

WHAT CONSTITUTES "ACCEPTABLE CONTEXTUALIZATION"?

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A central problem of missions is how to communicate the gospel across socio-cultural barriers so that it becomes alive in the hearts of people in the receiving culture. This problem is sometimes expressed in the form of questions: How should new converts relate to their cultural past—to the food, dress, medicines, songs, dances, myths, rituals, and all such that were so much a part of their lives before they heard the gospel? How far can the gospel be adapted to fit into a culture without losing its essential message?

Christians have adopted different views concerning the tension between gospel and culture. Some hold the view that culture and historical circumstances have priority over the gospel.¹ Others will compromise a balance of influences between the gospel and culture, some emphasizing more, others less. Still others, Seventh-day Adventists (SDAs) among them, believe that the gospel must survive intact any attempt at accommodation and contextualization.²

Missiologists created terms such as "accommodation" and "contextualization" to describe the interaction between gospel and culture. A major difficulty is that groups having different philosophies of mission use the same terms, thus creating confusion.

In this paper "accommodation" is the presentation of the gospel using local forms in order to produce the greatest impact on a given society. Sometimes accommodation and contextualization are called indigenization.³ However, I prefer to see indigenization as the whole process by which the gospel becomes relevant to a local culture. One major difference between accommodation and contextualization is that accommodation is done by outsiders (also called "advocates"), while contextualization is done by insiders (also called "innovators").⁴

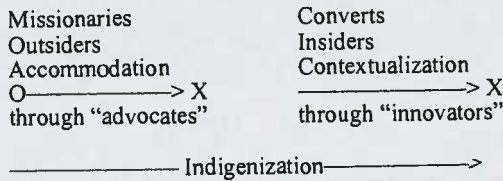
¹For instance, Robert Schreiter contends that contextualization begins with a "dialogue with Christian tradition whereby that tradition can address questions genuinely posed by the local circumstances." Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985), 13-14.

²For instance, see Donald A. McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Cultures* (Washington, DC: Canon, 1974), 51-74.

³"If we are careful to preserve the meaning of the Gospel, even as we express it in its native terms, we have indigenization." Paul G. Hiebert, "Culture and Cross-Cultural Differences," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1981), 378.

⁴Many sociologists and anthropologists have adopted these terms. See Daniel J. Morgan, "The Process of Change," in *That All the World May Hear: An Introduction to Missionary*

Accommodation in this case is indispensable as a first step, while contextualization will be a further development. The following graphic may help the reader to understand these concepts ("O" stands for "missionary" and "X" for "converts"):



Unacceptable Accommodation

There is acceptable and unacceptable accommodation and contextualization. In many cases accommodation has been more a compromise of the faith than an adaptation to the culture. Indiscriminate use of folk practices, myths, and rituals usually ends in open syncretism.¹ Accommodation has consistently been preached as the official policy of the Roman Catholic Church.²

Syncretism is the intentional or unintentional fusion of two or more opposing forces, beliefs, practices, principles, or religious systems that result in a new thing which is contrary to Christianity, as revealed in the Scriptures.³ Allan Tippet describes a syncretistic approach as "Christopaganism."⁴ Syncretism occurs when Christianity adapts a cultural form but still carries with it attached meanings from the former belief system. These old meanings can severely distort or obscure the intended Christian meaning. "The fear of syncretism has been one of the reasons missionaries have not always been open to adapting cultural forms to the Gospel."⁵

The Roman Catholic Church has never formally approved syncretism but has permitted people to do whatever was culturally agreeable to them as long as they paid token respect to the Church.⁶ Ellen G. White warns of the dangers of such an approach:

There is constant danger that professing Christians will come to think that in order to have influence with worldlings, they must to a certain extent conform to

Anthropology, ed. Ebbie C. Smith (Fort Worth, TX: Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary Press, 1991), 49.

¹See Enrique Dussel, "What Constitutes a Mixed Religion?" chap. in *A History of the Church in Latin America*, trans. Alan Neely (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 66-68.

²John Considine, *Fundamental Catholic Teaching on the Human Race* (Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll, 1961), 59-75.

³According to Paul Hiebert, the translation of the gospel into a native form without thought of preserving the meaning "will end up in syncretism—the mixture of old meanings with the new so that the essential nature of each is lost." Hiebert, 378.

⁴Alan Richard Tippet, "Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?" in *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?* ed. Tetsunao Yamamori and Charles R. Taber (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1975), 13-34.

⁵Jonathan Lewis, *World Mission: An Analysis of the World Christian Movement*, Part 3: Cross-Cultural Considerations (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1987), 24.

⁶An example of this attitude is a Roman Catholic mission policy of 1659 quoted in Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin, 1977), 179.

the world. But though such a course may appear to afford great advantages, it always ends in spiritual loss.¹

Acceptable Accommodation

Accommodation is acceptable, however, when it is seen as cultural adjustments that have to be made to achieve the indigeneity of newly planted Christianity. It means that to whatever degree possible, without violating any biblical doctrine, aspects of Christian life and ministry such as life-style, worship patterns, music, and ethics should be free to take on the forms of each new culture which Christianity enters. It is in this sense that Ellen G. White advised,

When you are laboring in a place where souls are just beginning to get the scales from their eyes . . . be very careful not to present the truth in such a way as to arouse prejudice, and to close the door of the heart to the truth. Agree with the people on every point you can consistently do so. Let them see that you love their souls, and want to be in harmony with them so far as possible.²

True accommodation remains a necessary beginning in the gospel's progression into any culture.

