualization has also been accelerated by issues raised by modern theologians and the global ministry on Conciliar ecumenical movements. These issues include: the situational hermeneutics of R. Bultmann; the call to the church in the midst of rapid social change to be action orientated as for example at the World Conference on Church and Society at Geneva (1966); the questioning of the distinction between salvation history and world history at WCC Assembly Uppsala (1968); the acceptance of the principle of humanization and universalism in salvation at CWME Bangkok (1972); and the search for the unity of mankind (WCC Assembly Nairobi 1975). The focusing on these issues of social reconciliation, humanization and liberation has led to a shift of priority from interpreting the text to reflection on suffering and oppression in particular contexts. Contextualization has become a way of doing politicised theology.

The origin of the term *contextualization* is credited to Shoki Coe and Aharoan Sapaezian, directors of the Theological Education Fund of the WCC in their 1972 report, *Ministry and Context*. They suggested that the term contextualization implies all that is involved in the term indigenization but goes beyond it to take account of 'the process of secularity, technology and the struggle for human justice which characterised the historical moment of nations in the third world.'

RADICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Modern scholars and liberation theologians in particular, have made extensive use of the concept of contextualization as part of a wider P. 103 theological debate. They begin by rejecting the traditional view of divine revelation as inscriptuated in the Bible, since the Word of God cannot be equated with any particular form, whether Scripture or theological systems. They deny that the Bible contains propositional truths and argue that since all Scripture in culturally and historically conditioned, its message is relative and situational. Further, they hold that there is no truth outside of the action of concrete historical events of human struggle. There can be no epistemological split between thought and action, truth and practice. Thus all authentic theology must be participatory theology. Theological knowledge only comes from participation in action and reflection on praxis. As a result, these radical theologicans held that the hermeneutical process does not begin with the exegesis of Scripture but with a prophetic 'reading of the times', discerning God's set of humanization and liberation in the general historical process and in particular situations. Gustavo Gutierrez argues that theology is reflection on praxis in the light of faith. It is a dialectical movement between action and reflection. The hermeneutics of Scripture give place to the hermeneutics of history. Evangelical Latin American theologians René Padilla, Emilio Antonio Núñez and others, while recognising the validity of the deep concerns raised by liberation theologians, argue that this way of doing theology eads to a truncated gospel, a secularised political theology and ultimately to the demise of the institutionalised Church and the centrality of evangelism.

CONSERVATIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Evangelical scholars, missionaries, church and lay leaders have taken seriously the validity of the shift from indigenization to the enlarged agenda of contextualization. A beginning was made at the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization (1974) and followed up at the Gospel and Culture consultation at Bermuda (1978). However for many

evangelicals the task of contextualization is restricted to the faithful and relevant communication of the unchanging message into the cultural thought forms and language of those to whom it is communicated. This concern takes seriously the issues of the cultural conditioning of the biblical message, the communicator's self- understanding and the receiving community p. response to the message. In this way contextualizaton p. understood in terms of 'dynamc equivalence', whereby the biblical message p. seen to bring forth in the receiver an equivalent response to that which the biblical text produced in those to whom it was addressed. P. 104

However the task of contextualization calls for a more profound understanding of translating the Gospel in its relationship to the contemporary historical situation. The time honoured grammatico-historical method of biblical exegesis continues to be accepted as fundamental to authentic contextualization, giving clarity and understanding as to what the biblical writers said and meant in their own context. However, contextualization takes place only when the faithful exegesis of the text enters into a dialogical encounter with the issues of the human situation. This encounter will be both theological and ethical in which belief and actions are interdependent. It takes place in dependence on the Holy Spirit who is the hermenuetic key to relating text and context.

