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A CROSS-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF SCRIPTURES & LOCAL THEOLOGY: CULTURE'S INFLUENCE ON THE INTERPRETATION & COMMUNICATION OF GOD'S WORD

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A constant challenge that I faced in teaching, preaching and church-planting among different cultural-language groups, was how different cultures perceive the Bible, and how the same passage of Scriptures can impact different cultures in different ways. I am often both bemused and perplexed when biblical passages and concepts that move me deeply, barely stir a polite response from my audience, whereas they get very emotional about ideas and passages that are ho-hum to me. Culture's influence is such that the late John Stott prefaced a collection of articles on the Gospel and culture with the following assertion:

> Nobody can reduce the biblical Gospel to a few culture-free axioms which are universally intelligible. This is because the mind-set of all human beings has been formed by the culture in which they have been brought up. Their presuppositions, their value system, the ways in which they think, and the degree of their receptivity or resistance to new ideas, are all largely determined by their cultural inheritance and are filters through which they listen and evaluate.[1]

In this article, I will argue that understanding the critical role of culture in shaping our hermeneutics and communication of God's Word, and in contextualization, should foster a cross-cultural perspective of Scriptures and a contextualized approach in developing local theologies that contribute to sharper acumen in the global theological conversation. To build the case, this article is divided into two major parts. The first part overviews the emergence of concepts of culture in the modern missionary

[1] John R.W. Stott and Robert T. Coote, eds., *Gospel and Culture: The Papers of a Consultation on the Gospel and Culture, Convened by the Lausanne Committee's Theology and Education Group* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1979), ix.

movement, and explains the influence and implications of culture upon our hermeneutics and communication of Scriptures. The second part explains the importance of contextualization in the history of Christianity and highlights the factors and current trends in contextualization. While I argue for greater awareness of our cultural biases in the hermeneutical processes, I assume and do not in any way, negate the need for the traditional disciplines associated with good biblical hermeneutics and theology.

Culture, Hermeneutics and Communication of God's Word

The accurate transmission of the Gospel message had always been a primary concern in the modern missionary movement that took the Gospel from the West to the Majority World. However, the influence of culture in shaping how we understand and communicate God's Word was only gradually recognized, as the concept of culture emerged in the nineteenth century. Even then, it was only in 1929 that the connotations commonly associated with culture as we understand it today in the behavioral sciences, found their way into the meanings of "culture" in English dictionaries of everyday use.[2] It was another three decades, into the late 1950s, before missionary anthropology became mandatory for Western institutions that made serious claims for missionary education.[3]

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[2] A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 62-64.

[3] The modern missionary movement is indebted to missionary anthropology for its understanding of the role of culture in the mission of the Church. The work that most comprehensively tracks the interactions between the emergence of the concept of culture, the modern missionary movement, especially its Protestant expressions, and concurrent developments in anthropology, is probably Charles R. Taber's *The World Is Too Much with Us: "Culture" in Modern Protestant Missions* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1991). Another useful book is Paul G. Hiebert's *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009). It focuses on the ideological issues but it does not match Taber's compilation of examples, detailed documentation of the issues, people involved in the developments, and the interactions of the concept of culture, anthropology and missiology.

Therefore, ethnocentrism was by and large, a general characteristic in the early missionaries who assumed that their interpretations of the Scriptures were definitive and normative. However, lest we be too judgmental of the Western missionaries, Asian and Malaysian Christians will do well to recognize that our own cultures can color the way we interpret, practice, and communicate God's Word.

Since culture is something that is ubiquitous and encompasses all aspects of human life, it can be defined in many different ways, depending on the academic discipline. For our purposes, the definition hammered out in 1978, at the *Consultation on the Gospel and Culture,* convened by the Lausanne Committee's Theology and Education Group is arguably most useful:

> Culture is an integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc.), and of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (government, law courts, temples or churches, family, schools, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs, etc.), which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity.[4]

Of particular pertinence in the definition to our topic, are "beliefs" and "values" because these are the key factors that influence our hermeneutics. These beliefs and values are generally "integrated" with the different aspects of culture, serving specific functions in society. In the following sections, I will offer a brief historical overview of how concepts of culture emerged to influence the modern missionary movement, before I elaborate on relevant aspects of culture and communication theory, in order to highlight culture's influence on how we interpret and communicate the God's Word.

