

Contextualization of theology

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Expressions like 'the indigenization' or 'the contextualization' of theology are commonly heard today, but are frequently not understood at least in the west. In this article Martin Goldsmith of All Nations Christian College, an associate editor of Themelios, introduces this important area of study.

Introduction

The day of the narrow North Atlantic isolationism has passed. The churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America have come of age. They are no longer just weak 'daughter churches' dependent on mother churches and missions of the western world. In many cases these churches are considerably larger, stronger and more vibrant than their western counterparts.

No longer are the churches of the various continents isolated from one another. Travel possibilities plus a considerable movement of peoples are leading to a growing cultural cross-fertilization. Most nations today contain a growing influx of immigrant peoples – for work and study purposes as well as tourists for short periods.

Such trends add to the pressures for a more sensitive indigenization within the Christian church. Post-colonial churches insist (sometimes stridently) that all attempts to foist western forms of Christianity upon them be abandoned.

Indigenization in the past

For many years missions have talked much of the indigenization of the church. Men like Hudson Taylor insisted on locally related externals in matters of dress, food, *etc.* Nevius, Roland Allen and many of the early CMS leaders stressed the importance of national leadership for the church, as also self-support financially. More recently we hear the call for indigenization of church architecture and of worship patterns. This has linked in with the emphasis on homogeneous units and the desire for ethnic and cultural identity in the church – *e.g.* messianic synagogues, messianic mosques, *etc.*

It is only in the last few years however that many Christians have applied these principles to the question of biblical interpretation and theological expression. The

early Jesuit missionaries in Asia, associated with the missionary outreach of the Counter-Reformation, gave us a superb example in this matter in the late 1500s and early 1600s before they were suppressed in the infamous Controversy of Rites. Thus Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) saw the need to relate his theology to the Confucian context of the contemporary Chinese society. Likewise Robert De Nobili (1577-1656) struggled with the intricacies of Brahmin Hinduism in order to apply his message relevantly to that religious philosophy. He was the first non-Brahmin to see and read the Brahmin Vedic scriptures. We may well criticize the attempts of such men as Ricci and De Nobili, but we can only admire their scholarly missiological vision which many of us are only now in the 1970s and 1980s really emulating.

Evangelical traditionalism

Evangelicals in particular have been slower to see the need of contextualization than more liberal Christians. Evangelicals have such a strong emphasis on the unchanging nature of revelation and such a healthy fear of heresy that they sometimes hesitate to adventure boldly in their understanding of Scripture and in their theological expression. Their fears have been compounded by the fact that many of the pioneers of contextualization have not held on firmly to the absolute authority of the Word of God. A result of this has been that evangelicals who have often criticized Catholics for their adherence to tradition have themselves in many cases become tradition-bound in their biblical and theological interpretation.

In a recent visit to a theological seminary in Africa I was told by one of the students that he did not feel that one particular aspect of the westernized traditional theology taught at this seminary was true biblically. I happened to agree with him. On mentioning the student's comment to the principal I received a shocked reply: 'What right does a young student have to question our theology? We have worked this out over many centuries and it is the truth.' I wondered what Martin Luther would have felt about that! Of course we should respect and learn from the fathers of the church through the centuries, but every theological formulation must be under the judgment of Scripture; and every Christian has

the ultimate right to submit our teachings to the test of God's Word. This was also a basic principle of the Reformation.

There is a danger that our theological formulations and expressions have become the ultimate standard of biblical orthodoxy. We are sometimes accused by more thinking African and Asian Christians of merely using Scripture to bolster and prove our theology. Our theology stands above Scripture. The pre-Reformation Roman Catholic church did the same. They too had their set theological beliefs and the Bible was used to defend them. If any interpretations of the Bible contradicted these theological propositions, then the interpretation must be wrong! Evangelicals today can fall into the same trap. We happen to believe that most of what we maintain actually is biblical, whereas we may feel that pre-Reformation Catholicism erred in faith. The principle still holds true – the Bible must be free to judge even the most hallowed theological traditions.

