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church, and society.’³³ Much of what is taught and written is directed to the academy (professional theologians or seminary students).

The service of the professional theologian or biblical scholar is of infinite value not just to the academy but also to the church. However, biblical/theological truth must be communicated intelligibly to the church and the community. Theological schools can train their students to do this.

Dr Rodrigo D. Tano is Principal of the Alliance Biblical Seminary, Manila, Phillippines. p. 368

Contextualisation in Chinese Culture

Bruce J. Nicholls

INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental factors in the growth of the church is our willingness and ability to interpret Christian Faith in the changing cultural contexts in which we live. This is our missiological challenge today. In this address I will attempt to speak to two changing cultural contexts mainland China with its billion plus citizens and Vancouver, Canada, a city in which one third of the inhabitants are immigrants.

We have traditionally thought of our task as one of indigenizing the church in terms of the people’s traditional cultures and we continue to recognize the importance of this goal. However during the last twenty years the term ‘contextualising’ has been widely used, implying all that is meant by indigenization, but going beyond it to take into account the ‘process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterise the historical moment of nations in the Third World’.¹ Our task, then is to relate the gospel to both our traditional culture (in the case of Chinese culture this means primal shamanism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) and to the modern industrial culture of secular materialism, and in the case of mainland China, to communism and its consequences. We may compare the difference between indigenization and contextualization to that between the National Geographic magazine and Time magazine. I enjoy both and I am sure you do also. However our task is more complex because most people live in at least two cultures at the same time. In business hours they are secular and materialist and at home they are traditional. For some people this creates conflicts, while others try to harmonize them.

In this address, I as a non-Chinese, will try to think in a Chinese way. How far I succeed or fail will show you how difficult the task is. Therefore I shall not use the lecture method of traditional western scholars which involves abstract linear thinking, rational language

³³ Ibid., 36.

¹ *Ministry in Context*, (Theological Education Fund, UK, 1972) p. 20.

and copious p. 369 footnotes, but one which involves thinking concretely, practically, using symbols, analogies and stories. I hope you enjoy my attempt.²

I. REVOLVING DOORS: BE QUICK!

Were you terrified the first time you entered a department store through revolving doors? You hesitated to step in, you were afraid of the door closing behind you. Today many people are terrified by the speed at which changes are taking place within their cultures. This is true both in China and in Vancouver. People suffer 'culture shock'. They freeze and are powerless to act. They are unable to make decisions or act upon them.

In the same way many Chinese people (and western secular people also) are terrified when they enter a Christian church. It is like entering through a revolving door. They feel trapped, they want to escape but can't. There is no door marked 'Exit'. Everything in the church is different, having to sit in straight pews, listening to western music, standing to sing, sitting to pray, and even being expected to make a donation when the offering bag is put under their nose. Even Christians find it frightening to go into a new church, especially if the service follows a liturgical form with which they are not familiar. This cultural jump is a major stumbling block to sharing the gospel with people today.

In the midst of rapidly changing cultures, the crisis of our age is one of identity. People are confused between returning to their cultural roots or abandoning them for the totally new culture in which they find themselves. The identity of the ordinary Chinese lies in their Chinese religion, for religion and culture are one. Primal Shamanism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism merge into one religion which provides a coherent world view, accepted values, and a very structured society, all of which is worked out in customs and daily behaviour. However, the younger generation of Chinese, whether in China or Vancouver, are largely ignorant of these great traditions and they believe them to be irrelevant to life in a secular world. The collapse of communism, the exposing of Mao Tze Tung, the shock of the Tiananmen Square massacre of 4 June 1989, has discredited both the ideology and the market place practice of communism. The alternative of a free market economy, with immediate wealth, is also proving a false utopia and an illusion. The poor see no change, their suffering increases. Thus a dangerous vacuum exists in both China and Vancouver. Will people go back to their cultural roots and again become very religious? Or will they turn to some new utopia and to some new self-proclaimed saviour? This then is the greatest threat to the church, and its greatest opportunity. We are confronted with a missiological task never faced before in the Christian church with such potential p. 370 for good and for evil. New Age philosophies and life styles which are sweeping across the western world offer a hope not unlike that of Taoism. In the search for peace and harmony in society many are turning to Buddhism and to Zen Buddhism in particular. Chinese Christians face a crisis: what does it mean to be Christian and Chinese at the same time? If I follow Christ and become part of his church will I lose my 'Chineseness'? Does following Christ mean that I have to reject my culture? If so, all of it or only part of it? Are there aspects of ancestral practices that I can adopt into my Christian faith? Must I destroy all my family tablets? Why are western churches so dull and uninteresting? Some are so noisy I don't find any peace there as I used to in the temple. When I enter by the front door I feel trapped. I suffer claustrophobia. Can I escape? Is there a back door?

