

Chapter 1

CONTEXTUALISATION

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The historical world situation is not merely an exterior condition for the church's mission; rather it ought to be incorporated as a constitutive element into her understanding of mission, her aim and objectives. Like her Lord, the church-in-mission must take sides, *for* life and *against* death; *for* justice and *against* oppression. Thus mission as contextualisation is an affirmation that God has turned toward the world. In this context it is important to note that to see an antithesis between the glorification of God and the search for a truly human life on earth is contrary to the Gospel. Any talk about 'leaving everything to God' is nothing but an escape from our responsibility in the world. This paper basically tries to expound from an evangelical perspective, the above thesis or how can the church be true to the Good News of Jesus Christ showing forth the love of God the Father and the power and presence of the Holy Spirit and yet be relevant to the context in which God has put her.

What is contextualisation

After World War II, the end of the colonial era brought independence to many nations. This unleashed new social, economic and political powers which are radically affecting the lifestyle of the people of these nations. This has meant increasing frustration for the younger churches in these countries who are in search of self-identity and have a desire to participate in building their new nations, because they were both encouraged and discouraged by missionaries and their agencies to use their cultural heritage in their attempts to indigenise.

Many communicators of the Good News have often underestimated the importance of cultural factors in communication. Some have doctrinal formulations which make them insensitive to the cultural thought patterns and behaviour of those to whom they are proclaiming the Gospel. Some have been too slow to reflect person-critically on the impact of their own cultural heritage and personal experiences on their understanding and interpretation of the Gospel. Too often the hearer is treated as if he or she were merely a drum to dump in the message. The assumption behind this is the conviction that the gospel is the Word of God 'it will not return to me void'.

In this light, Paul Heibert rightly describes the Protestant mission era from 1800-1950 as the period of 'non-contextualisation'.¹ A majority of the missionaries believed that Western theology had eternal validity. The theologians believed that the Christian faith was based on eternal, unalterable truth, which had been stated in its final form, for instance in ecclesiastical confessions and policies. Hence, the 16th century protestant confessions were treated as universal, valid in all times and settings and through the missionary enterprise, exported in their unaltered and unalterable forms to the younger third world churches.² The task of the theologian or preacher was to simply translate the theology that had been defined once and for all into the languages of the people of the Third World and indigenise it in their cultures without surrendering any of its core or essence. For too long the role of cultural, political and social factors in the genesis of such formulations was not recognised, but rather the priority of ideas and principles was upheld. As David Bosch puts it,

Under the influence of the Greek spirit ideas and principles were considered to be prior to and more important than their "application". Such an application was both a second and a secondary step and served to confirm and legitimize the idea or principle, which was understood to be both suprahistorical and supracultural. Churches arrogated to themselves the right to determine what the "objective" truth of the Bible was and to direct the application of this timeless truth to the everyday life of believers.³

This basic philosophy was further reiterated by the Kantian paradigm of the superiority of 'pure' or 'theoretical' reason over 'practical reason', during the Enlightenment. The coming of Francis Bacon's inductive thinking led the church and theology to judge the creeds and dogmas not on the basis of their conformity to eternal truth but in terms of their usefulness.⁴ However, the churches became denominations by claiming an ultimate and uncontestable correspondence between their own teachings and the divine revelation. This overenthusiastic preoccupation with the western denominational theologies left the younger churches of the independent nations with a sense of frustration.

One should not forget that the churches were encouraged to be indigenous but the process of indigenisation was limited to the goal of self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating. There were attempts made to indigenise the forms of worship, music, church architecture and patterns of evangelism with varying degrees of enthusiasm and fear of syncretism. But these attempts were primarily concerned with the traditional culture or religious vocabularies.

The word 'contextualisation' was first coined in 1972, by the directors of the Theological Education Fund (TEF). Shoki Coe and Aharon Sapsezian. The TEF report for that year, *Ministry and Context* suggested that contextualisation implies all that is involved in the familiar term indigenisation which relates to traditional cultural values, but goes beyond it to take into account very seriously the contemporary factors in cultural change.⁵ It deals with the contemporary socio-economic, political issues of class-caste struggles, power politics, riches and poverty, bribery and corruption, privileges and oppression — all factors that constitute society and the relationship between one community and another.