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[4] *The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture* (Lausanne Occasional Paper 2, Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978), No.2, A Definition of Culture..

It was in the second quarter of the 20th century that the Western missionary movement intentionally tapped into what anthropology could offer to the missionary task. It was just at that same period that anthropology in North America was going through a paradigm shift. Through the influence of Franz Boas, Alfred L. Kroeber and their disciples, a functionalist approach, labelled as "cultural anthropology" gained dominance by the late 1920s. It focused its research on cultures as cognitive systems that give meaning to people, with a stress on the equality and variety of human cultures. It gave currency to the word "culture," rejecting the word "civilization" with its ethnocentric associations.[5]

The key vehicles that exposed the missionary movement to the concept of culture was the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) that was started in 1934, and the Wycliffe Bible Translators, its sister organization. Two major figures associated with them were Kenneth L. Pike, an early student at SIL who later became its president, and Eugene A. Nida, who later joined the American Bible Society, and assumed its leadership.[6] A core issue integral to the task of Bible translation was that of "meaning." This engaged linguistics which germinated concepts and questions about meaning and culture, creating powerful ripple effects which eventually went beyond Bible translation, to hermeneutics, and other tasks of the Church.

Pike coined the "emic" and "etic" concepts, to differentiate between the viewpoints of cultural insiders from that of the outsider-cultural researcher. Emic perspectives are the culture-specific perspectives of insiders, in their own terms and categories, whereas etic perspectives are viewpoints and categories used by the researcher that are generally universal to all cultures.[7] By the time Nida wrote *Message and Mission* to explain

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[5] Taber, 93; Hiebert, 88-95.

[6] Taber, 129.

[7] Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human*

his theory of communication, language was already recognized to serve as a grid through which people perceive, classify, store and manipulate their experiences. This was collaborated by insights from psychology which showed that people do not merely perceive the "outside world" differently; they select, organize, and interpret all that they perceive.[8]

> However, the idea that different cultures perceived and interpreted the world in different ways implied some form of cultural relativity. To avoid the absolute relativism espoused in secular anthropology, Nida proposed a "Biblical relativism" that was contingent on a society's 1) endowment and opportunities, 2) extent of revelation, and 3) cultural patterns. He did not see it as an inconsistency, but as "recognition of the different cultural factors which influence standards and actions."[9] At the heart of the approach is the distinction between cultural "forms" and "meaning." It "recognizes the Bible as the absolute rule of faith and practice, while recognizing that cultures are relative and that application must be in light of culture." Cultural forms can only be fully understood in their own cultural contexts, and can take on other meanings when transferred to other cultures. Therefore, biblical absolutes may take different forms in different cultures.[10]

The emergent cultural concepts had epistemological and theological repercussions. Perceptions of reality are not only influenced by one's cultural background, the very position that one occupies within that culture itself, shapes how reality is interpreted.[11] To address the

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Behavior (Pt.1), vol. v (Glendale, California: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1954), 8-10.

[8] Eugene A. Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith* (New York: Harper, 1960), xi-xiii.

[9] Eugene A. Nida, *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (New York: Harper, 1954), 49-51.

[10] Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin Keene Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 29-30,273.