² *Ways of Thinking of Eastern People* by Hajime Nakamura, ed. by Philip P. Wiener (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1964) pp. 175-294. 'Steak, Potatoes and Chop suey: Linear and non-linear thinking in Theological Education', *Evangelical Review of Theology*, October 1981, pp. 279-286.

I suggest to you that many people today of every race and culture feel this way about our churches. They enter the front door, and some time later leave by the back door of the church, never wanting to return.

So we must ask ourselves, 'Is our suburb in Vancouver a part of Beijing or is it part of New York? Is Regent College, which is sponsoring this conference, a part of Nanling Theological Seminary or shall we say Dallas Seminary Texas? Is it neither or is it both?'

II. TRAVELLING UP THE YANGTZE RIVER

I have travelled up some of the great and holy rivers of India, but not the Yangtze. Perhaps one day I will fulfil this ambition. Is the Yangtze river like the Ganges, meandering across the fiat plans, then cutting through the deep gorges of the mountains, reaching treacherous rapids and waterfalls? Are there dangerous sandbanks and rocks on the way? Is there an analogy between our journey to contextualize our Christian faith and travelling up the Yangtze? Let us explore this exciting but dangerous mission.

Our sailing junk is named 'Good News'. Our boat is well built and strong, tested through many a journey. Is there a pilot on board? YES, his name is Jesus Christ. He is a very experienced pilot, he knows every hidden danger in the river, but he is very strict with the crew and today we are that crew. He knows the currents, the deceptive shallows, the dangerous rocks, the submerged wrecks and the treacherous rapids. He keeps us within the markers, or beacons (the English call them buoys), for to stray outside is certain death. These beacons at every bend and dangerous point in the river protect us and warn us. There is freedom only if we stay within these signposts. If our missionary calling is to interpret the gospel to the people of our contemporary culture, whether in China or Vancouver, we have to be willing to take risks. We must decide which parts of our culture we can bring to the service of Christ, and what must be rejected as syncretistic or evil. Paul took risks. He used terms and ideas from Greek and pagan culture, filling them with Christian content and using them as bridges over which to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. But [p.371](#) because he never lost sight of his goal or the master he served, he never capitulated to syncretistic thinking. Peter did and Paul had to rebuke him, for he allowed his Jewish culture to shape the message he had to proclaim.

Before we proceed we need a chart of the river. I suggest to you three principles in the chart of contextualizing the Christian faith.

1. First we must reject everything in our religious heritage and culture and in our contemporary culture that is contrary to the Scriptures, the unique and authoritative chart of our Faith and practice. Biblical revelation points to three principle areas where there can be no compromise, namely idolatry, immorality, and communication with the world of the dead. Firstly, the Lord's covenant with Abraham, the laws given to Moses and especially the ten commandments, the word of the Lord to the prophets, the teaching of Jesus Christ (especially the sermon on the mount), the New Testament epistles unite to declare the sovereignty of the one true and triune God. To project other gods, to create and worship God in our own image, or that of creation, is idolatrous. Idolatry includes sexual immorality, witchcraft, selfish ambition and greed ([Gal. 5:19-20](#); [Col. 3:5](#)). All idolatry is subject to the wrath of God and must be put to death. In religious practice idolatry is a way of manipulating God for a self-centred purpose. If true contextualising is to take place, all forms of idolatry, whether physical or spiritual, must be rejected. Secondly, all forms of immorality are contrary to the character of God as Holy Love, and his laws which reflect his character. The second tablet to the Mosaic law given at Sinai, codifies areas of immoral practice. These are expanded as personal and social ethics throughout the Biblical record. Only righteousness can be contextualized, never evil.