Western philosophy

The pressures for a better understanding of the relationship between revelation and culture or contemporary philosophies are not only coming from the internationalization of the church. We are also faced with the significant impact of contemporary linguistic philosophies (e.g. structuralism) which obviously relate to the whole question of our practice of biblical interpretation. It is not accidental that hermeneutics has become a major theological battlefield in our day. Clearly this article cannot go into detail on the current debate with regard to hermeneutics – for a better understanding of this we shall need to study the secular writings of Saussure, Chomsky, etc. and the Christian studies on hermeneutics by Thiselton and others. These will need to be augmented by books on the relationship of gospel and culture.

The question today is not only the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. Of course we have on our hands a keen debate on such words as 'inerrancy' and 'infallibility' which determine the nature of the Bible. But we also struggle with the question of how we understand the Bible and relate to our particular society with its specific cultural, philosophical and religious movements.

1. Revelation and theology

In the context of our current debates it is dangerous to fail to distinguish between revelation and theology. As Christians we believe in ultimate truth which is found in the unchanging perfection of the Godhead, Father, Son and Spirit. He is the absolute truth which is neither comparative nor changing. We believe that God reveals himself. Ideally we should be able to find the perfect revelation of God in the creation and in man. Creation was declared to be 'good' – the adjective used to describe the very nature of God himself. Likewise man, the climax of creation, was made in the image and likeness of God, so that ideally we should be able to see God when

we see man. Sadly this form of revelation in nature and in man was spoiled by the fall and sin. As a result revelation of God in nature and in man became inadequate and corrupt.

From the outset of creation God had revealed himself perfectly through and in his active Word. Even the form of revelation in nature and in man was the outcome of God's Word – God spoke and it was. God's chosen method of revelation is by word. We believe that Jesus as the incarnate Word and the Bible as the written Word give us the absolute and perfect revelation of God.

Our rock-like assurance in an absolute and unchanging revelation of God must not blind us however to the fallibility of our human understanding of that perfect revelation. However much we seek to be objective and scholarly in our biblical interpretation we are constantly blinkered by our own inadequacies and by our particular backgrounds. Then too our theological formulations will also be fashioned according to our own context, which will likewise influence our teaching and preaching of the Word. We need therefore to make a clear distinction in our minds between the objective and absolute reality of the revelation and the human, contextual understanding and expression of that revelation from age to age.

a. *The Word in context.* God's Word is never in a vacuum. It is always wrapped in cultural form. We may contrast this with Islamic views of revelation. In Islam the Quran was written on a tablet in heaven by God. It was eternal and uncreated. God then caused it to descend through the prophet who plays no formative part in shaping its content. Muslims therefore emphasize that Mohammed was illiterate: he could not have written such a work as the Quran. Although critics may see all sorts of obvious links between the Quran and its cultural, historical and religious background in the Arabia of Mohammed's time, theologically the Muslim will still maintain that the Quran stands above history and culture. The prophet is like an honoured teleprinter.

Judaeo-Christian concepts of revelation differ totally from the Islamic. The written word clearly reflects the background of the human writer and may be considered theandric (to use an Orthodox term). Thus it would have been impossible for Amos to have written the gospel of Luke or *vice versa*. Both use the common language of their day. Both reflect the historical context of their particular age. Both relate to the religious, philosophical and cultural situations of their societies. The whole of the biblical revelation is acculturated.

What we say of the written word is equally true of the Word incarnate. Jesus is not some superhuman figure who bears no relationship to any historical context. He was a Jew of the first century. This is seen in his way of life, his message and his method of communication. The influence of Jewish thought and proto-rabbinics is a major element in Jesus' words. Contemporary Jewish attitudes to Samaritans and Gentiles come across strongly in his teaching. His teaching methods in the use of parables and stories as well as the inter-relationship of the visual sign and the verbal proclamation again reflects contemporary Judaism. As with the written word, so

also the incarnate Word is acculturated.