[11] Taber, 119.

epistemological issues, most evangelical missiologists proposed a critical realist position; an objective reality that is mediated through a subjective reality constructed in the mind.[12] However, the breadth of the impact upon all areas of Christian thought and practice was such that the Lausanne Committee's Theology and Education group saw it necessary to convene a consultation on "Gospel and Culture." This brought together theologians, linguists, anthropologists, missionaries and pastors from around the world to discuss the role of culture in six areas: revelation, hermeneutics, evangelism, conversion, ethics, and churches. It resulted in a Lausanne Occasional Paper and an edited collection of scholarly articles.[13]

Concepts of Culture and Biblical Interpretation

Culture is *shared* by a group. It is created collectively, being socially constructed through human interaction within a group of people. It is transmitted across generations by parents, respected leaders, and is mediated through a variety of channels, including the stories parents tell their children, experiences in the educational system and the media.[14] It creates a system of shared ideas, meanings, understandings, and shared competence; reflected in a group's sense of social identity, behaviors, structures, routines and societal norms. It is also dynamic, being constantly enacted and shaped.[15]

Where it pertains to biblical interpretation, the *basic assumptions about life* are the most critical dimensions of culture. They are the shared

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[12] Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 18.

[13] *The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture*; Stott and Coote, eds. It was held at Willowbank, Bermuda in January 1978.

[14] Kenneth Cushner and Richard W. Brislin, *Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1996), 6-7.

[15] William B. Gudykunst and Young Yun Kim, *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*, 4th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 15-27; Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 1,12-14.

ideas about life, and values of what are important and unimportant, good and bad. They guide thinking and behavior, are generally accepted as normal, natural, and right; and therefore taught as the "correct way to perceive, think and feel."[16] They exist at different levels, and at their deeper levels, they are largely unconscious and hence seldom discussed or challenged. Awareness only surfaces when there are encounters with other cultures that do not share the same assumptions.[17] Some of these assumptions undergird value biases which may be directly connected with the way cultures interpret and apply Scriptures. For example, the Western individualist orientation may tend to emphasize Scriptures and concepts that highlight the individual's response to God. In contrast, the Asian collectivist orientation may be more observant of Scriptures and ideas that stress consensus, collective decision-making and submission to group norms.[18]

The basic assumptions about life and reality also frame a culture's worldview, providing "models of reality" that govern how experiences are perceived and interpreted.[19] With worldviews that assume the supernatural, spirits and demons, non-Western cultures generally do not have difficulty accepting biblical accounts of the miraculous and the spirit world. In contrast, the philosophical assumptions of the enlightenment of the last few centuries have so shaped the Western mind that they wrestle to believe

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16 Cushner and Brislin, 6-7; Schein, 17.

17 Charles H. Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2008), 12-22.

18 Other examples of cultural biases include time/event orientation, crisis/non-crisis orientation, task/person orientation, guilt/shame orientation, achieved/ascribed status and low/high power distance. Cultural preferences and value biases are already well documented in the social sciences. Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* (2001) compared five cultural dimensions or preferences across more than 50 countries. More recently, the GLOBE Research Project (2009) compared nine cultural dimensions from 17,000 responses, spanning 62 different cultures. How these cultural preferences are played out in cross-cultural ministry and leadership have been addressed by missiologists such as Sherwood Lingenfelter and James Plueddemann, but there is minimal empirical research on how these cultural preferences influence hermeneutical processes.

19 Kraft, *Worldview for Christian Witness*, 18-20.

the biblical accounts of the supernatural and the miraculous - hence the need to "demythologize" that which cannot be explained scientifically.

These assumptions of modernity partially explain why theologies espousing the cessation of the charismatic gifts of healing and the miraculous in the post-apostolic era, were once widely accepted by the Western evangelical church. The Western worldview also has a "flaw of the excluded middle" (see Figure 1) - a perspective of reality that leaves little or no space for the intervention of the supernatural in the routines of life, where the divine and angelic spirits, as well as malevolent spirits meet with the natural order.[20] Postmodernity has now changed the Western philosophical milieu and some hyper-charismatic groups have overcompensated with a hyper-inflated "middle" space, but generally, the legacy of the excluded middle remains in the Western worldview.