Therefore all aspects of cultural life which condone immoral practices, including those with religious sanctions such as child sacrifice and religious prostitution, must be rejected. Thirdly, all practices of divination, sorcery, witchcraft, or consulting mediums or spirits of the dead are detestable to the Lord and are forbidden ([Deut. 18:9-13](#)).

2. The second guideline in our chart is that cultural values and practices that are consistent with God's general revelation through nature and conscience, and which are not in conflict with God's special and saving revelation in Scripture, are to be accepted and transformed to the glory of God. For example, there are values in Chinese family lifestyle drawn from their Confucian heritage which are good and worthy of preserving. Respect for parents, the honouring and care of the elderly are to be commended and are worthy of affirming, especially when we see the lack of respect for parents and irresponsible behaviour to the elderly which so often characterizes western secular society. But for a wife to worship her husband as is common in Indian Hindu culture, or to worship the ancestors as in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese cultures, is contrary to God's design for marriage. But beauty, harmony and truth are found in the art forms of every culture, including painting, calligraphy, dance, drama, poetry, [p. 372](#) and music. These are to be made subject to Christ and to be enjoyed.

We must remember that culture in itself is never neutral. It is the way people respond to good and evil. The Lausanne covenant rightly stated: 'Culture must always be judged and tested by Scripture. Because men and women are God's creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The Gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture' (para 10). Therefore, in the process of contextualising our Christian Faith, the gospel must transform every aspect of culture that is true and good, and reject all that is evil, and untrue. The gospel is never a guest of culture, rather Christ is the Lord who transforms culture to his glory.

3. A third principle in our river chart is that the gospel brings to culture new dimensions of truth and goodness. For example, the biblical doctrine of grace when properly understood is unique to the gospel. It is true that there are glimpses of divine grace in other religions including Buddhism, but they are but shadows of the uniqueness of the grace and truth that came with Jesus Christ. Likewise the Christian doctrine of eternal hope is unique to the gospel because the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the hope and model of our resurrection is unique in the realm of religious history. The hope of the resurrection in Islamic doctrine or the hope of nirvana as a release from karma as in Buddhism is a distant and uncertain hope compared with the certainty of the resurrection in Christ. This unique hope gives a totally new perspective to our relationship with our ancestors. These three basic principles in our chart mark the difference between good contextualizing and bad syncretism which is the fusion of truth and untruth.

We are now ready to start our journey up the Yangtze river in our worthy junk the 'Good News'. We will be guided by four beacons or markers that warn us of danger, sandbanks, and rocks, and guide us to navigate the never-changing direction of this glorious river. These beacons or markers will guide us in the contextualising of our Christian Faith as we travel from one culture to another.

1. The Kingdom of Heaven

The concept of heaven is a very important concept in interpreting the gospel in Chinese culture. The meaning of heaven has gone through several changes during the centuries. In maintaining consistency with the Genesis account of the origin of religion as being

