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# Transcultural Theology and Contextualisation

Richard Howell

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## Introduction

Evangelical theology addresses the issue of truth that transcends culture and serves the church in understanding the gospel and communicating it in multiple contexts. As a rule faith precedes theological reflection. Yet personal assurance of faith requires confirmation by experience and reflection. By nature it is thus open to validation in the sphere of polemic pertaining to the universal validity of the truth. Theology deals with the universality of the truth of the revelation of the triune God in creation and in Jesus Christ. God's nature transcends all cultural variables and racial and caste prejudices and does not change.

Evangelical Christianity believes in the transcultural realm of reality and its interaction with human cultural

factors. This results in a faith and conduct that have their source in transcendence. But since the context keeps changing, evangelical theology would be inadequate if it is only a repetition of the past. For what is in fact communicated and understood today can be very unlike its original meaning. But evangelical theology would be heretical if it is only creative and forfeits its timeless biblical message. This timeless biblical message which is transcultural must engage itself with contemporary perplexities and culturally rooted questions.

Evangelicalism today must enhance its dialogue between the Scripture as a relevant and revealed Word of God and the contextual issues and needs of the postmodern secular society and a world of plurality of living religions. The imperative of world evangelization and the urgency to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to every person, require evangelical theology to articulate a theology of mission and evangelism that does not tend to be culturally and ethnically imperialistic. Contextualisation is a missiological imperative.

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## I. The Communications of the Triune God

Evangelical theology has affirmed that the knowledge of the transcendent God is conceivable because it proceeds from the Triune God and is due to the working of his Spirit. From eternity transcending the boundaries of space and time, meaningful communication was prevailing between the three divine persons: Holy Father, Holy Word, and Holy Spirit. God is neither an impersonal energy nor non-rational. Rational meaning and purpose are prior to creation.

God's eternal Logos not only gave meaning to the things in the world but also gave purpose to the course of events in history. Jesus Christ entered history as an actual demonstration of transcendent love. Jesus' teaching originated, not with himself, but with God the Father (John 7:15-16). The conceptual content of Jesus' teaching in history harmonized with the Father in eternity. Jesus taught that divine revelation could be communicated in human concepts and words (John 17:8). The teachings of Jesus were not restricted to his time alone but were time related. 'Heaven and earth will pass away', Jesus said, 'but my words will never pass away.' (Mark 13:31)

Jesus' teaching communicated reliable information pertaining to what is and normative principles regarding what ought to be. In the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, there is no need to distance propositional and relational truth or to separate the conceptual from experience. The teachings of Jesus have demonstrated that God's truth can be communicated in human, culturally influenced categories and languages.

Like the message of Christ, the apostles' messages originated with God the Father, came through human concepts and words and were kept from error by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit.

## 2. Trinity the Model for Missions

A constructive engagement with the issues which impact upon the evangelistic work of the church requires an understanding of the nature and work of the Triune God as Father Son and Holy Spirit. Gerald H. Anderson, writes, 'A major confusion in missions today comes from the inadequacy of the various attempts to formulate the theology of mission in recent years ... from the culture-centered, man-centered, revelation-centered, eschatology-centered, kingdom-centered, Bible-centered, church-centered, and Christ-centered points of view.'<sup>1</sup>

In the context of the relativism of postmodernity and the plurality of religions, the question of the finality and uniqueness of Jesus Christ has to be presented with new sharpness. But this question can be correctly answered within the framework of a fully and explicit Trinitarian doctrine of God; the same is true of the relation between what God is doing in the mission of the church and what God is doing in the secular events of history. Mission deals with the realities of the life of humanity and helps understand what God is doing in the secular movements and changes which are taking place every where. This is possible through the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church and

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald H. Anderson, 'Theology of Mission among Protestants in the Twentieth Century,' in *The Theology of Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1961), p. 15

the life of the believer, which causes him to trust the creative and providential power of the Father to direct all things towards the glorifying of the Son.

We are invited to become, through the presence of the Holy Spirit, participants in the Son's loving obedience to the Father. All things are created that they may be summed up in the Son of God. All history is directed towards that end. All creation has this as its goal. The Spirit of God, who is also the Spirit of the Son, is given as the foretaste of that consummation, as the witness to it.