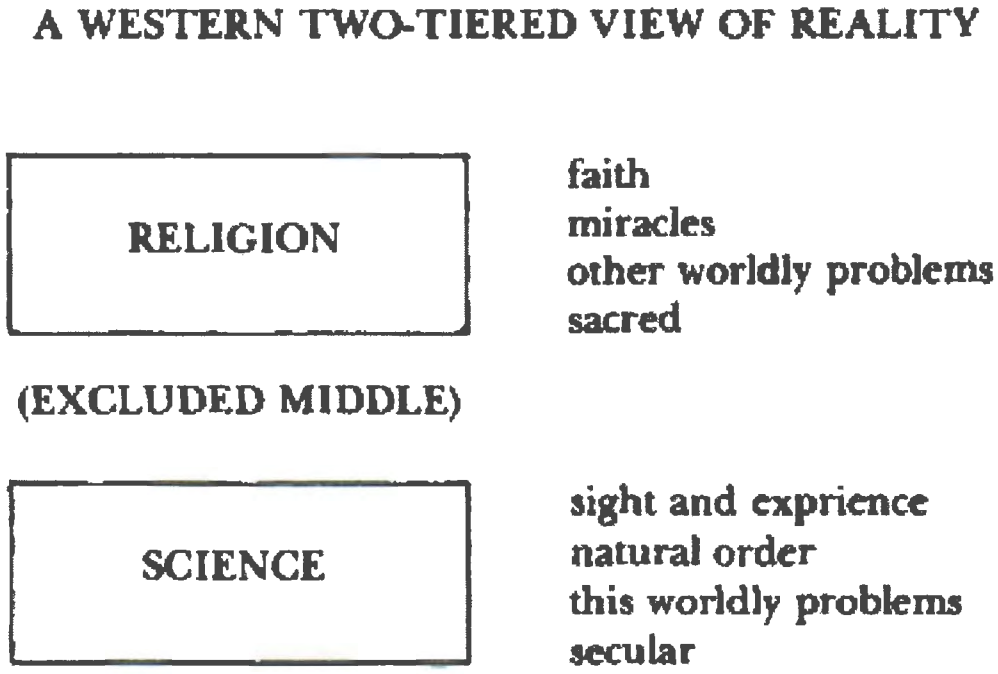

Figure 1

[20] Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* X, no. 1 (1982). The diagram in Figure 1 is in page 43.

Culture also influences learning or *cognitive styles.* Through a series of comparative studies of East Asians and Westerners, psychology professor, Richard E. Nisbett found that East Asians are more perceptive of relationships and contexts. In contrast, Westerners are more apt to rely on categories in grouping objects rather than relationships, and to use formal logic, whereas Easterners are more open to contradictory propositions.[21] In other words, some cultures have cognitive styles that stress contexted relational perception and concrete experience, whereas other cultures orient toward analytical, impersonal and abstract styles.[22]

This partially explains why fresh out of Bible College, I preferred studying the logical and propositional epistles of Paul, to the Gospels and Old Testament narratives. I was already cognitively conditioned by my mainly English education, and a Western-styled Bible college education accentuated it. It also help to explain why my congregation of simple folks from the villages and plantations gleaned more from preachers who preached from narratives, told stories, with seemingly little "depth," in comparison to those who presented systematic, logically sequenced, and propositional messages. However, the good news is that there is substantial evidence showing that cognitive processes can be modified and inculturated, even with limited time spent in another culture. Furthermore, bicultural people have the capacity to alternate between forms of reasoning characteristic of both cultures.[23]

Communication, Culture and God's Word

Culture and communication use *symbols*. A shared attribution of similar meanings to specific symbols is a defining characteristic of culture.

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[21] Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently... And Why* (New York: Free Press, 2003), xix.

[22] Mary-Lou Breitborde, "Ways of Learning: Culture and Cognitive Style," in *Toward Multiculturalism: A Reader in Multicultural Education*, ed. Jaime S. Wurzel (Newton, Massachusetts: Intercultural Resource Corp., 2004).

[23] Nisbett, 226-227.