monotheistic and salvation through sacrifice (burnt offerings)³ we propose the assumption that the earliest religion of the Chinese was both monotheistic and sacrificial. The further we go back in Chinese history the clearer becomes the [p. 373](#) possibility of an original monotheism. This is certainly true of the Vedic religion of Hinduism and the concept of a high God as creator which is common to most forms of the tribal primal traditional religions. While this hypothesis on the origin of religion is not widely accepted, I believe it is a working hypothesis which is consistent with biblical revelation. The earliest reference to religious belief in China (about 2500 BC) speaks of Shang-Ti as the Lord of Heaven who is personal but remote and unknowable. He is the sole object of worship. We assume he was worshipped as creator, though scholars debate this view. His majesty and holiness were emphasized, but little was said of his love and mercy and thus over the centuries Shang-Ti became more distant so that (by the Zhou Dynasty—1066–770 BC) only the Emperor as the Son of Heaven was permitted to worship him, and that only once a year. Shang-Ti, or T'ien as Heaven became more widely known, ruled everything and rewarded good and punished evil. In the time of Confucius Heaven was further secularized. For him Heaven was the power which controlled everything. However, Confucius shifted the emphasis in religion from heaven to the ideal man and to achieving harmony in society. Under recent communism Heaven lost all religious significance, yet in the hearts of many ordinary Chinese people the memory of Heaven was never lost and no doubt in post-communist China it will again become a living reality.

The challenge to every Chinese Christian is to take the meaning of heaven back to its original source as the creator/redeemer God and to use this belief as a bridge to bring the people to Christ. Paul did this when he used the bridge of the altar to the 'Unknown God' to the Athenian philosophies at Areopagus ([Acts 17:16–34](#)).

It is important to note that when Matthew spoke of the kingdom of Heaven in his gospel he was referring to what Mark and Luke called the kingdom of God. Matthew used Heaven for God in deference to the Jewish practice of not calling Yahweh by his Name. The link then between Heaven and God is clear in scripture.⁴ It has been noted in the history of Christian missions in China and Korea that when the missionaries used Shang-Ti for heaven and Hananim in the Korean language the church grew faster than when other terms were used.⁵

Thus the concept of Heaven is a bridge across the Yangtze to the New Jerusalem ([Revelation 21](#)), which graphically describes the Christian hope of Heaven. Christ is the Alpha and Omega. He is Lord of both Heaven and Earth. He is the living and eternal Heaven.

2. The Glory of the Cross

This second beacon on our journey shines brightly as a beacon of judgement and hope. The cross is God's answer to the human predicament of suffering and lostness. The cross is God's response to the rebellion and sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and to the continuing human [p. 374](#) race. If Adam and Eve had not sinned, the cross would not have been needed, and God's self-disclosure as creator would have been sufficient to point the way to God. If the cross had not been necessary then the ways of Confucius, Taoism, Buddhism, as well as primal religion would have been valid and sufficient for life, but the

³ See 'Origins of Religion' by Robert Brow in *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982) pp. 30–48.

⁴ Dispensational theologians do not accept this identification.

⁵ *Eternity in their hearts* by Don Richardson, (Regal Books, Ventura, 1984) pp. 62–71.

cross stands as a beacon pointing to God's judgement and hope. The cross was no afterthought of God for Christ the lamb was slain from the creation of the world ([Rev. 13:8](#)). The sacrifice of Christ as the Lamb of God was in the heart of God from eternity.

