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**Issues in Contextualisation**

by Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo

The Nine O'Clock Service in Sheffield, Britain began as an attempt to contextualise the evangelistic ministry of a local Anglican church into contemporary youth culture. The experiment that began with such promise ended in disaster as the leader and the ministry developed cult-like characteristics.

Lord Plant, in his recent lecture, spoke of the contemporary understanding of moral values as being primarily subjective, with the determining factor being self-interest. Human beings are regarded as commodities and all relationships determined by individual concern or interest. The Nine O'Clock Service contextualised itself for post-modern culture so successfully that it came to reproduce the cultural attitudes summed up by Lord Plant.

### **The scope of contextualisation**

Contextualisation may be understood as the expression of the gospel through appropriate forms within the culture of its recipients. While not an easy process, contextualisation endeavours to distinguish between the content of the gospel and the forms which express it. The gospel is God-given and so is of universal application, while culture is relative to time and place. The process of contextualisation recognizes that all cultures contain elements which oppose or compromise the gospel. Contextualisation is therefore committed to the gospel controlling its forms of expression. Syncretism reverses this priority.

In any contextualisation enterprise, the following questions need to be given serious consideration:

- i. How do we understand culture?
- ii. Who should do the contextualising?
- iii. What principles should be used to determine contextualisation?
- iv. What of the leadership? How does one ensure that spiritual maturity and theological soundness are attained?
- v. What monitoring process needs to be developed to ensure that the work does not go off the rails?
- vi. What is to be the relationship of contextualisation with historic Christianity and the affirmation of historic truths and traditions?

vii. Syncretism - how can one ensure that the church enters into the world and not vice versa?

### Gospel and culture

J.H. Bavinck was right in urging that "Christians are to take legitimate possession of customs and cultures, give them new meaning and new contents, and enlist them in the service of Christ". But as he pointed out, "it is never easy to decide whether a custom can be retained or should be rejected" or, if I may add a further point, should be adapted.

The assertion that every culture has something of God, something of the devil and something human raises serious implications for contextualisation. The retention of cultural identity in relation both to conversion and to church life is a taxing issue and one which creates polarisations. It is important to identify the extent to which our stance on this issue is based not only on missiological principles but also on our family background, culture, theological and church traditions.

An Italian Jesuit missionary, Roberto Nobili, who arrived in South India in 1605 and remained there until his death in 1656, was a pioneer of contextualised missionary methods in the Tamil culture.

To win the Indians he would become as an Indian. He made a careful study of Brahman custom and prejudice, and abandoned everything that could offend, such as the eating of meat and the wearing of leather shoes. He adopted the ochre (kavi) robe of the holy man, and as far as could be, converted himself into a sannyasi guru, a teacher who has renounced every form of attachment to the world. He mastered classical Tamil. To this he was later able to add Telugu and Sanskrit. In order to avoid what in Indian eyes was contaminating, he cut himself off entirely from contact with the existing Christian church.

By 1609 Nobili had 63 converts, including a few Brahmans. The converts were not required to break their caste rules, except in so far as these were actually idolatrous. The Brahman could continue to grow the kudumi (hair tuft on shaven head). Members of the "twice-born" castes could continue to wear the sacred thread which marked their rank, though a special thread, blessed with Christian prayers. In later years, as members of the lower castes were converted, he divided his mission into two - one for lower castes and one for higher castes.

During Nobili's lifetime, complaints had gone back to Rome that he was tolerating Hindu superstition, deceiving the people, and by segregating his converts, creating a schism in the church. Nobili defended himself and was largely exonerated by Rome. However, when Tournon, a papal legate, arrived in Pondicherry in 1703 he disapproved of the Jesuit methodology which had continued to follow Nobili's pattern. He issued a decree in 1704 banning many of their practices which were considered too close to Hinduism and restoring ceremonies which had been suppressed as offensive to Indian culture. The observation of caste differences was also banned. The Jesuits were horrified and made many attempts to have this decree modified.

In 1744 Pope Benedict XIV issued the Bull *Omnium Sollicitudinum* which supported the decisions of Tournon, with the one exception: that a further period of ten years was allowed before the ceremonies offensive to Indians had to be revived once more.

The context that needs to be addressed

The issues raised by contextualisation vary with different contexts. Following are examples of important issues which have come to the fore in the process of contextualisation in various countries at various times.

#### a. Contextualisation and race

In Britain there is an increasing emphasis on seeing churches started for specific people groups. This would effectively create churches rooted in their given cultures. At the same time, it is recognised that racism is an evil which must be fought, and that churches, particularly white churches, must take a stance against this evil.