When there is no accommodation, there is a high possibility of rejection.³ Without proper accommodation, the advocate faces the possibility of not being properly understood. In many parts of the world, Christianity is considered a foreign religion, not because of its doctrines but because local ways were indiscriminately altered. Forcing nationals to adopt the missionary's customs was a common practice during colonial days. New generations of Christians in those countries may perpetuate the missionaries' flaws and find that the transmission of the gospel in their own culture is not an easy task.

The churches in Asia may fail to communicate the gospel to their own societies because they have learned the gospel through words borrowed from the West. Borrowed words can be understood by minds intelligent enough to understand them, but they do not speak to the heart of a nation.⁴

Contextualization

It is with the term "contextualization" that many sincere Christians have problems, because it has been used with different meanings. Again, for SDAs and

¹Ellen G. White, *The Story of Prophets and Kings as Illustrated in the Captivity and Restoration of Israel* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 570.

²Ellen G. White, *Historical Sketches of the Foreign Missions of the Seventh-day Adventists* (Payson, AZ: Leaves of Autumn, 1985), 122.

³In Acts 6:14 the Jews complained that Stephen wanted to change their customs. Similar charges are found in Acts 16:21, when Paul was accused of teaching "customs which are not lawful for us to receive, being Romans."

⁴Pekka Phojola, "Home Field—Mission Field: Isolation or Symbiotic Relationship?" in *Adventist Missions Facing the 21st Century: A Reader*, ed. Hugh I. Dunton, Baldur E. Pfeiffer, and Borge Schantz (Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 1990), 96.

for many evangelicals, the concepts of accommodation and contextualization may be used as equivalent to indigenization. Contextualization could be described as the presentation of the gospel using the forms of the local culture in such a way that it will be easily understood and relevant to the hearers. In this case we could speak of contextualization as a mission strategy.

For conciliarist theologians, contextualization is the process by which the gospel becomes relevant in a sociocultural context, with the understanding that the context takes priority over the text.¹ So, the current debate over contextualization is not concerned merely with the communication of the gospel but with the nature of the gospel itself.²

Evangelical Christians in general, and SDAs in particular, hold that faithfulness to Scripture must be the primary standard for evaluating contextualization.³

In an attempt to secure both cultural relevancy and faithfulness to the Scriptures, Paul Hiebert suggests a process which he calls "critical contextualization."⁴ Insiders study both cultural manifestations and the biblical teachings on a matter, and then maintain or reject the old practice, or create a new contextualized Christian practice. In many cases it will result in a "functional substitute."⁵

Unacceptable Contextualization

Contextualization is unacceptable when its advocates do not hold a high view of Scripture. Both conservative and liberal evangelicals pay attention to culture and method, but conservatives are accused of not being willing to change their theology.⁶ Theology resulting from critical reflection in the framework of a Marxist interpretation of history is "a political hermeneutics of the Gospel" which calls men to make the world a better place.⁷ In such a view of theology, the Scriptures

¹The emphasis of this approach is not saving souls from sin and condemnation but from social injustice. They are seeking "a New Order," implying liberation from a system centered in oppression. With this understanding of contextualization many are looking for a revolutionary extension of God's kingdom by the use of violence and Marxism. Examples of this approach are IDO-C ed., *When All Else Fails: Christian Arguments on Violent Revolution* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1970), and Jose Miguez-Bonino, *Christians and Marxists: The Mutual Challenge to Revolution* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).

²E. Ross Kinsler, "Mission and Context: The Current Debate about Contextualization," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (1978): 25.

³Donald A. McGavran, *The Clash between Christianity and Cultures* (Washington, DC: Canon, 1974), 52-54. Also, David H. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meaning, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 179.

⁴Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 75-92.

⁵They are culturally appropriate elements which take the place of rituals or practices which are incompatible with scriptural teaching.

⁶Rene Padilla contends that "the contextualization of the Gospel will not consist of an adaptation of an existing theology to a particular culture" but of "a new, open-minded reading of Scripture." Rene Padilla, "Hermeneutics and Culture: A Theological Perspective," in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture*, ed. Robert T. Coote and John Stoot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 78.

⁷Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, trans. and ed. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973), 11-13.

are relegated to a secondary level; for its advocates "the most important key to contextualization will always be the soul of the local community."¹

In unacceptable views of contextualization, the religious, social, political, and economic needs of the people have priority over the gospel message. These views do not hold to "propositional truth" but to "a free, flexible Word."² Their emphasis on circumstances rather than on the Scriptures³ prevents SDAs from adopting them as valid theological models.