The human predicament or failure can be understood in the Asian context in the relationship of shame and guilt. In the biblical story our first parents were ashamed of their nakedness when their greed and desire for status equal to God was exposed ([Gen. 3:7](#)). Their self-image was broken. They were humiliated before their God and before each other. In shame they tried to cover themselves. At the same time they had a sense of guilt that they had disobeyed God. They each tried to transfer their guilt to the other and to the serpent. As a general principle, shame in Scripture is a term which speaks of humiliation and dishonour, while guilt or the feeling of being guilty is used in a more judicial sense of breaking the law and deserving punishment. It is most commonly associated with sacrifice as a propitiation for wrong done. David's confession of his adultery ([Ps. 51](#)) suggests his deep sense of guilt that his sin was primarily sin against God. He repented and asked for forgiveness. Thus shame is primarily a blushing or sense of humiliation before others, while guilt is a sense of sin against a righteous and just God. One speaks of a break of relationship in society, and the other in relation to God. However, in Christian theology they are interdependent since we are accountable to both God and our neighbour. In Asian religions this is not so. Chinese religion is primarily man-centred and God fades into the background or is denied altogether. Heaven has become secular. Therefore the focus is on loss of face, humiliation, and shame, rather than on a sense of guilt. A Confucian gentleman will experience shame but little guilt. A Taoist priest experiences no guilt, nor does a Confucianist monk. The glory of the Cross is that it offers liberation from both shame and guilt and the restoring of a true relationship with God and with one's neighbour. This is salvation. This is Good News. Is it possible then for a Buddhist monk to become a bodhisattva? Yes, if salvation is only overcoming shame. But if guilt demands a propitiatory sacrifice then it is not possible, for there was only one who was worthy to be that sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ. In his shameless and sinless life he made a sufficient atonement for the whole world on the cross. Chinese religion tried the way of self-discipline and self-renewal and it is not surprising that Marxism, which follows the same path, found a ready home in China. Only Chou En-Lai recognized that unless human nature was changed there could be no hope of a permanent change in human society. He too failed; he [p. 375](#) ignored the way of the cross. How then can we explain the cross to someone who has never heard of Jesus Christ and has no understanding of sin and guilt? I suggest that our starting point be the felt need arising from shame. We have to begin where people are, not where theologically we think they ought to be. Therefore we must proclaim the Cross in the context of shame, so that we can lead people to a deeper understanding of sin and guilt, and on to repentance and faith. This is a central challenge if we are to effectively contextualize our Christian faith to people whose culture knows little of guilt.

3. The Hope of the Resurrection

This beacon is very crucial to our safe journey up the Yangtze, for it speaks to the problem of death and ancestral worship and practices which are so close to Chinese identity.

Chinese religion is preoccupied with the subject of death. Ancestral worship, cultural practices at the funeral, regular visits to the tomb, the preservation of the family tablets, all leave us in no doubt of this fact. They provide the integrating point for Chinese history, religion and society. The Christian response to ancestral rites is not a simple choice between acceptance or rejection. We reject the ideological content as contrary to Scriptural revelation, but many Christians believe that aspects of the cultural forms can

be adapted and transformed in Christian worship and in honouring the departed. Chinese Christians rightly ask: 'Where are my ancestors? Can I ensure their happiness? Will they bless me or curse me?' Scripture points to both continuity and discontinuity. God declares: 'I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments' ([Ex. 20:5f](#)) But there is also a clear discontinuity. Scripture prohibits any attempt to communicate with the spirits of the departed, as seen in Saul's attempt to communicate with Samuel through the medium of Endor ([1 Sam. 28](#)). All acts of worship of and prayers to the dead are forbidden.

The great religions of Asia point to parallels between their own religious faith and those of Christianity in such ideas as heaven, incarnation, the ethics of karma, and immortality of soul. The one fact that cuts across all parallels is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and that his resurrection is the pattern for our resurrection. Not even the Koranic understanding of resurrection comes near to the biblical understanding, for hope in Islam is to return to all the pleasures of this life. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is uniquely God's saving act. Christ's forty days on earth after his resurrection remind us of the unique properties of his transformed life. They testify to continuity with his human life and point to the discontinuity and newness in the way he transcended space and time. In Christ and Christ alone we have the glorious hope for ourselves and our ancestors in Christ of knowing the eternal presence of God himself. In the light of this glorious hope, the Chinese special [p. 376](#) telephone to the dead is obsolete. The hope that in heaven we will communicate with our ancestors in a way that will transcend all human communication experienced now on earth is good news. Understanding the resurrection gives a totally new understanding to death. A truly Christian funeral is the most powerful testimony to the gospel as every good pastor knows. Its evangelistic impact is beyond compare. In our missiological task proclaiming the resurrection can be the most powerful bridge in communicating Christ to people of other faiths. It is the beacon that shines more brightly than any other for those who live in the fear of death.