Symbols can be words, writing, sounds, gestures, objects, acts, odors, colors, events, and even usage of time and space. In short, it can be anything to which people assign meaning or value. The meanings of the symbols are often learned unconsciously, through a culture's socialization process. It is this use of symbols that makes human thought and communication possible, but it is also what contributes to miscommunication because no two persons attribute the exact same meaning to a symbol. In addition, meanings of symbols can change over time. In cross-cultural situations the possibilities of miscommunication are accentuated because the relationships between symbols and their referents are arbitrary, varying from culture to culture.[24]

Communication assumes a *process of transmitting and interpretation of messages.* Transmission involves the process of encoding; putting thoughts, emotions, or whatever that is to be communicated into recognizable forms or symbols. Interpretation is the process of perceiving, and making sense of incoming messages. How people transmit and interpret messages, are influenced by their backgrounds, culture and personal experiences. Communication also *involves the creation of meaning* because only messages can be transmitted, not meanings. A meaning may be attached to a message, but how the transmitted message is interpreted is influenced by contextual factors. Hence, a transmitted message's meaning as intended, is never exactly the same as the meaning as interpreted by others.[25]

In addition to the cognitive and evaluative dimensions, culture has an *affective dimension that evokes deep emotions.* However, what stirs the emotions depends on what is valued and what is disdained by that culture. Its worldviews and perceptions of what is good and bad, tell it how it should feel about, evaluate and react to reality. Its ideas of beauty, art, literature, and the tone for its rituals and behaviors, are often shaped by

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[24] Gudykunst and Kim, 5-6; Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 114,117.

[25] Gudykunst and Kim, 6-8.

these emotionally charged values, beliefs and attitudes. Strong emotional reactions are triggered and conveyed through its cultural symbols because of the attached meanings and values.[26]

Implications in the Interpretation and Communication of God's Word

For those of us engaged in studying and communicating God's Word, the implications of culture's influence may be considered in two dimensions. The first dimension is in the process of exegeting and interpreting the Scriptures. Beyond our philosophical assumptions, we should be aware that our cultural cognitive biases will color our choice of hermeneutical approaches and methodology. Furthermore, we should also be cognizant of how our cultural value biases will influence the weightage we give to ideas that emerge from the text.

The second dimension pertains to the communication of God's Word. In formulating the concept of "dynamic equivalence" for Bible translation, Nida stated that translated terms and phrases should be "the closest natural equivalent to the source-language message", and "directed primarily toward equivalence of response rather than equivalence of form."[27] Communication of God's Word as taught in the Western seminary curricula has traditionally emphasized on the cognitive component, the communication of information, with insufficient consideration given to the emotional component. The Gospel has affective as well as cognitive and evaluative dimensions, and all three dimensions are essential to conversion, decision-making and discipleship.[28] Since words and imageries carry different emotional significance in different cultures, effective communicators of God's Word need to be students of culture, so as to best frame the communication of God's Word in different cultures.

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[26] Louis J. Luzbetak, The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology, Revised ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 254-255.

[27] Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, 166.

[28] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 32-35.

Contextualization, Inculturation and Local Theologies

Since cultural research shows that cultures differ in behaviors, worldviews, social systems and reasoning processes, it is only logical that the truths of God's Word should be expressed, systematized, and applied in culturally appropriate forms in each culture it enters. However, this was not always the case. Although the missionary stalwarts of the 19th century, Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson championed the notion of the indigenous church, they assumed the cultural superiority of whites. Their three-self slogan had minimal cultural indigeneity besides the pragmatic use of vernacular languages and the appointment of native leaders.[29] The 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference stressed the importance of anthropological insights in the Protestant missionary enterprise, "understanding the cultures and customs of the people to whom missionaries go"[30] but it was only from the late 1960s and 1970s that the push for contextualization, inculturation and local theologies gathered momentum.

