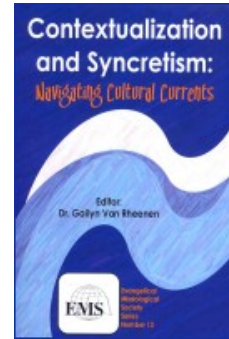


Contextualization and Syncretism

By Dr. Gailyn Van Rheenen

For many years I have contended that the largest vacuum in Missiology is the study of syncretism and the interrelated perspectives toward contextualization. It has, therefore, been my privilege to edit a book of presentations of the Evangelical Missiological Society entitled *Contextualization and Syncretism: Navigating Cultural Currents*, (William Carey Library, 2006; written by fifteen leading evangelical missiologists. The book asks how the gospel can be effectively contextualized within various world cultures without changing its core essence. The authors struggle with the interactive dynamic and tensions between effective contextualization and essence-changing syncretism. The issues of contextualization and syncretism are discussed within the context of real-life field experiences. The authors are concerned that the Evangelical Movement, molded by modern rationalism and the desire for relevance, frequently truncates, abuses, and loses the essence of the gospel.



In this Monthly Missiological Reflection I will give three illustrations of syncretism and then define the terms *syncretism* and *contextualization* as I do in the first chapter of the book.

Examples of Syncretism

I am continually awed by the creativity of humans to mix and match various religious beliefs and rituals to suit their changing worldview inclinations.

I sat in an African house, full of people worshipping God. The mud-walled, thatched-roof house measured fifteen paces from rounded wall to rounded wall. Some sat around the circumference in chairs, others on stools, many on mats on the floor. About half an hour into a time of praise, a gaunt, nervous woman named Takwanya entered the house. Spotting the empty chair beside me, she sat down and whispered in the local language, “I want to be baptized.” I nodded politely. After a stirring evening of song, praise, and preaching, those who had not yet accepted the way of Jesus Christ were invited to do so. Takwanya announced, this time publicly, “I want to be baptized!” I was surprised when the elders stated that they would pray for the sister and guide her on the way of Jesus. Later I learned from both Takwanya and the church leaders that she had been sick for many months. She was desperate. Non-Christian relatives, noticing the transformation of new Christians, had told her that if she were baptized in the church, she would be healed. Takwanya, viewing baptism as a magical rite of healing rather than a participation in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, decided to try the “Christian way.”

Two years ago Jim planted an evangelical Bible church. The guiding question forming his strategy was “How can we meet the needs of the people of this community and make

this church grow?” Jim developed a core team, launched with an attendance of 300 after six months of planning, and now has an average attendance of 900 people each Sunday. By all appearances he is very successful. However, Jim is inwardly perturbed. He acknowledges that his church attracts people because it caters to what people want. The church is more a vendor of goods and services than a community of the kingdom of God. Jim sees that those attending have mixed motives: Attending is their duty, a place to meet people of influence or where children receive moral instruction. Church attendance assuages guilt and declares to others (and to self) that “I am religious.” A spiritual responsibility has been discharged. Therefore, all is well. Observing the worldliness of members leads him to privately ask, “What have I created?”

Julie lived with tension. She was fearful about the success of her children, the faithfulness of her husband, and her own vocational ability. She also felt guilt because of her neglect of spiritual things. Julie grew up in a Christian home but grew tired of what she considered “the emptiness” of Christianity. She did believe in God and loved to hear stories about Jesus, whom she considered the greatest man who ever lived. In the midst of a busy family and work life, paradoxically, she was very lonely. Eventually she joined a yoga meditation group and found peace by relaxing and accessing the god within her while imagining the Holy Spirit drawing her to oneness with Jesus.

These stories illustrate the many ways in which Christianity is mixed with folk religion, humanistic understandings, and Eastern mysticism. I have found that in the West Christian leaders readily see the syncretism of Takwanya and perhaps Julie but permit (and perhaps appreciate) the syncretism of Jim because his church is growing. Is it possible that such syncretism is also prevalent in the Western church, but we are simply too close to perceive its pervasiveness? *The Evangelical Movement, molded by modern rationalism and the desire for relevance, frequently truncates, abuses, and loses the essence of the gospel.*

Syncretism is like “an odorless, tasteless gas, likened to carbon monoxide which is seeping into our atmosphere.”

(John Orme, 2004, 1)

Syncretism cannot be defined without an understanding of *contextualization* since the two processes are interrelated. As illustrated in the book, what is considered authentic contextualization by some may be interpreted as syncretism by others.