Bultmannian approaches have tended to stress the need to strip the message of its cultural accretions, as if the kernel of the true message were hidden in an envelope of meaningless historical wrapping. But when we seek to remove this historical wrapping, we actually find there is nothing left. The whole message is interwoven within its context. We need therefore to understand the Word *in* its context and then interpret it and reapply it *in* our context today. This is contextualization of theology and interpretation of the Word.

b. *Philosophical contextualization.* Not only is our understanding of the biblical revelation likely to be coloured by our own philosophical background, but also our formulation and expression of our belief must inevitably be bound by our philosophy. The particular example of our various concepts of time and history may illustrate this.

It is sometimes assumed by western writers that there are only two basic understandings of time and history. Such people claim that either one holds a 'biblical' straight-line view of history or one falls into the trap of a cyclical view of time. Actually there are other possible world-views. And it is questionable whether the Bible is uniquely restricted to a straight-line approach.

John Mbiti in his writings from Kenya (specifically the Akamba people)¹ seeks to show that at least some East African peoples see time as moving backwards. He claims that they view the life of man as progressing from the purity of the baby to the decline of old age and thence to being an immediately remembered ancestor. Ultimately we become long-since forgotten ancestors. We thus slip further and further into the past. Mbiti's views are hotly debated by scholars of African philosophy, but there is good evidence to suggest that at least some languages do share this approach to time. We then have to face the pressing question of how to relate our biblical teaching to this particular world-view.

Many writers have suggested that the Greek view of time was cyclical or perhaps spiral, whereas they see the biblical concept of time as a straight-line. It seems to me however that the Hebrew concept of time is rather event-centred. As with many non-European languages the Hebrew language is more interested in the completion or non-completion of an event than in its timing as past, present or future. Despite some modern linguistic philosophers I would maintain that language does reflect the philosophy of a people and therefore this aspect of the Hebrew language is important in our understanding of the Hebrew mind. In Hebrew thought an event may actually be in various parts which may happen at various stages of history. Thus the salvation event is at the Exodus, in the return from Babylon, in the life and death of Jesus and finally in the parousia. So it is that men like Cyrus were called the anointed or the Messiah. Likewise Jesus seems to see the judgment in AD 70 as one with the final judgment in his eschatological teaching sections (e.g. Mark 13). It is our totally straight-line view of history which makes us face difficulties in understanding

such passages of Scripture. But all our biblical interpretation and theology is done in the context of our view of time. It seems to me that the New Testament shows an interaction between the Hebrew event-conscious view of time and a Greek view which I consider to be more straight-line.

Our biblical interpretation and theology are also much influenced by western individualism. Some other cultures will see things more from the background of a group culture. Thus we in the west tend to see every biblical 'ye' as a collection of individual 'thous', whereas others may think of a 'thou' as just a small part of a conglomerate 'ye'. This will have significant influence on our whole theology of salvation, as also of the Holy Spirit. What does the New Testament mean when it talks of the Holy Spirit 'in us'? Does it mean that the Spirit indwells each individual – and therefore secondarily in the church also? Or does it mean that the Spirit indwells the church – and then secondarily individuals who are closely linked to the church? Notice how this will affect our approach to the church and our membership of it.

It could be said that all theology is contextual. It must be, for all of us interpret the Bible through the spectacles of our philosophical background. And we then express our beliefs within the framework of those terms.

c. *Verbal contextualization.* Despite Goethe's cynical statement that words are given to man to conceal his thoughts, Christians maintain that God reveals by word and that men communicate verbally. Of course there is a constant danger that words are misused with the specific intent of non-communication. We have all seen too much of this in some church council statements. But as Christians we want our words to express the fulness of our biblical faith.

But communication is more a question of what people hear than of what we think we are saying. What therefore do our words convey? Take the word *Theos* (God). What did this mean to a first-century Jew? What did it mean to a Gentile of those days? What does 'God' mean to a Muslim? Or to a dechristianized Englishman? What word should we use for God in a Hindu or Buddhist context?