The terms contextualization, inculturation and local theology are often used interchangeably (as in this article), but strictly speaking, they carry different nuances. The technical term of "*contextualization*" was introduced in 1972 by the Theological Education Fund (TEF) under the World Council of Churches. It goes beyond indigenization, stressing the prophetic function of doing theology in engagement with the specific contextual needs of society in the midst of change. "*Inculturation*" stems from Roman Catholic missiology, and is concerned with the processes whereby the Church integrates into a culture and in the process, transforms the culture. "*Local theology*" on the other hand, lays stress on theologies in different parts of the globe.[31]

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[29] Taber, 61-62; Henry Venn, *To Apply the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Henry Venn*, ed. Max Warren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 78; Rufus Anderson, *To Advance the Gospel: Selections from the Writings of Rufus Anderson*, ed. Beaver R. Pierce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 73.

[30] Darrell Whiteman, "Contextualization, Models Of," in *Encyclopedia of Mission and Missionaries*, ed. Jonathan Bonk (New York: Routledge, 2007), 92.

[31] T.D. Gener, "Contextualization," in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the*

Contextualization, History of Christianity and Affirmation of Culture

The concept of contextualization is important for two reasons. First, the historical growth and development of Christianity is characterized by what former Muslim turned Yale professor, Lamin Sanneh termed the "translation" principle. "From its origins, Christianity identified itself with the need to translate" and adopt itself into the Gentile or whichever culture it enters, while simultaneously adhering to specific aspects of its Judaic roots. In comparison, the growth of Islam, its fellow Abrahamic faith, is characterized by the "diffusion" principle - an insistence that "the proclamation of the message must be accompanied by adherence to the Sacred Arabic of Scripture in law and devotion."[32] Sanneh's core thesis of the development of Christianity through translation or contextualization is concurred and reinforced by mission historian, Andrew Walls, in his writings on the cross-cultural processes in the history of Christianity, and by Kwame Bediako's specific focus on *Christianity in Africa*.[33]

Second, contextualization affirms and ennobles local cultures. The very act of translating God's Word into a local language has ideological implications. It attests God's sovereign hand upon a culture because "language is the intimate, articulate expressions of culture" and Christianity is "the transcendent divine will mediated by the channel of cultural variety and multifaceted appropriation." As a translated religion, Christianity is thus, an expression of God's grace and affirmation to every culture it enters. Christ and His Word is not the exclusive domain of the

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Worldwide Church, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, Illinois; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 192; Damayanthi M.A. Niles, "Contextualization," in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christianity*, ed. Daniel Patte (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 277.

[32] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd. ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2009), 1,33.

[33] Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh; Maryknoll, New York: Edinburgh University Press ; Orbis Books, 1995).

Westerners or of any specific culture - He belongs to all cultures. At the same time, contextualization also ennobles culture because God's word properly translated and contextualized, serves as a safeguard against the innate tendencies of every culture to exalt and deify aspects of itself.[34]

Dynamics, Principles and Components of Contextualization

When we speak of contextualization, it should be noted that all theologies are in a sense, contextual theologies.[35] The Bible was originally written in specific historical-linguistic-cultural contexts and every reader's interpretation is not only influenced by the reader's broad historical-cultural context, but also by the reader's unique personality, temperament and circumstances. As pointedly observed by Andrew Walls, the statements of the Church creeds, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation were forged and formulated through Christianity's interaction with the Greek culture.[36] Similarly, Roman Catholic theologian, Robert J. Schreiter has underscored that the initial aim of developing culturally appropriate theologies for the "mission fields" turned full circle with Western Christianity realizing that what is called "the great Christian tradition" is in effect a series of "local theologies." [37]

Drawing from Church history, Andrew Walls used the word "conversion" to describe the process of doing contextualized theology in a new culture. It is the conversion of ideas, questions and "materials" that already exist in a culture, and turning "what is already there" toward

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[34] Sanneh, 3,34-35.

[35] The Roman Catholic theologian, Waldenfels differs. He argues that contextual theology is "a form of theology." Hans Waldenfels, "Contextual Theology," in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives*, ed. Karl Müller et al. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 82.

[36] Walls, 79-80.

[37] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 93-94.