It must be recognised that 'contextualisation' is not simply a fad or a catchword but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word. It is so, because as claimed, contextuality is the capacity to respond

meaningfully to the gospel within the framework of one's own situation. Even though theologians recognize the concerns of contextualisation, some have questioned the more, arguing that the term 'indigenisation' is not a static concept and is less abstract and less technical, is more symbolic, simple and effective.⁶ Al Krass has vividly illustrated the difference saying, "Indigenising concerns traditional culture, the kind of thing you read about in National Geographic. Contextualising, on the other hand, concerns more the kind of thing you read about in Time. It relates to the current history of the world's culture".⁷ Contextualisation has raised wider theological concern for understanding the function of the church in the world as well as theological debates, as the process of secularizing Christian theology has gained momentum.

Since the Uppsala General Assembly of WCC (1968), mission as the history of salvation has progressively become the salvation of history and the world rather than of the church.⁸ Overemphasis on contextualisation has led to describe the mission of the church purely in socio-economic and political terms. And more recently in the context of religious pluralism, mission is understood in dialogical terms with a goal to build a world human community which presupposes an ultimate universalism. In this light, it is essential to emphasize that any discussion on the contextualising of the gospel in terms of God's work in the world of socio-economic and political structures cannot be separated from the work of evangelism and the indigenising of the church. The International Congress on World Evangelisation 1974, Lausanne reaffirmed the church's role, stating, "The church is the very center of God's cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the Gospel" (Lausanne Covenant, para. 6). And again, "Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty" (para. 5).

A Critical Analysis of Models of Contextualising Theology

As a broad generalization, we may speak of two levels of contextualisation – cultural and theological. The cultural level presents itself as a translation or an inculturation model relating primarily to the institutions of family, law, education and the observable level of cultural behaviour and the use of art forms. This tends to be the preoccupation of anthropologists and sociologists whose approach is more phenomenological.

On the other hand, the theologians are primarily concerned with the deeper levels of culture, namely, the world view and cosmology and the moral and ethical values that are desired from them.

One can look at various approaches to contextual theology and find various sets of divisions. Bosch identifies two major types: the indigenisation model and the socio-economic model. These are further divided into two subtypes: the indigenisation motif presents itself as translation and inculturation models while the socio-economic pattern can be evolutionary (eg. political theology, theology of development etc.) or revolutionary (e.g. liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, dalit theology etc.).⁹

Nicholls on the other hand speaks of the existential contextualisation prevalent in the ecumenical circles and the dogmatic contextualisation which begins with an authoritative biblical theology.¹⁰ It must be recognised that these two approaches are not irreconcilable alternatives, but both approaches do carry with them their own presuppositions and pre-understandings. We will briefly look at Liberation theology as a model to understand the existential contextualisation.

The liberation theologians claim that they constitute an epistemological break when compared with the traditional theologies. They argue that since the time of Constantine, theology was conducted from above as an elitist enterprise,

its main source was philosophy, and its main interlocutor the educated non-believer. On the other hand as contextual theology, liberation theologies are from below, from the underside of history, its main source is the social sciences and its main interlocutor the poor or the culturally marginalised. Equally important in the new epistemology is the emphasis on the priority of praxis. As Gutierrez puts it, "theology is critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the Word of God, or critical reflection on the Word of God received in the church."¹¹

One can also see the more explicit dimension of the emerging epistemology which takes existential contextualisation process seriously in the following words of Sergio Torres:

The traditional way of knowing considers the truth as the conformity of the mind to a given object, a part of Greek influence in the Western philosophical tradition. Such a concept of truth only conforms to and legitimizes the world as it now exists. But there is another way of knowing the truth — dialectical one. In this case, the world is not a static object that the human mind confronts and attempts to understand; rather the world is an unfinished project being built. Knowledge is not conformity of the mind to the given, but an immersion in this process of transformation and construction of a new world.¹²

In the above statement one can realise several presuppositions which are common to the existential contextualisation. Some are valid but some can be very parochial and equally conditioned by the context as the ones they try to criticize.

1. There is a profound suspicion that not only western science and philosophy but also western theology, whether conservative or liberal, in spite of their claim that knowledge was neutral, were actually designed to serve the interests of the West and particularly to legitimize the world as it now exists.

2. It refuses to endorse the idea of the world as a static object which only has to be explained. It is history and the human and physical world that have to be taken seriously, not metahistory or metaphysics.