### 3. The Formulation of the Theological Questions.

Genuine inquiry begins by defining the issue to be researched and becoming aware of its significance. The development of theological concerns and the formulation of theological questions are closely associated with the process of Christian self-definition. Christian identity emerges as an essential component of the whole process of contextualizing with clearly marked theological pursuits. Kwame Bediako writes:

The ethnocentrism of a large part of missionary work in Africa not only prevented sufficient understanding of African religious tradition, but also led to a theological misapprehension of the nature of the Christian Gospel itself. African theology in the post-missionary era, therefore, is as much a response to missionary underestimation of the value of African pre-Christian religious tradition, as it is an African theological response to the specific and more enduring issues of how the Christian Gospel relates to African culture. Thus modern African Theology emerges as a theology of African Christian identity.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), p. xvii

The motivation for diligent theological reflection and action often comes from traumatic experiences of life. People need to feel poverty and powerlessness, racial and caste discrimination in order to appreciate Latin American Liberation theology and Indian Dalit Theology. Lewis and Demarest write, 'Stimulation of thought may come from the whole range of theologies, religions, philosophies, new consciousness groups, cults, and the occult. Creative contextualizations of the Christian faith may come from any cultural horizon in any country in the world. An objective survey of varied perspectives helps students become aware of their own presupposition.'<sup>3</sup> Contextualisation is not a private or purely individual task. It is the responsibility of the local church and must be undertaken within the framework of the believing community. The Holy Spirit illuminates the individual interpreter within the context of the church. The body of Christ has an historical dimension. The historical traditions of the church have great value in interpreting the realities of our modern existence.

### 4. The Need for Cultural Sensitivity

Communicators of the gospel have often underestimated the cultural factors in communication. Some have been insensitive to the cultural thought patterns and behaviour of those to whom the gospel is proclaimed. Similar words, like salvation, sin and heaven, convey different images and meaning in the

<sup>3</sup> Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Academie Books), Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), Vol 1 p. 38

minds of the hearers. When the communicator brings with him alien ways of thinking and behaviour or attitudes of superiority, paternalism or preoccupation with material things, effective communication is hindered.

Culture in contemporary language is a modern word. It appears in the seventeenth century and was first established in eighteenth century Europe. The *Sanskrit* dictionary gives an equivalent for cultivation, but not for culture—except perhaps the artificial compound of *vidyanusevanam*—cultivation of science. A *visyanusevin* is simply a scholar, an erudite, somebody engaged in learning, a *pandita*.

The notion of culture is as wide as its vagueness. It is generally understood as a sum total of values by which a particular human group lives. It represents a general worldview. There is one human nature but many cultures. Cultures are not static entities but they undergo change. Pannikar writes, 'Each culture begins with, or at least develops, a vision of reality. The principle enlivening this vision is what we call religion. The meeting of culture when it goes deep enough is always a religious encounter. Ultimate values are at stake.'<sup>4</sup> Culture is not an accident of human life, which we may change at will. The problem of inculturation is an anthropological and theological question. Culture is something belonging to the very nature of man created in the image and likeness of God. Any cross-cultural communication of the gospel must take cultural realities into account.

Conversion brings about cultural

change. The convert accepts a set of beliefs, which articulate a vision of the world which is certainly different from the previous one. At the same time a convert carries with him a number of conscious and unconscious archetypes, attitudes, reactions, which serve as a factor of change in both directions. The Word of God changes the direction of culture and transforms it. The life style of the Christian community of faith will be different from the wider community. It will reflect both the universality of the gospel and the particularity of the human culture. Nicholls writes, 'The gospel is never guest of any culture; it is always its judge and redeemer.'<sup>5</sup> The gospel does not exalt one culture over another, but instead it evaluates all culture according to the revealed criterion of truth and righteousness.

Theological syncretism denies the finality of revelation as recorded in the Bible in terms of its historical and verbal truth. It assumes that all theology is culturally conditioned. It confuses the transcultural with the cultural. It reduces all theology to the storytelling of one's experience and faith. The ministers of God's word must address the difficulties raised by different cultural, conceptual, and linguistic influences on time. The challenging task for theology is to reflect how the transcultural truth of the saving act of God in Jesus Christ relates to the unavoidable issues and questions which arise from the Christian's cultural and historical contexts and present a coherent worldview and way of life.

<sup>4</sup> Raimundo Pannikar in 'Indic Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism from the Perspective of Interculturation', *Religious Pluralism*, ed K.Pathil (Delhi: ISPCK, 1991), p. 268.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Vancouver: Regent College Bookstore, 1995: First ed, 1979), p. 15

## 5. The Hermeneutical Task

The Bible is the authentic and trustworthy record of this unique and saving revelation. Therefore our theology must be grounded in the revealed Scriptures, for they carry supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct. Nicholls writes,

The ground for a theology of mission demands a further step in knowing how to understand the Scriptures in their own historic and cultural context and to be able to rightly interpret them for the context in which we live. This is a hermeneutical task involving the careful exegesis of the Scriptures and interpreting them for our context. This is a dialogical process between text and context. The context raises issues, which are addressed to the text which in turn raises further issues not consciously addressed by the context but which are relevant to the context. This dialogue is not an endless cycle of debate, nor is it simply a clear linear interpretation. It is better to understand it as an upward spiral, involving both uncertainty and certainty but ever leading to a truer knowledge of God. It is a teleological process culminating in the personal knowledge of God, which is eternal life (John 17:3). Only as our horizon of understanding the conflict merges with God's horizon of revelation does our theological task become clear and have direction.<sup>6</sup>

The objective-subjective principle of distancing from and identification with the text involves the interpreter's encounter and response with both the Word of God and with his own culture and that of the receptor. It presupposes a two way process of distancing oneself from the text—involving critical study and reflection and then fusion or identification with the text—and calls for commitment and obedience.