Christ. He asserted that "it is more about direction than about content."[38] However, more than doing theology, contextualization is applying God's Word to develop culturally suitable faith practices, rituals and responses to the issues of society. Good contextualization is not measured by the intentions of the missionary, but by the perception of the receptors. The goal is minimal cultural dislocation when an individual or group, turn to Christ.[39]

While the contextualization process is one that is complex, and there are many different models and perspectives, all of it may be narrowed down to the interaction of the contexts and three key components. Adapting from Nida's "Source-Message-Receptor" model of mission, these three components are the messenger (source), the Bible (message) and the receptors of God's word.[40] All models of contextualization and differences in perspectives are in broad strokes, interactions with these three key components and its contexts. Whereas missionary anthropology has highlighted the importance of cultural contexts, other influences to consider include socio-economic, political, ideological and religious factors.[41] This makes contextualization very much an interdisciplinary exercise.

Protestants' perspectives on contextualization are a lot more variegated than the Roman Catholic's. This is mainly because the Roman Catholics are more rigid in one of the three components – the message. While Roman Catholic theologians may assert that the "expression" of the gospel is "of necessity linked with numerous cultural phenomena," the gospel is "per se and objectively independent in relation to all cultures."[42]

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[38] Walls, 79.

[39] Charles Edward Van Engen, Darrell L. Whiteman, and John Dudley Woodberry, eds., *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, and Spiritual Power - Essays in Honor of Charles H. Kraft* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 16-17.

[40] Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith.*

[41] Waldenfels, 84-85.

[42] Eugen Nunnenmacher, "Culture," in *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Per-*

Interpretations of the Bible have to align with the official Vatican stance that confined "theological speculation" to that "which have been set down in Sacred Scripture and explained by the Fathers and by the magisterium."[43] This is in contrast to the Protestants who are more diverse in their interpretations of the message / Bible component.

Trends in Contextualization

Contextualization is now understood as an ongoing process rather than an end product.[44] The rapid changes in society bring forth fresh needs that necessitate the forging of relevant theologies through an ongoing study of culture and context. Second, there is also a shift in who does the contextualization. In the past, the messengers (missionaries) were assumed to be the primary agents of contextualization. The problem is that outsiders do not only have a problem understanding the local culture; they may be asking the questions that nobody asks, resulting in irrelevant theologies. Now, the onus is on the receptors. The Church in lands once considered mission fields, will develop "local theologies" for their own contexts. They will ask and answer the relevant questions in their respective societies.[45]

A third trend will be a more organic, or systems approach to contextualization. Analyzing the contextualization models that have emerged through the years, evangelical missiologist, Scott Moreau has categorized them into four types according to the "flow" between the different components and contexts. Early contextualization models had a "one-way flow," from the source to the recipients. Inadequacies in the models gave way to "two-way flow," "cyclical flow" and then

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spectives, ed. Karl Müller et al. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 97.

[43] *Ad Gentes* (Vatican, 1965), 22.

[44] R. Daniel Shaw, "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-First-Century Model for Enabling Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, no. 4 (2010): 208.

[45] Schreiter, 4-5.

"organic flow" models. An organic flow refers to models that recognize a simultaneous interactive influence of all components and contexts upon each other in the contextualization process.[46]

Concluding Implications for Malaysian Christians and Churches

If interpretations of the Bible are culturally conditioned as I have argued in this article, a primary implication is the need for Malaysian Christians to break out of our cultural enclaves and develop a "cross-cultural perspective" of the Scriptures. A cross-cultural perspective enhances awareness of self within one's own sociocultural matrix, and it brings fresh insights in the study of Scripture through perspectives enriched by other cultures.[47] This is all the more necessary in view of the inherited condition of Malaysian Christianity. Although Malaysians take pride in the multicultural nature of our society, due to historical reasons, the practice of Christianity in Malaysia is by and large, divided along ethnic and language lines.[48] Until the eruption of the "Allah" issue in recent years,[49] many Christians in West Malaysia were blissfully unaware that more Malaysian Christians (from East Malaysia) use Malay as a language of worship than any other

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[46] A. Scott Moreau, "Evangelical Models of Contextualization," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew A. Cook (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2010), 172.