The interpreter's critical reflection on his own cultural pre-understanding as an essential part of this three way process. While drawing on the insight of Bultmann's hermeneutical circle scholars such as Orlando Costas find an alternate symbol in a dialogical spiral that points to an eschatological goal. This dynamic process of critical reflection and interpretation takes place as the interpreter identifies by faith with the text of the Scripture and at the same distances himself from it in study and reflection. At the same time the interpreter identifies with and distances himself from the context. Authentic contextualization takes place when these horizons meet. In the dialogue between text and context the questions raised by the context are brought to the text for answers while the text in turn raises new questions that confront the context. For example, the context may focus on specific issues of violence while the text raises issues concerning sin and demonic power. Since the text is given and authoritative and the context relative and changing the dialogical movement will always be from text to context. In this way the process of reflection differs sharply from that of the more radical views. However, while recognising that there can be no absolute and final system of theology the interpreter works in the confidence that the Spirit of God gives increasing clarity and assurance on the nature of the Gospel and its relevance to every human situation.

Evangelicals recognize that valid contextualization only takes place where there is unreserved commitment to the path of discipleship. First and foremost this calls for loyalty and commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord of all of life, personal and social, and to His Gospel Evangelicals share with liberation theologians their commitment to the historic Jesus in his humility and suffering and his prophetic rebuke of hypocrisy and injustice. But they are equally committed to the Christ of faith—incarnate men of God, crucified, risen from the dead and p. 105 coming again at the End time to consummate his kingdom. This commitment to Jesus Christ is within the trinitarian framework of God the Father, and God the Holy Spirit.

Further, true contextualization demands commitment to the church as the people of God. The church with its openness to God is worship and fellowship is also called to obedience in humble service, especially to the poor and to proclamation to all people that salvation is only in Jesus Christ. Contextualization takes place primarily within the sphere of the church and only secondly within the world. Reflection and interpretation is the work of the Church. The priesthood of all believers and the work of the Holy Spirit in illuminating Scripture emphasize that the Church is the sphere in which contextualization

takes place. It is not the prerogative of a professional theological elite alone but is open to all God's people. The church as the body of Christ with the Spirit given diversity of gifts of ministry ensures that this dynamic process of contextualising theology and practice takes place. Its goal is conformity to the image of Christ in character and conduct. The historic dimensions of the church universal mean that God's dealings with the church fathers, the reformers and revivalists, the prophets and social workers of other ages are also relevant to the contextualizing process today. A purely existential view of contextualization is a truncated view of God's mission in the world. Historical and dogmatic theology when tested against the givenness of Scripture are foundational to a more contemporary contextualizing of theology.

Commitment to Christ, to the Bible as the Word of God and to the church inevitably means commitment to the *missio Dei* in the world. The Church as the Kingdom community is called to be a model of the coming redeemed society where truth and grace reign and where justification and justice belong to each other. The Church is both a signpost and an agent of this coming Kingdom. It gives hope, courage and endurance in the midst of suffering and oppression. The Church is also like salt and light permeating every part of society restraining evil by prophetic rebuke and non-violent conscientization and preserving all that is good in society. Commitment to God's mission is a commitment to Christian transformation of the world; commitment to conversion to Christ, to peace and goodwill among men, to justice and harmony in and between the nations. Such commitment also calls for the faithful stewardship of the resources of creation for the good of all mankind.

True contextualization warns against the dangers of syncretism in theological beliefs, religious practices and ethical lifestyles, but it is not driven to inertia or to maintenance of the status quo by fear of this p. 106 danger. A willingness to take risks and commitment to clear missiological goals enables the communicator to overcome this fear. The Holy Spirit as the divine communicator is the pioneer and enabler, in the fulfilment of this task.

In this dialogical relationship between the biblical text and the human context all forms of idolatrous beliefs and practices, whether religious or secular, are judged and stand condemned. The church is committed to their destruction. Though all of culture is tainted with sin it still reflects the truths and beauty of God's general revelation. Therefore that which is compatible with the law of God must be purified, transformed and put under the Lordship of Christ. Finally, contextualization culminates in the Good News showing its relevance in every situation, with the newness of redemption from sin, guilt and demonic power and eventual liberation from human despair and social injustice and the actualization of faith, hope and love. Thus contextualization is a central task of the Church in its mission in the world.

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