The same two way process is

essential in the interpreter's encounter and response with the receptor of the Word and with his culture. This is the task of contextualising theology, and it is set in the framework of the church's mission in the world. Its goal is cross-cultural communication for evangelism and service. The comprehension of biblical and systematic theology is required as an authoritative base from which to contextualise theology.

The distancing must be followed by identification with the receptor's culture. The incarnation is the absolute model of this identification involving both renunciation and identification. There will be no real cross-cultural communication apart from this identification. It begins as an attitude of the mind and leads to the practice of costly servanthood (Philp. 2: 5-8). This is the missionary calling of the church, the price to be paid for true contextualization.

## 6. The Transcultural Theology and Morality.

The natural laws of creation and essential humanness are not modified by cultural differences. However much the universal requirements of the Ten Commandments (which were written by God on human hearts, given by Moses, and repeated in the New Testament) may be distorted, they are universal imperatives. They uphold universality of moral accountability, of failure to attain the moral ideal, and of divine condemnation. These principles hold true without respect of persons for all nations and peoples in the world. Although there are varied perspectives as relativists have emphasized, a universal ability to know some objective truth about cre-

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Nicholls, 'Gospel and Culture', unpublished paper. p. 4

ation and the creator is implied in natural theology. Many of the first scientists worked creatively because they were guided by the conviction that 'the enduring rationality of the cosmos made sense only so long as the world, its laws and its constants were given in the deepest ontological sense'.<sup>7</sup>

### **7. The Transcultural Theology and Cross-Philosophical Communication**

A transcultural theology in a pluralistic postmodern world makes cross-philosophical communication possible. When others dispute the truth of Christianity, can Christians discover any points of contact on which both can agree? As Christians begin conversations with non-Christians, are there any common principles of sound thought or valid argument to which both can appeal? There is a common ground in metaphysical dependence on God and need for acceptance by God. At Athens, the apostle Paul established the truth about God as creator and as the giver of the moral law by recovering distorted common ground in the writings of one of the Stoic pantheists' own poets. Paul's use of the common ground did not make the Athenians independent of God or autonomous. It made them more responsible for what they knew.

### **8. The Transculture Theology and Cross-Culture Communication**

A transcultural theology by common grace in a pluralistic world provides

the basis for cross-cultural communication. We must understand the distinctive content of revelation in creation and should not confuse it with redemptive revelation. In presenting the gospel, we must not fail to establish cultural points of contact with non-Christians, otherwise we will be isolated from the very people we seek to reach. This may also result in one-directional communication and insensitivity to people's needs. And the Christian message may appear to be meaningless and irrelevant.

Contextualization is a missiological necessity. Christian missionaries need revelation in creation for points of contact with people in every culture on earth. But since revelation in creation is law, not gospel, every missionary urgently needs to preach the good news of grace in Christ, not the message of salvation by works. The gospel is not suspended in air; it presupposes the order of nature and speaks to life everywhere in the world at its ultimate level.

Lewis and Demarest write, 'Not everything practiced in non-Christian cultures need be given up as people receive the perfect righteousness of Christ. All that evangelical missionaries need to ask people is to give up their sin. All the true and good elements of non-Christian cultures by common grace can be incorporated in a Christian worldview and way of life.'<sup>8</sup>

### **Conclusion**

We should present the truth of the redemption in Christ in varied ways to those who do not know they are God's moral and spiritual children. While witnessing to a diverse range

<sup>7</sup> Stanley L.Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 180

<sup>8</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, p. 88

of people in a pluralistic world, we need to review the many factors the Spirit uses to bring people to Christ. The example of Paul is commendable, who said,

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. To the Jew I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law—though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).

The primary work of the Holy Spirit is to regenerate sinners, and the primary task of every Christian

(including theologians) is to communicate the gospel to sinners. Our confidence is in the Holy Spirit, who has chosen to bring the world to Christ through his people's sowing and watering of the seed of God's transcultural truth. We are called to serve diligently and faithfully, but leave to God his work of redeeming, judging, and making new. The great commission and the spiritual condition of the lost should impel believers to minister to the unreached with a holy passion. The crucial causes of global evangelism, social justice, and family values must be our prime priorities. We must be willing to obtain necessary education to minister the transcultural gospel effectively and contextually in all cultures to every person.

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