3. The point of departure, is orthopraxis and not orthodoxy. This means, that commitment is the first act of theology. More specifically it is the commitment to the poor and marginalised.

4. The theologian can no longer be 'a lonely bird on the rooftop' (Barth), who surveys and evaluates this world and its agony; he or she can only theologise credibly if it is done with the victims of society.

5. Today, the emphasis is on doing theology.¹³ The universal claim of the hermeneutic of language has to be challenged by a hermeneutic of the deed, since doing is more important than knowing or speaking. It is in the process of transforming the world through participation in history that one gains knowledge.

6. Finally, the priorities are worked out by means of a hermeneutical circle. The circle begins with experience (praxis) and proceeds to reflection as a second act of theologising. In the traditional sequence *theoria* is elevated over praxis (action); here it is turned upside down. This does not imply a rejection of *theoria*.

In the above approach one must recognize the failure of missionary communicators to identify the degree of cultural conditioning of their own theology which has been devastating to many Third World churches. There was an unspoken kind of western theological imperialism stifling the efforts of national Christians to theologise, within their own context. Hence there was an awakening to the reality of the poor masses who were downtrodden and oppressed in the Third World. This in turn brought a new dimension to the reading of the Bible.

Nevertheless, the method used by the liberation theologians in general, presupposed the essential relativity of text and context, as well as the use of dialectical methods for the search of truth. In the process it relativised all theology including biblical theology as culturally conditioned and there was no perfect or absolute truth which was supracultural or suprahistorical.

It must be submitted that the communicative theology is always missiological and in order to be relevant to the people in a given context it will of necessity be culturally conditioned. But, this must not be confused with the nature and function of the cultural conditioning in the biblical revelation, where the sovereignty of God is at work in a way that is unique.

Furthermore, this relativising of both the text and context, rejects any understanding of the propositional verbal revelation as objective and authoritative. As a result liberation theologies to some extent fail to see that both the oppressed and oppressors need the Cross of Jesus Christ for forgiveness and true liberation from the bondage of evil and not *a priori* salvific confirmation of the state of poverty.

The second model is provided by the theologians of religious pluralism who argue for a pluralist position. The well known work *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, edited by John Hick and Paul F. Knitter was the result of a conference held in Claremont, California in March '86. The purpose was to interpret a new 'Christian Uniqueness' since it was no longer appropriate. As Knitter puts it,

More and more Christians, along with peoples of other faiths and ideologies, are experiencing religious pluralism in a new way — that is, they are feeling not only the reality of so many other religious paths, but also their vitality, their influence in our modern world, their depths, beauty and attractiveness . . . (so) the need for a more productive dialogue and co-operation with other religions, a new attitude towards them.¹⁴

They have proposed a pluralist model to understand the world of other religions and Christianity's place in the world. In the process of existential contextualisation in the world of religious pluralism they have denied the very essence of the Christian faith. It is "a move away from insistence on the superiority and finality of Christ and toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways."¹⁵

S.J.Samartha, in his article "The Cross and the Rainbow",¹⁶ argues for a revised Christology because of historical pressures and theological imperatives. He has moved

from a more inclusivist position to a pluralist position in order to be faithful to the world of religious pluralism.¹⁷ For him exclusive claims made by one community affects its relationship with others, since it has political consequences and jeopardises harmonious living and co-operation between communities in a multi-religious society. Furthermore, it also questions God's relationship to the whole humanity.

His revised Christology begins with the primary thesis that God has relativised God's self in the Incarnation, therefore absolutising Jesus Christ or making exclusive claims about Him are questionable. So there is redefinition of God Himself. God is seen as the one who is the Mysterious Centre (*Satyasa Satyam* - The Truth of the Truth), for genuine plurality. Christology is then postulated from this theocentric perspective. In Samartha's words,

Mystery provides the ontological basis for tolerance . . . This Mystery, the Truth of the Truth (*Satyasa Satyam*), is the transcendent centre that remains always beyond and greater than apprehensions of it or even the sum total of those apprehensions. It is beyond cognitive knowledge (*tarka*) but it is open to vision (*Dristi*) and intuition (*anubhava*). It is near yet far, knowable yet unknowable, intimate yet ultimate . . . cannot even be described as 'one'. It is 'not two' (*advaita*), indicating thereby that diversity is within the heart of Being itself and therefore may be intrinsic to human nature as well.¹⁸