Contextualization

Definitions of contextualization differ depending on the emphasis placed upon *scripture* and *the cultural setting* (Moreau 2005, 335). Models emphasizing scripture usually define contextualization as the translation of biblical meanings into contemporary cultural contexts. Therefore, images, metaphors, rituals, and words that are current in the culture are used to make the message both understandable and impactful. This model “assigns control to Scripture but cherishes the ‘contextualization’ rubric because it reminds us that

the Bible must be thought about, translated into and preached in categories relevant to the particular cultural context” (Carson 1987, 219-20).

When the cultural setting is prioritized, however, God’s meaning is sought experientially within the culture using the Bible as a guide. This model more fully “assigns control to the context; the operative term is praxis, which serves as a controlling grid to determine the meaning of Scripture” (Carson 1987, 219-20). The goal is to find what God is already doing in the culture rather than to communicate God’s eternal message within the cultural context. For example, Vincent Donovan in *Christianity Rediscovered* (2003) describes anthropological inquiry as a “treasure hunt that uses Scripture as map or guide to discover the treasures to be found in the culture” (Moreau 2005, 336; cf. Bevans 1992, 49).

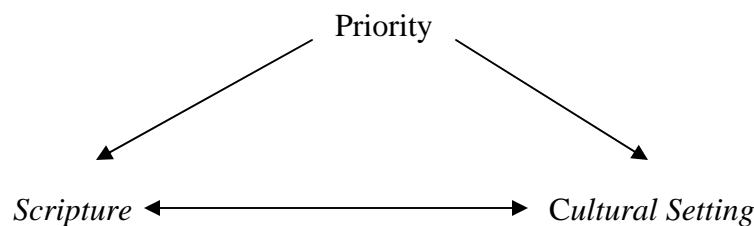


Figure 1: Varying Emphases in Contextualization Models

Evangelicals, who believe that God’s revelation in Scripture is authoritative in life and ministry, view this second option as syncretistic. Scripture is marginalized in the contextualization process. According to Hesselgrave, “acceptable Contextualization is a direct result of ascertaining the meaning of the biblical text, consciously submitting to its authority, and applying or appropriating that meaning to a given situation. The results of this process may vary in form and intensity, but they will always remain within the scope of meaning prescribed by the biblical text” (1995). Tite Tiénou describes contextualization within the process of theology. He writes, “Contextualization is the inner dynamic of the theologizing process. It is not a matter of borrowing already existing forms or an established theology in order to fit them into various contexts. Rather contextualization is capturing the meaning of the gospel in such a way that a given society communicates with God. Therein theology is born.” (1982, 51)

To Enoch Wan contextualization is derived from the dynamic relationship between gospel and culture, between “cultural relevancy” and “theological coherence.” *Contextualization* is “the efforts of formulating, presenting and practicing the Christian faith in such a way that it is relevant to the cultural context of the target group in terms of conceptualization, expression and application; yet maintaining theological coherence, biblical integrity and theoretical consistency” (Wan 1999, 13). Wan then describes *Sino-theology* (ST), or a theology for China, as one such “contextual theology” and compares it to “Traditional Western Theology” (TWT). He says that Sino-Theology:

is specifically designed for the Chinese people; not by transplanting Christianity in the “pot” of Western culture but by planting it in the Chinese cultural soil so it can take root, flourish and grow. ST should be done by using the Chinese

cognitive pattern (e.g. shame culture vs. the guilt culture of TWT), Chinese cognitive process (e.g. synthetic vs. the dialectic of TWT), Chinese way of social interaction (e.g. relational /complementary vs. dichotomistic/confrontational of TWT), Chinese vocabulary, topics, etc.

(Wan 1999, 13)

Christianity, according to Enoch Wan, can be dressed in the garments of a shame culture, a synthetic cognitive process, Chinese ways of social interactions, communicated through the use of Chinese grammar, and expressed in terms of Chinese topics (Wan 1999, 13-16).

David Hesselgrave and Ed Rommen define *contextualization* as "the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as put forth in the teaching of Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural and existential contexts" (1989, 200). The first part of this definition focuses on authentic understandings or faithfulness to scripture: "The adequacy of an attempted contextualization must be measured by the degree to which it faithfully reflects the meaning of the biblical text" (1989, 201). Contextualization thus involves conceptions of (1) *revelation* (God's communication of eternal truth in human linguistic and cultural categories); (2) *interpretation* ("the reader's or hearer's perception of the intended meaning"); and (3) *application* (including how "the interpreter formulates the logical implications of his understanding of the biblical text" and how he "decides to accept the validity of the text's implications" by totally accepting it, accepting some parts and rejecting others, or superimposing his own meanings upon the text (1989, 201-202).