4. The Way

In Chinese religion Tao is the creative principle, the Eternal Order, the ground of all being. Man and nature have a common origin, and both are subject to Tao. Tao is manifest in the eternal duality of yin and yang, common to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. It holds the balance and harmony of heaven and earth, light and darkness, male and female, good and evil, the world of the living and the world of the dead. Tao is neither personal nor the creator. It pervades the unseen world of the spirits, good spirits (Shen), and evil spirits (Kwei). In visiting a Tao temple I was amazed to see the same degeneration from monotheism to panentheism and spirit worship that I have observed in Hindu temples. The lights in the midst of darkness, the disorder and dirt in the temple, the indifference of the priests, the multiple sacrifice to idols, the oppressive sense of the presence of evil declare that Tao is unknowable.

How different is the biblical beacon of the Way! Jesus Christ said 'I am the way (Tao), the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me' ([Jn. 14:6](#)). Tao is the eternal Word of God. In the incarnation 'The Word (Tao) became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.' ([Jn. 1:14](#)). In Jesus Christ the mystery of Tao becomes an open secret, Good News for those who walk in darkness. Good News as we journey up the Yangtze.

Christ the Tao triumphed over death in the Cross and brought eternal life to light. In him the kingdom of God triumphed over the kingdom of Satan. Paul writes, 'and having

disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross' ([Col. 2:15](#)). In his life Christ demonstrated this victory in healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out evil spirits. In Chinese Religion Tao is the virtue of contentment, 'the emptiness of non-desire', the way to self-negation. According to Confucius, each man must find the Tao for himself and for society. For Lao Tzu Tao is the way to true peace and happiness. It is found in the mystery of union with the cosmos and with nature, of the grandeur of the mountains and the smallness of the man in his boat fishing. Through Christian eyes such art reflects the sovereignty of the creator God. I find it very moving and inspiring. [p. 377](#)

Yet biblical Tao as the ethics of living is also very exciting. For Tao as law reflects the glory of the character of God as Holy Love. The Psalmist is caught up with this love when he declares

The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart,
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever

([Ps. 19:7-9](#)).

We can rightly speak of the grace of law (Tao) as the goodness and mercy of God showing us the Way, and giving us the Holy Spirit to empower us for victorious living. God's power is the way to true peace and happiness. For Christ's peace is not as the world gives, but it is experiencing the bliss of heaven now. Clearly the concept of Tao is one of the most important bridges in contextualizing our Christian faith to people whose wellspring is one of Tao. It is one of the clearest beacons on our journey up the Yangtze.

III. GROWING PLUM TREE CHURCHES

I love plum trees in Chinese art. The gnarled trunk testifies to age and to strength in adversity. In India it is the mango tree which is equally impressive. The strength of the trunk, the symmetry of the branches, the evergreen leaves contrasting with the scorched earth, the luscious and beautifully shaped mango fruit so refreshing in the hot weather have inspired many an artist. The psalmist declares, 'Blessed is the man who is like a tree planted by streams of water which yield the fruit in season' ([Ps. 1:3](#)).

Plum trees belong to China, mango trees to India, but do Chinese plum trees grow in Vancouver? I don't think so. The climate and soil are different. Contextualization is about growing churches, churches that stand the storms of doctrinal dispute, ethical confusion, and rapid cultural change. Such churches must be rooted in culture but their strength comes from the Word of God, the water of Heaven, and the wind of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to plant churches that are true to Christ and the gospel and are not overcome by sectarian and secular philosophies 'distorting the Word of God', and yet are sensitive to cultural heritage and the needs of contemporary society. All too often churches are either potted versions of western originals or they are so radical and identified with local culture that they are hardly recognizable as Christian churches. This applies to both lifestyle and the physical plant. What then will a Chinese church look like in Vancouver? Or new churches in the new China? As a non-Chinese I cannot say. I can only point to some principles in cross-cultural church planting that are important. The task of contextualizing the church can only be done by Chinese Christians. This is your challenge. Let us look at three such principles using the analogy of the plum tree.