#### b. Contextualisation and ethnicity

In a certain diocese of Tanzania every deanery is made up of a different ethnic group. **Churches were started by missionaries within each different ethnic group; subsequently the deaneries were created from the existing churches. The geographical boundaries of the diocese now encompass deaneries which are ethnically distinct. It is recognised that in the event of ethnic conflict in the country, each deanery may well end up fighting their fellow-Christians in the other deaneries.**

#### c. Contextualisation and political development and ideology

In a certain North African country there is a certain Muslim minority group, who are linguistically and culturally oppressed by the Arabs, and are regarded as having been Christians prior to the arrival of Islam. Missionaries who work among them are focusing on the pre-Islamic Christian roots of this people group and the development of their ethnic identity. Some have become Christians, and some see their new faith in terms of their ethnic identity. However, the government considers that the missionaries are encouraging a nationalistic fervour which would lead to conflict with the Arab majority if the minority were to seek political autonomy.

#### d. Contextualisation and justice

A problem arises when seeking to contextualise the gospel in a culture which is characterised by injustice. Should the church conform to the unjust ways of the prevailing culture?

#### e. Contextualisation and economics

The Dalits of India, as a scheduled caste, receive various affirmative action benefits in terms of reserved government jobs, education, scholarships, trade loans, free land, free housing etc. However, those who become Christians lose these benefits. They have therefore been petitioning to be given back their status as Dalits and the economic and social advantages they had before. For the Christian Dalits the retention of their cultural identity has financial benefits.

#### f. Contextualisation and social change

Contextualisation can often result in social change, sometimes on an enormous scale. The Bible is central to the task of contextualisation. In his critique of the 1996 Bahia consultation, Bishop Lesslie Newbigin commented that Bible translation is perhaps the most important step towards enculturation of the gospel. In the same article Newbigin referred to Lamin Sanneh's evaluation of the vital effects of Bible translation in revitalizing and preserving indigenous cultures.

### **Contextualisation and mission**

David Bosch in his "Transforming Mission" points out how mission activity from the West is inextricably linked with Western cultural values and an innate sense of Western cultural superiority.

There are those who would argue that Western values of morality, respectability, order, efficiency, individualism, professionalism, work and technological progress were the products of Protestant Christianity and therefore should be exported. To a degree this is true, and the considerable benefits that this brought to non-Western contexts cannot be minimised.

However, there was a downside in that Christianity and Christian mission were seen to be part and parcel of Western civilisation and of a Euro-American thought pattern and cultural framework. These attitudes could be reflected in the structures that were created by the missionaries which were often an exact replica of those that existed in the home context. The imposition of institutional systems unrelated to the cultural values of a new context could have disastrous results. The result of such a strategy led to the formation of Christian churches in the non-Western world following the form of their Western counterparts.

#### Contextualisation and worship

The York statement on "Liturgical Inculturation in the Anglican Communion" commented on the need for "a willingness in worship to listen to culture, to incorporate what is good and to challenge what is alien to the truth of God. It has to make contact with the deep feelings of people. It can only be achieved through an openness to innovation and experimentation, an encouragement of local creativity, and a readiness to reflect critically at each stage of the process - a process which in principle is never ending."

#### Contextualisation and theology

A historic theological education consultation held in Bangkok in 1956 found that: "The teaching of systematic theology must be relevant to the environment. It must,

on the one hand, be grounded in the Bible; and on the other, related to the actual situation... The Christian faith should be presented in relation to the totality of questions raised by the local situation, and it should not be assumed that certain questions are relevant to all times and situations."

### Contextualisation and ethics

A worker who wishes to remain unnamed, in his comments on Joshua Massey's article on planting underground churches in Muslim contexts, points out that some militant Muslim publications fiercely condemn contextualised Christian mission as deceit. The practices to which they object include such things as encouraging converts to Christianity to continue attending the mosque prayers and calling themselves Muslims. Sometimes missionaries will describe themselves as "true Muslims" rather than admitting to being Christians. The Bible is presented in an Islamic format mimicking the Qur'an, so that readers may believe they are reading the Qur'an. Islamic holy days and festivals are observed by Christians, as well as Islamic methods of prayer and fasting.

### Conclusion

I have sought to raise questions and point out difficulties, risks and complications. Let us not forget that the Holy Spirit remains sovereign and works out His purposes despite our failures and shortcomings. As the Lausanne Willowbank Report rightly affirms, "He is the Spirit of truth who can teach each church how to relate to the culture which envelops it. He is also the Spirit of love, and love is 'the language which is understood in every culture of man.'"