[47] Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 9,18.

[48] Although published more than two decades ago, the most inclusive history of Malaysian churches in a single book is Hunt, Lee and Roxborogh's *Christianity in Malaysia: A Denominational History* (Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1992).

[49] In a case that is still ongoing in the courts of law, Malaysian Christians are now prohibited the use of the word "Allah" in its publications and religious practices despite using it for hundreds of years. For an official response from the Christian Federation of Malaysia, see "A Declaration to the Churches in Malaysia", Christian Federation of Malaysia http://www.necf.org.my/newsmaster.cfm?&action=view&menuid=154&retrieveid=976 (accessed 09th January 2014).

language.[50]

A cross-cultural perspective is not a rejection on one's culture. On the contrary, it affirms one's culture through a deliberate process of critique and enrichment. It recognizes that culturally conditioned interpretations of Scripture will only be challenged by those who read the Bible with minds shaped by other cultures. As succinctly phrased by the late Lesslie Newbigin, only by "being faithful participants in a *supranational,* multicultural family of churches that we can find the resources to be at the same time faithful sustainers and cherishers of our respective cultures, and also faithful critics of them."[51]

Another implication is the need for the articulation of local Malaysian theologies through critical engagement with local cultures, contexts and the mix of Christian influences from around the world that find their way into Malaysian Christianity. There are already existent theologies in the minds of Malaysian Christians, embedded in the forms and practices. However, they are often not clearly and systematically articulated, nor critically engaged. Any formulation of local theologies should take into account what is already there.

It should also be noted that cultures are never static, but dynamic, changing through encounters with other cultures, and through the globalizing influence of the media and the internet. For this reason, attempts to contextualize based on old and traditional notions of a culture often do not gain traction.[52] The interactions between cultures are a

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[50] The vast majority of the 75% of Malaysian Christians who live in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak are indigenous peoples, with many using Malay as their language of worship. Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 559.

[51] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids; Geneva: Eerdmans; WCC Publications, 1989), 197.

[52] I am reminded of a story from my mission professor, an American who pastored briefly in Singapore during the early 1990s. With great care for the culture of his predominantly Chinese members, he composed a English song and set it to traditional Chinese melody. They sang it during one of the worship services, but subsequently it was quietly shelved

complex process, with a pick-and-choose dynamic in play. Therefore, Western influences on local cultures are not direct transplants from the West, but they take on hybridized forms. In addition ethnic and language boundaries, other considerations are the socio-economic and generational demarcations of cultures.

The agenda of a local Malaysian theology can have both local and global dimensions. Besides the West, there is substantial influence from Taiwan, Hong Kong, India and Indonesia upon the theology and ecclesiology in Malaysian churches because of historical and language connections. Good theology should interact with the theologies of the West and the rest of the world, but the agenda should primarily be determined by our local contexts. In the past, the Western Church had set the theological agendas and debates for the rest of the World, but this should no longer be the case. Although the financial resources for in-depth theological reflection are still primarily in West, the center of gravity of Christianity has clearly shifted from the West to multiple centers in Latin America, Africa and Asia.[53]

Yet an authentic local Malaysian theology can have a global dimension through what Paul Siu refers to as an ongoing process of "glocalization in theological reflection." This is where we take our local theology seriously and upload it to the rest of the world in the hope of gaining a listening ear. Optimistically it will not be a "dialogue of the deaf" where the Church in the West pays no heed. Rather, it will be a continual interchange of theological insights within the global Church between different local theologies, of which Western theology is but one of the many voices.[54]

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with typical Chinese cordiality. His English educated congregants clearly preferred Western music to traditional Chinese music!

[53] Backed by a mass of statistics, the shift in Christianity's center of gravity away from the West to the Global South is the primary thesis of Philip Jenkins' *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[54] Paul Siu, "Theologizing Locally," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew A. Cook (Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 2010), 151.