1. Cultivate the Roots

In our home in Auckland we have many fruit trees, some old and some **p. 378** we have planted in the past two years. We take great care of the roots, mulching the ground, adding compost, regular watering. We are rejoicing in the increased harvest. By analogy the roots of culture are in its world view and its values of what is true and good. Religious belief is the dominant factor in any world view. Arab culture is shaped by an Islamic world view, Chinese culture by Chinese religion. Communist culture is shaped by Marxist doctrine and practice. Paul Tillich has rightly said, 'Religion is the substance of culture and culture is the form of religion.'

While the church must be deeply rooted in culture, its world view and values are drawn from the divinely inspired Scriptures. The gospel is not of human origin; it is given to us by God. The gospel itself is not to be contextualized, but our theological understanding of it is and must be. In other words, the way we understand the gospel, the priorities we give to it will be deeply influenced by our culture. The West is orientated to abstract thinking and rational logic and to prose language, while Asia is orientated to concrete symbolism, analogy, and parabolic method. In this address I have attempted to explore the Asian and Chinese way of doing theology, and I leave it to you to judge how successful I have been.

Ultimately Christian theology is relational. Salvation and lifestyle flow from our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationship to one another. Rational understanding depends on the kind of relationships we maintain. Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury at the end of the 11th century, believed that faith was a necessary foundation for rational proof. In his celebrated dictum, *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe so may I understand), he established a principle of doing theology that has been central to all good contextualizing ever since. Good theology begins with doxology—praise to God. This then is the foundation for effective church planting; it is the roots of the plum tree.

2. Prune the Branches

Last year I pruned rather severely an old apple tree in the garden around our home. The result this year is bigger juicier apples and less rot. Pruning is equally important for the growth of the church. Discipline is painful but necessary. If the church as the body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the family of God, is to grow, discipline needs to be exercised in all aspects of its life—doctrinal belief, ethical behaviour, social activity and in its day-to-day lifestyle. For example, Scripture ordains that sexual intimacy is the privilege of husband and wife. Adultery, fornication, homosexual unions are contrary to God's design and persons engaging in these need to be disciplined for the health of the whole body. The church must be a model before the watching world of a redeemed and transformed society in which peace, justice, and unity reign. We hang our heads in shame that this is not always so. But at the same time church life needs to be ordered, and discipline maintained in ways that are sensitive to cultural norms. The Confucian understanding of discipline is worthy of adaptation and transformation in line with **p. 379** the mind of Christ. To adopt it in its traditional form is syncretistic. The family is the biblical unit of the church and of society, and therefore the church will give priority to relationships within a family. Traditional Chinese filial relationships are not to be ignored but to be transformed and integrated into the body life of the church. Singleness within the church needs to be honoured as a gift from God and a holy vocation, with people living in chastity by the grace of God. Thus the body life of the church is the ground of its evangelistic outreach, individuals are reached by individuals, and families by families. In the priesthood of all believers we recognize the gifting of God to men and women in the

many ministries of the church, preparing God's people for works of service so that the body of Christ might be built up in faith and maturity ([Eph. 4:11-13](#)), symbolized in the gnarled trunk of the plum tree and its strong branches.

3. Harvest the Fruit

The plum tree blossom is a sign of fruit to come. Where there is justice, peace and harmony in the body life of the church the fruit of conversion and growth will surely follow. The fruit of the gospel in the church is that we as individuals and families are being recreated in the image of Christ. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts, refines, leads and empowers us for this new life of service. The fruit of the gospel must not be limited to adding to the numerical growth of the church; it must be seen in the transforming of society. The church's function is to make visible the kingdom of God in a hostile world, maintaining a prophetic witness of rebuke to everything evil, overflowing with love and compassion to the lost and needy, and being salt and light in the world.