In any language we have to use existent words, bending them (to use H. Kraemer's expression²) to our concept of truth. It is not customary in the Bible to import totally new and foreign words because of a lack of adequate Greek terms. The apostles used current Greek terms with all their overtones of pagan Greek philosophy and religion, but tried to introduce new meaning into these words. But the words had to relate to the already accepted usage of them and the whole expression of the Christian faith had to be made to relate to existent beliefs. This pattern has been followed more or less by us all ever since.

Let us give an example. Some Indian theologians during the past hundred years have sought to relate the gospel to Hindu trinitarian concepts of the threefold *saccidananda* (sat-cit-ananda). Inevitably the three 'persons' (what do we mean by 'person' outside of its

ancient Greek context?) of the Trinity have been made to relate to traditional Hindu ideas of *sat/being*, *cit/truth* and *ananda/joy* or bliss. Followers of the great nineteenth-century theologian, Brahmabandhab Upadhyaya, tend also to relate this to non-dualist Hindu philosophy in which nothing has separate existence, but rather all is Brahman. This is the highest form of Hindu philosophy and Upadhyaya rightly realized that the Christian faith needs to relate to non-dualism if it is to appeal to higher caste Hindus and to religious leaders.³

All traditional Asian religious words have non-Christian significance, but we are bound to use words in the expression and formulation of our theology. The choice of particular words for incarnation, God, salvation or other key concepts already pushes us into a particular non-Christian philosophical and religious context.

d. *Contextualization in history.* We have already observed that all theology is contextual. All theology throughout history has been expressed within the context of current religious and philosophical movements. This contextualization inevitably adds to or subtracts from the biblical revelation.

The story begins in the early church. I find myself some times rather shocked at the way some Christians refer to the creeds of the early church as if they were the very revelation of God and therefore totally authoritative and perfect. It seems clear to me that these credal statements, though of great value and importance, are still ultimately man-made theological formulations which are contextualized and fallible. In his writings on Indian theological developments R. F. Boyd⁴ has rightly pointed out that the early creeds use pagan background Greek philosophy. They relate to the specific problems and questions of their time and give their answers in terms which may not relate adequately to the theological battles of a different age or background. Thus one may well question whether Chalcedon suffices for Indian struggles with a non-dualist Hinduism. Nor may the vocabulary and thought-forms of their Greek background suffice for ordinary Christians in Britain today who need their Christian faith to be expressed in terms related to modern British life and philosophy. It is no wonder that some of the sects make hay with their denial of the Trinity; many Christians today cannot understand this doctrine because it has been locked into an alien terminological and philosophical cage.

Greek thought was largely ontological rather than dynamic and active. Hebrew thought tends rather to the dynamic. Greek credal statements major on definitions of the internal *being* of God and his nature, while Hebrew takes greater interest in what God *does* in creation and salvation. The New Testament begins the process of contextualizing the Hebrew faith for an increasingly Gentile church. The history of the early church continues that process.

For many years evangelical leaders affirmed that doctrine and theology should only be halachic and therefore largely rejected the gospels and Acts as source books for theology. They were merely history! Today we

have realized that the writers of the gospels also had theological axes to grind. But our theological writing is still mainly in halachic form and haggadic theological formulations are less acceptable in the academic world. We immediately react by saying that Haggadah by its very nature lacks the requisite precision. But is that also cultural? Must all theology be precise in its definitions and formulations?

2. Revelation or situational theology?

Liberation theologians deliberately attack traditional theology for its non-situational objectivity, affirming that all true salvation theology should spring from existential historical realities. We are forced to face the question today of the relationship of theology to historical situations and to 'praxis'.

Perhaps there is a tendency for both sides to swing the pendulum to extremes. The conservative may react against situational theology which has no rock-like objectivity in truth and which has not ultimate revelatory value. He may therefore over-emphasize the fact of revelation issuing from God and being an unchanging and absolute truth, but in this emphasis he may lose hold of the relationship between ultimate objective revelation and current situational praxis. On the other hand, the liberation theologian may so over-emphasize the reality of God's actions in history and the incarnational aspect of revelation and salvation in praxis that he can lose sight of the absolute in that which is revealed by the unchanging God.