The final phrase of the definition infers "effectiveness"--that communicating the gospel "grows out of an understanding of our respondents in their particular context and out of the active ministry of the Holy Spirit in us and in them" (1989, 199-200). Hesselgrave's seven-dimension grid (Worldview--ways of viewing the World; Cognitive processes--ways of thinking; Linguistic forms--ways of expressing ideas; Behavioral patterns--ways of acting; Communication media--ways of channeling the message; Social structures--ways of interacting; Motivation sources--ways of deciding) provides tools for cultural analysis that equip the Christian missionary to effectively communicate the gospel (1989, 202-203). Hesselgrave and Rommen assert that *authentic contextualization* must be measured by its "faithfulness" to the meanings of the scripture and its "effectiveness" or "relevance" in communicating Christ within the recipient culture.

The New Testament has given us the pattern for cultural adaptation. The incarnation itself is a form of contextualization. The Son of God condescended to pitch his tent among us to make it possible for us to be redeemed (John 1:14).

Byang Kato (1975, 1217)

These definitions establish the need for contextualization and illustrate that an over-emphasis upon the cultural context can lead to syncretism.

Syncretism

Syncretism occurs when Christian leaders accommodate, either consciously or unconsciously, to the prevailing plausibility structures or worldviews of their culture. Syncretism, then, is *the conscious or unconscious reshaping of Christian plausibility structures, beliefs, and practices through cultural accommodation so that they reflect those of the dominant culture*. Or, stated in other terms, syncretism is the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture (Van Rheenen 1997, 173).

Frequently syncretism is birthed out of a desire to make the gospel relevant. The Christian community attempts to make its message and life attractive and appealing to those outside the fellowship. Over the years these accommodations become routinized, integrated into the narrative of the Christian community and inseparable from its life. When major worldview changes occur within the culture, the church struggles to separate the eternal from the temporal. The church, swept along by the ebb and flow of cultural currents over a long period of time, loses her moorings. Thus syncretism occurs when Christianity opts into the major cultural assumptions of a society (Van Rheenen 1997, 173).

For example, my religious fellowship was born and grew to maturity during Modern times and reflects Enlightenment thinking. Salvation was understood as certain steps that individuals had to do to be saved; scripture was interpreted as a blue-print or a pattern to be logically followed; and the hermeneutic of "command, example, or necessary inference" formed our interpretive grid. Generally our movement followed the rationalism of Alexander Campbell rather than the revivalism of Barton W. Stone. Our emphasis was on *knowing about* God and Christianity rather than *relating to* Him personally as Father God. I acknowledge these syncretisms for a number of reasons. Biblically-based theology must form our identities and challenge our syncretisms. We must realize that we are always, to some degree, syncretistic, and acknowledge our syncretisms before God and fellow Christians.

Missiologists' writings tend to focus more on contextualization with only brief notations about syncretism. There are many reasons for this. Writing about contextualizing the message of the gospel in the life of the church is much more appealing than discussing excessive accommodation to the philosophies and practices of the dominant cultures. We also live in an age of tolerance. Few are willing to negatively critique the beliefs and practices of others. David Hesselgrave, however, does this frequently and with grace. For example, many of the authors of *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach* encourage establishing *common ground* with participants of the new spiritualities. Satanists believe that people should not "follow the herd" as Christians do, but insatiably enjoy all of life. Within this context authentic Christians might be described as "Left-handed Christian philosophers," who think for themselves despite peer pressure. The message of the taro can be an archetype for sharing the gospel. The story line of the Bible can be communicated within the framework of the Wiccan Wheel of the Year myth. A theology of anointing forms the basis of creative outreach to aromatherapists. Hesselgrave, however, raises a significant caution flag.

"Both philosophically and theologically, a communication approach that is over-dependent upon the discovery and utilization of similarities is open to question. *Dissimilarities* between beliefs and practices may, in fact, be more important and utilitarian in the long run If one's objective is to convert and disciple, both the number and importance of these differences will far outweigh the number and importance of supposed similarities."

(Hesselgrave 2004, 147, 149)

Incorporating oils into Christian practice, for instance, does not necessarily Christianize an aromatherapist. Christian evangelists must, therefore, consider both points of contact and points of contrast. Although the authors of *Encountering New Religious Movements* rightly provide an incarnational model of engagement with occult practitioners, they must also ask, "When and how do we adopt the forms of New Religious Movements to both relate to the culture and communicate a distinctively Christian message?" Can the accommodations of today become the syncretisms of tomorrow?

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