Samartha argues that from the above perspective, 'Brahman' and 'God' are culturally conditioned terms. Thus, Brahman as *sat-cit-ananda* and God as triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are two responses to the same Mystery in two cultural settings. This availability of different ways of articulating varied human responses to the revelation of Mystery, leads Samartha to accept the fact of plural ways of salvation as equally valid, since they are merely experienced and articulated in different ways, but coming from one God. Therefore, any claim to "exclusiveness puts fences around the Mystery."¹⁹

Furthermore, a basic argument of the authority of the Bible is also inadmissible, since the notions of 'authority' itself differs and there is the plurality of scriptures in a multi-religious context.

These basic pre-suppositions lead him to posit that the Bible and Jesus himself are theocentric, which helps christology from being 'Jesulogy' – confessing Jesus Christ as God or 'Christomonism' – limiting 'Christ' to Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, a theocentric christology understands God – *Sat* or Mystery or the Transcendent or Ultimate Reality – as the ultimate horizon over the ocean of life. It further helps to make commitment to God in Jesus Christ without a negative attitude towards neighbours of other faiths, retains the Mystery of God recognizes the theological significance of other revelations and other experiences of salvation, provides a meaningful quest for all, and finally provides theological grounds for co-operation and participation in the human community. In final analysis for Samartha theology is critical reflection on God's relationship to humanity and nature, history and the cosmos.²⁰

It is very important to recognize the danger involved in this type of existential contextualisation which takes the context of religious pluralism seriously but moves away from the centrality of Christ and the triune God. In order to have 'ecumenical ecumenism' of various religious communities one needs to reject all that is distinctive of the Christian faith, as far as the pluralists are concerned. Samartha not only separates Christ of God from the Jesus of Nazareth but also justifies other religious assumptions regarding God, salvation, scriptures and ultimately the very world view to which it gives rise. This theocentric christology redefines God Himself in order to arrive at its premise. This redefines God is no way near to the biblical understanding of God. It further relativises Christian truth revealed in the particularity of Jesus Christ to uphold the absoluteness of God as a mystery. Furthermore, it goes far beyond the biblical dimension of God's general revelation to recognize all cultures, all religions, all ideologies and equally valid

arena of God's revelation. In this context one agrees with Newbigin that this kind of assumption portrayed by the pluralist theologians comes close to the Hindu concept of *ishta devata* (the god of one's choice). He says,

It is indeed true that the being of God is beyond comprehension by the human mind. But this does not mean that we are free to make our own images of God. Nor does it warrant the denial that God could have acted to make himself known. Both the luminosity and the depth of the divine mystery are presented to us in the incarnation, the whole fact of divine mystery are presented to us in the incarnation, the whole fact of Christ.²¹

In the final analysis Samartha fails to recognize that the kind of pluralism he and other pluralists propose can make the religions a matter of indifference or can take a form of pious skepticism or people may renounce all religious choices, since they can live equally without them.

In the above examples it is clear that the overemphasis on the context leads to theological syncretism. The following four aspects posit the reality of what is at stake:

Firstly, such attempts relativise the nature of Truth itself. They tend to deny the finality of God's revelation given in the very person of Jesus Christ and as recorded in the Bible in terms of its historical and verbalized Truth.

Secondly, it tends to universalise the particularities of the Christian faith. The reality of Jesus Christ is either reduced to mere historical Jesus – a man who met God in the inner recesses of his heart or lifts Jesus of history to the ideal of cosmic Christ. It also reduce the very personal dimensions of God to impersonal principles.

Thirdly, the principle of complementarity espoused by these attempts reduce the reality or possibility of the Truth. The sum total of particular truths is seen as greater than the expression of any one truth. Truth is found in consensus.

Finally, there is the progressive absorption, ie., all claims to supra-cultural uniqueness and finality are absorbed by naturalistic and humanistic ideas and practices. "Nature finally eats up Grace".

The true contextual theology allows the Good News to be rooted in the new cultural, contextual soil but not losing its marks of being God's truth and Gospel.