Is the pastor the gardener or the fruit gatherer? Does he control the church or is he the servant of the church? Does the Confucian model of hierarchy determine ministry in the church or is it brought under the discipline of God's Word? Every structural model of secular Confucianism and Communist autocracy must be brought under subjection to Christ. Positions of respect in the church have to be won, and they are not hereditary. Respect is given to age and opportunity to the young. Some fruit ripens quickly, others slowly. To harvest before the fruit is ripe, or too late is equally disastrous. How true this is in our evangelistic ministry in Vancouver. If new immigrants are not contacted and nurtured within the first few months of entry into Vancouver it is less likely that there will ever be fruit from among them. When immigrants first arrive they are insecure and open to new friendships and spiritual possibilities. But before long they retreat into their cultural ghetto and find their identity in their traditions. They are beyond the reach of the church.

Conversion is a process of change as well as an event. Conversion is usually a progression beginning with change in outward behaviour and extending to family relationships and finally accepting new values and a new world view. As James argues, change in outward behaviour ought to be a sign of inward faith. [p. 380](#)

We rejoice that God is calling Chinese Christians, and I am thinking of some of the students at Regent College, to give up their freedom and return to their motherland. May they take the content of the gospel with them, but allow the form of the church to grow out of the soil of the new China. Transplanting Vancouver plum trees into mainland China may prove disastrous to the growth of the kingdom of Heaven in that land. Don't plant Vancouver plum stones in Beijing.

CONCLUSION

The work of contextualization is a necessary task if the church is to take root and grow from one culture to another. It calls for courage, wisdom and maturity. It is as exciting a task today as Paul found it to be in the first century as he travelled through the Roman empire.

But it is also a dangerous task. There are many sandbanks and hidden rocks. The whirlpool of syncretism is an ever-present danger to our fragile junk, but with Jesus Christ as the pilot aboard we need not fear. With his Word as a trustworthy chart we may go forward in faith. With his many beacons to guide and warn us we may venture into unknown waters in faith. The new Jerusalem is our goal, a city whose maker is God, a new heaven and a new earth in which dwells righteousness. The door is revolving; be quick.

Work while it is still day, for the night comes when no one can work. If our gospel is hidden it is hidden to those who are perishing ([2 Cor. 4:3](#)). What is your vision for the church in Vancouver and in China? The historian T. R. Glover said of the growth of the early church: 'The Christians out-thought, outlived and out-died the pagan world.' If this is what it means to contextualize our faith then we must contextualize or we will fail in our missionary task. We are being called to think more deeply and culturally about our faith, to be salt and light and be models of a new society, to take up our cross and to be willing to out-die the pagan world, ever seeking first the kingdom of Heaven and his righteousness.

May God help you to build churches that are truly centred in Christ and rooted in culture, and to God be the glory!

An address given at the Annual Spring Conference of the Chinese Studies Program of Regent College Vancouver Canada April 1. 1995. [p. 381](#)

A Nineteenth Century Church Growth Debate: India

Charles Hoole

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During the last three decades a distinctive form of missiology has been developed, packaged and marketed by a cluster of evangelical institutions based in Pasadena, California. Their growing influence in world Christianity was clearly evidenced in the Lausanne II-Manila conference, where their strategies using the year 2,000 A.D. as a date to complete world evangelization received considerable publicity. More importantly however, their influence can be seen in the proliferation of Church Growth centres and Church Growth Seminars, which encourage local churches to adopt the California way of growth which is authenticated by an array of arresting and yet mystifying statistics.

The new missiology attempts to reduce mission to a manageable enterprise. The missionary effort is thus narrowly linked to numerical growth. By implication anything that would hinder such growth has to be eliminated. So it is argued that if 'men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers' then for the sake of numerical growth, the converts ought to be encouraged to remain within 'their own hereditary societies'.¹ There emerges from this observation a 'homogeneous unit principle' that is perceived as the key to successful church planting and growth, which in the Indian context would point to the desirability of establishing caste-like churches.

¹ Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 108; *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979), p. 14.