Liberation Theology is an example of such unacceptable theology.⁴ The father of Liberation Theology says that its theologians are committed to "construct a just and fraternal society, where people can live with dignity and be the agents of their own destiny"⁵ through "a social revolution, which will radically and qualitatively change the conditions in which they now live."⁶ "The goal is not only better living conditions, a radical change of structures, a social revolution; it is much more: the continuous creation, never ending, of a new way to be a man, a *permanent cultural revolution*."⁷ This theology is "an attempt to reconcile the traditional conflict between theology and Marxist notions."⁸ Radical advocates of this view are looking for a revolutionary extension of God's kingdom by the use of "the socioanalytical tools . . . and the revolutionary ethos and programme [of Marxism]."⁹

We should also be aware of the difference in terminology when some theologians and missiologists speak of "incarnation." The evangelical concept stresses the need of identification with those to whom we are ministering. Understanding the other culture and using local cultural elements to transmit the gospel will enhance the possibility that the gospel will be understood.⁹ However, based on the theological understanding of incarnation, recent official Roman Catholic teachings call for "inculturation." This term is more or less equivalent to the concepts of "indigenization" and "contextualization," used mostly by Protestants, although not necessarily in the same sense. Roman Catholic liberation

¹Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 81.

²Bruce E. Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology: An Evangelical Assessment* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey, 1980), 39.

³Even evangelicals have adopted these views. See Padilla, 75.

⁴For a detailed analysis of such unacceptable views, see Alan Neely, "Liberation Theology and the Poor: A Second Look," *Missiology* 4 (1989): 392; Charles Van Engen, "The Relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology," in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Charles Van Engen, Dean S. Gilligan, and Paul Pierson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 31; Arthur Glasser "Liberation Theology Bursts on the Scene," in *Contemporary Theologies of Mission* by Arthur Glasser and Donald A. McGavran (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 150-66; Morris A. Inch, *Doing Theology Across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 61-69.

⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, *Lineas Pastorales de la Iglesia in America Latina: Analisis Teologico* [Pastoral Lines of the Church in Latin America: A Theological Analysis] (Lima: Editorial Universitaria, 1979), x. Translation provided.

⁶Gutierrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

⁷Ibid., 32. Italics in original.

⁸Alfredo Mirande, *The Chicano Experience* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 138.

⁹Jose Miguez-Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation Confrontation Books* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 35; also see J. Andrew Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1980).

theologians use “inculturation” as interchangeable with their own views of contextualization and incarnation¹ Inculturation has been defined as the on-going dialogue between faith and culture.² The word itself suggests the transfer of the faith from one culture to another but in a higher sense than mere acculturation, since it presupposes a measure of reinterpretation.³ This approach sees a dialectical interaction between the cultural situation, the Catholic faith, and the minister’s experience.⁴ Liberation Theology is based on this theological perspective.⁵ These views are in most missiological Roman Catholic textbooks, especially those published by Orbis Books (Maryknoll, NY). This approach is basically humanistic rather than Christocentric.

Acceptable Contextualization

I see acceptable contextualization as the process of making the biblical text and its context meaningful in and applicable to the thought patterns and situations of a given people. Conciliarists and liberationists reject this view. Liberal scholars and many independent mission agencies may consider it as “non-relevant.” However, we cannot negotiate or compromise biblical doctrines. There are “landmarks” that have made the SDA Church what it is, and “the lapse of time has not lessened their value.”⁶ These pillars must emerge intact in any attempt at contextualization. However, we can develop different strategies on how we are going to teach the whole truth. These strategies must be culturally relevant, should touch people at the point of their needs, and should reach them wherever they are. This was exemplified in Christ’s ministry.

Christ drew the hearts of His hearers to Him by the manifestation of His love, and then, little by little, as they were able to bear it, He unfolded to them the great truths of the kingdom. We also must learn to adapt our labors to the condition of the people—to meet men where they are.⁷

In order to communicate with people we have to be sensitive to their perception of their own needs. We may reach them through their needs. When we have done

¹See Sherwood G. Lingefelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

²Luzbetak, 69. The term inculturation “combines the theological significance of inculturation with the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation to create something new.” Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation* (New York: Mahawah, 1990), 22.

³More fully, “it is the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture or cultures.” Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 11.

⁴Ibid., 12.

⁵Schineller, 75.

⁶Shorter, 237-50. Another example of a contextualized system based on this approach is Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982).

⁷Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors* (Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1946), 52.

⁸Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1946), 484-85.

this, we will have the potential for communicating the saving power of Jesus beginning at the point of their needs, in their language, and in their cultural forms.

The use of "contextualization" may generate reaction and debate among SDAs because many associate the term with unacceptable views. However, the concept is still valid, and contextualization is a necessity. A valid approach to contextualization demands two commitments. First, there must be a commitment to biblical authority. The message of the Bible must not be adulterated. It demands faithfulness to the Church's understanding of revealed truth. Second, a commitment is needed to cultural relevance. The biblical message must be related to the cultural background of its recipients. It demands cultural sensitivity. This view of contextualization will facilitate the proclamation and acceptance of the Three Angels' Messages of Rev 14.