The Dogmatic Contextualisation: Its Reality and Role

The dogmatic contextualisation that is true to both the Gospel and the context of people begins with the basic commitment to the 'Authority of the Bible', and accepts the supra-cultural factor of the Good News, ie., transformation to Jesus Christ and the acceptance by faith of His Lordship over the cosmos and history. Nevertheless, it takes seriously the developments in critical biblical studies, the new insights gained from the social sciences of cultural anthropology and sociology, the impact of technology and political theory in rapid cultural change and the issues raised by cross-cultural communication on a global scale.

In practice it means that the theologian committed to this model of contextualisation must recognize the importance of cultural and ideological factors in his/her own pre-understanding. This will help to resist the temptation of mere verbal assent to the Bible's authority, and facilitate the whole hearted affirmation – 'What Bible says God says'. This is essential, for the Bible's authority is derived from Jesus Christ's authority, who is the central figure and affirmation of the Bible.

This process of contextualisation recognises the distinctives of the biblical writers' cultural heritages and situations and so differentiates between Pauline theology, Johanine theology and so forth, but it also affirms that their relational centres are held together in a divine harmony. It also affirms an inseparable relationship between the content and form of the Word of God, since both are overshadowed by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, there needs to be a real recognition of the limitation of any particular contextual formulation of theology which may be valid and true to the Gospel, since it

cannot claim to comprehend the totality of the revealed world of God. Nevertheless, Nicholls' observation is important to note,

The hermeneutical process of distancing and of identification, exercised under the Lordship of Christ and the Holy Spirit, ought to ensure a progressive approximation of the communicator's understanding of the Gospel to its biblical formulation.²²

The role of such contextualisation continues to be missiological. Contextualisation itself is a missiological task. It cultivates a mission conscious church. Since the supreme missiological model is the Incarnation, contextualisation itself must be incarnational and must open the way for incarnational witness. It further promotes a multi-dimensional Gospel for multi-dimensional needs. It guards against the imperialism of theology.

Dialogue with other faiths and ideologies is not only important and essential but it must not lead to an eclectic kind of contextualisation. Rather the centrality of the *Missio Dei* must be its focus. Today we need to emphasise transformation rather than conversion. We must hold out to men and women of all cultures, faiths and ideologies what Paul calls 'new creation' (Gal.6:15; 2Co. 5:17). It touches the entire person – the ethical, the moral, the aesthetical, the physical, the social, the economical and the political dimensions. The true and faithful communication of the Good News begins with the contextualisation of the Gospel in the life of the theologian-communicator. It takes place through worship and fellowship, through diaconic service and prophetic justice and through evangelistic witness and disciple-making. So contextualisation demands the willing acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and joyous servanthood and suffering for others, to present and produce the life-transforming power of the Living God in the life of the theologian-communicator.²³



END NOTES

1. Paul Hiebert, "Critical Contextualisation", *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol.11, 1987, pp. 104-112.
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4. Max Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalisation and Mission in Theological Education*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, pp. 92f.
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6. James O. Busewell, "Contextualisation: Theory, Tradition and Method", David J. Hesselgrave (ed.), *In Theology and Mission*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1978, pp. 93-94.
7. Al Krass in *The Other Side*, March 1978, p. 62. Also see Ruy O. Costa, *One Faith, Many Cultures*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988, pp. ix-xii.
8. For details of changes in trends see Bruce J. Nicholls, *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1979, pp. 22-23.
9. Bosch, *Op. cit.*, pp. 423ff.
10. Nicholls, *Op. cit.*, p. 24.
11. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988, pp. xxix-xxxiii.
12. Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres (eds.), *African Theology en Route*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1979, p. 5.
13. J. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1975; Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (eds.), *Doing Theology in a Divided World*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1985; V. Fabella and Mercy Amba Oduyoye (eds.), *With Passion and Compassion: Third World Women Doing Theology*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1988.
14. Paul Knitter, "Preface", *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1987, p. vii.
15. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 69-88. Samartha has further developed his thoughts in his work, *One Christ – Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1991.
17. Samartha, *Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ: Towards a Christology in India*, CISRS, Bangalore, 1974.
18. *The Myth*, p. 75.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.
21. Leslie Newbiggin, "Religion for the Market Place", Gavin D'Costa (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1990, p. 138.
22. Nicholls, *Op. cit.*, p. 54.
23. J. Andrew Kirk, *Gospel in Context*, IVP, Downers Grove, 1978, p. 25.