What is the biblical position? The normal pattern in Scripture is that credal statements and major doctrinal passages are given in a particular practical context. Thus the great Christological word in Philippians 2 comes out from the context of personal disagreements in the church and therefore the exhortation to be of one mind. So also the almost credal formulation of Titus 3:4-7 issues from the apostolic concern for obedience, submission and gentle courtesy. But it needs to be underlined that the existential situation does not determine the content of the faith; it merely earths it. Whereas the liberation theologian would argue for a theology which is formed by the historical situation of injustice, we would want to apply revealed and objective truth to living situations. The form in which our theology is expressed and the way it is applied will be determined by its situational context, but the basis of fundamental truth remains.

As we follow the development of theology into the middle ages we note the significant influence of Aristotle. Interestingly this is not only true of Christian theology in the person of Aquinas, but equally so in Jewish theology through Maimonides and in Muslim theology under Al-Ghazzali.

Even in the revival of biblical theology in the Reformation contextualization is obvious. The interpretation of the epistle to the Romans is a clear example. The Reformers expounded this great epistle to fit the battles of their day, particularly the fight against salvation by works in favour of a renewed emphasis on

justification through faith alone. None of us would query the validity of their struggles. None of us would want to question the truth of the foundational fact that we cannot achieve God's righteousness through our own works and our own merit. All of us would agree with the Reformation emphasis on faith. We would also agree that faith is important to Paul in Romans. But it is not clear that Paul's main concern in Romans is the same as the Reformers' main concern in their context.

In Romans Paul is answering the problems of his context. His main preoccupation was his calling to be the apostle to the Gentiles. Was it a valid and acceptable calling? Was it right for a follower of the God of Israel to engage in out-going proclamatory mission to Gentiles? Could Gentiles be Christians? If so, did they have to follow the Jewish Law and become like Jews. If Gentiles could become Christians just like Jews could, then what is the advantage in being a Jew (Rom. 3:1)? And has God forgotten his ancient covenants with his people? Are the promises of God revoked? It is in this context that Paul demonstrates that both Jews and Gentiles are under sin and need salvation (Rom. 3:9). Paul proceeds to show that justification is not through the works of the Jewish Law, for then it would be only for Jews (3:28,29). Justification is by the work of Christ received through faith – and anybody (both Jew and Gentile) can have faith. Sin is therefore international and justification is also universally available. What then is the advantage of being a Jew? What has happened to the old covenants? Paul answers these questions in Romans 9-11.

The Reformers' understanding of the New Testament is contextualized. When we come to the present day, it is easy for some of us to criticize some more liberal modern theological expressions for their surrender to current philosophical streams, but we have to say that evangelicals are equally involved in this process of contextualization. The very cerebral and 'objective' approach to theology in which we often rejoice may also be a form of contextualization. Traditional Jewish teaching always had two forms, Halachah and Haggadah. Halachah was the legal approach while Haggadah was more in story form or through historical events.

Dangers

The contextualization of theology always contains within itself the inherent danger that we lose hold of the objectivity of revelation. But that danger should not push us into the opposite danger of literalism or unrelated cerebral orthodoxy which fails the test of what liberation theology calls 'orthopraxis'.

Likewise an excessive emphasis on the context of our theology without adequate emphasis on revealed truth can lead to the twin evils of syncretism and universalism. B. Kato in his little book on African theology⁵ rightly points to these common pitfalls. Some theologians who stress contextualization have assumed that the context is already an integral part of God's revelation and have thus sanctified the local culture and religion. This approach is weak on sin and the demonic within every

culture and religion. Some have even suggested that African Primal Religion is the African equivalent of the Old Testament.⁶ The Gospel of the New Testament is therefore the fulfilment of the religion of traditional African life. This can be equally applied to Islam, Hinduism, etc. Some Gentile Christians are saying similar things with regard to Judaism,⁷ assuming that modern Judaism is the religion of the Old Testament and so is to be fulfilled in the New Testament of Jesus Christ without radical conversion. This of course ignores the reality of sin and fails to take account of the impact of the rabbis on contemporary Jewish faith. Non-Christian religion is thus sanctified as a divine means of revelation and even of salvation; hence the burning problem today of whether there is revelation or salvation within other religions. But this is too big a question to be debated in this article! We must however maintain the radical distinction between the Christian revelation and other religions. The biblical Scriptures are clearly against any naive syncretism which fails to see the demonic within the worship and religious systems of the religions.

It hardly needs to be added that the tendency to put other religions on a revelational par with the Old Testament as forerunners of the gospel can also lead to universalism. The pre-Christian Jew was surely saved through his faith in the religious forms and practices which God had given as introduction to the coming Messiah; some would therefore draw the analogy that likewise the African primal religionist or follower of other faiths is also given salvation in and through their non-Christian religion. But we can only say that such universalism is biblically highly speculative.

There are indeed dangers attached to the contextualization of theology. Nevertheless we are reminded that all theology will always be contextualized in some manner. The challenge is to stand firm by God's revealed Word and relate it carefully to our particular context – both parts of that sentence are vitally important.

Conclusion

The context in which theology is done is both socio-political and also philosophico-religious. Contextualized theology tends today to divide along these two streams.

a. *Socio-political.* The Latin American liberation theology is matched today by a deluge of political theological writings from all over the world. The American black theologian James Cone has played a major part in adapting liberation theology to the situations of American blacks and then beyond that to Africa.⁸ A growing volume of South African black theology is now emerging.⁹ In Europe too we are facing the issue of the relationship of the 'spiritual' gospel to our socio-political context and this has led also to the writing of politically oriented theological works. The tide of such opinion flows out to other lands also and it has become the accepted mode of current theological writings, particularly in those circles which are related to 'ecumenical' movements. Sadly one feels that much of the political theology produced in other African and Asian countries

is merely aping the fashion. It therefore becomes boringly repetitive. Nevertheless we have to take into account the reality and relevance of this whole movement to relate the Christian faith to its socio-political environment and to the needs of the poor.

b. *Philosophico-religious*. We need to reiterate that contextualization of theology does not only deal with socio-political realities. It also follows the pattern of the New Testament in seeking to express the faith in terms of the surrounding religious and philosophical environment. The Hebrew faith of Israel needed to be bent to fit the context of a Greek Gentile civilization. It now requires further contextualization to adapt to current English, Indian or African approaches.¹⁰ Our biblical

interpretation, theology and proclamation will reflect the world-view of our day and our culture. The burning question is always: which world-view will it reflect? Will we keep up to date philosophically or will we express the gospel in out-moded forms? And will we in cross-cultural mission export a European or North American understanding and expression of biblical truth and theology? Or can we stand with our brothers and sisters in every land and culture to encourage an indigenous approach to biblical interpretation, theological formulation and the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ? An insular approach to theological study, in which we recognize only North Atlantic theologians is no longer tenable.

¹See *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969) and *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (Oxford UP, 1971).

²See *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (Edinburgh House Press, 1938).

³See R. F. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969).

⁴*An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology and India and the Latin Captivity of the Church* (Cambridge UP, 1974).

⁵*Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975).

⁶See, e.g., K. A. Dickson and P. Ellingworth (eds.), *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (London: Lutterworth, 1969); E. B. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* (London: SCM,

1973).

⁷See P. Goble, *Everything you need to grow a messianic synagogue* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974).

⁸J. Cone, *Liberation - a black theology of liberation* (Lippincott, 1970).

⁹E.g. B. Moore, *Black Theology and the South African Voice* (C. Hurst, 1973); A. Boesak, *Black Theology, Black Power* (Oxford: Mowbrays, 1978)

¹⁰We rejoice to see a growing number of leading African and Asian theologians whose writings relate the biblical faith to the context of the religions and philosophies of their area - e.g. L. de Silva in Sri Lanka, Choan Seng Song in Taiwan, Kitamori in Japan, Upadhyaya and many others in India, Koyama as a Japanese missionary in Thailand, Mbiti in Kenya.