Journal of Asia Adventist Seminary 22.1–2 (2020–21): 49–70

Toward Shinto-sensitive Christian Mission in Japan: The Critical Contextualization and Inculturation Approaches

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Abstract

Christianity has struggled in Japan for centuries. A major part of the reason is the lack of cultural sensitivity in mission approaches. Any Christian mission approach in Japan must take the Shinto influence into consideration. Japanese culture has been shaped by other philosophical systems, such as Buddhism and Confucianism. However, Shintoism is the basis for the construction of this cultural identity.

This research seeks to explore Shinto-sensitive Christian missions in Japan. After a brief introduction to the history of Catholic and Protestant missions in Japan and their current challenges, this article compares two current missionary methodologies, inculturation (Catholic) and critical contextualization (Protestant). They are based on different theological lines, neoliberalism[1] and neo-orthodoxy.[2] Both

[1] According to David J. Hesselgrave, neo-orthodoxy is distinct from liberalism in so far as it asserts that the Bible is more than sufficient, or even the best literature, and does not presuppose a continuity between the human and the divine. He claims that the Bible contains the word of God in imperfect form on account of its human authors (David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 2nd. ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], 141).

[2] According to Hesselgrave, neoliberalism leaves it up to people to approach both the biblical text and the cultural environment in order to see beyond the shortcomings of

suggest faith development while respecting and affirming the local culture. They acknowledge God's revelation and celebrate His presence in a particular context. After this initial review, conventional ways are questioned, and a new proposal is suggested to combine both approaches by missionaries in Japan. Examples of missiological approaches to Shinto values used to build bridges are included in the last section.

Keywords: Christian Mission, Japan, Shinto, Inculturation, Critical Contextualization

1. Introduction: A Brief History of Catholic Mission in Japan

The first Christian missionary delegation that went to Japan landed in Kagoshima, in the south of Kyushu, on August 15, 1549, marking the beginning of the Jesuit missions in the country. Ikou Higashibaba mentions that the methodology of Francis Xavier, the first Jesuit missionary in Japan, was to get in touch with local university students, resulting in the baptism of five hundred Japanese in 1551.[3] However, the first missionaries had their strategies frustrated being rejected by the religions in Japan.

Samuel Lee comments that the Jesuits opted for an adaptation strategy.[4] In order to communicate the Christian faith in a more clear way, they

both, discover the contemporary word and work of God, and join Him in the "say" and "do" (Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 141).

3 Ikuo Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan: Kirishitan Belief and Practice* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 2. A legacy of this process was a Japanese catechism that spoke of God's creation of the heavens and the earth, the fall of the angels, Adam and Eve, an account of Noah and the Flood, the building of the Tower of Babel, and the beginning of idolatry; the destruction of Sodom, the preaching of Jonah in Nineveh, the story of Joseph, the son of Jacob, the captivity of the children of Israel in Egypt and their release by Moses; the Commandments on Mount Sinai and the entry of the Jews into the Promised Land; the fall and inheritance of King David, the prophet Elisha, Judith and Holofernes, the statue of Nebuchadnezzar, and the prophet Daniel; the Incarnation, an extensive description of the life and sufferings of the Redeemer, His resurrection and ascension, and His return in the moment of the Last Judgment; the reward of the good in the eternal bliss of heaven, and the punishment of the wicked in the eternal torments of hell.

4 Samuel Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity: Why Is Christianity Not Widely Believed in Japan?* (Amsterdam: Foundation University Press, 2014), 1164.

tried conforming to Japan's religious customs and manners, becoming part of Japanese society, and functioning within Japan's way of life. It was decided to use various terms from Buddhism to translate Christian theology into Japanese, for example, the term *Dainichi*, a Buddhist word for "god," was translated into Latin, *Deusu*. What characterized the Jesuit approach, nearly thirty years after Xavier, was its adaptation to Japanese political, social, and religious situations.

The adaptations did not seem efficient due to the lack of deeper understanding and serious consideration of the local culture. Even so, according to Ikou Higashibaba, within the first decade, six thousand new Christians joined the religion.[5] Soon after, Christianity in Japan had its most accentuated growth in the 1570s, with the sum of one hundred thousand Christians in the country.

Higashibaba explains that the acceptance of Christianity by a regional lord meant that the new religion could become the faith of his state, namely, the "unified religious standard that was applied to all inhabitants."[6] The Christian faith was given to commoners as the faith of the community, not of individuals. From the missionaries' perspective, such a way of entering the Christian faith involved a problem in the quality of faith. In the Japanese religious context, however, such a social system helped the Christian faith to spread rapidly among the people. Therefore, the Jesuit success was due to the political strategies of the Japanese themselves. Lee says that Xavier considered his mission a success despite the cultural and linguistic problems he encountered.[7]

In the 16th Century, the rejection of Christianity happened at the same time as other missionary groups became aware of the country and outlined their strategies.

> The first Franciscan mission was established in 1593, and Dominicans and Augustinians followed later. The arrival of the three groups of friars marked the beginning of a bitter rivalry and territorialism. It was particularly violent among the Jesuits and the Franciscans. The Franciscans, Dominicans and Augustinians were well informed of the successes of the Jesuits in Japan and were desperately anxious to reap the harvest in that field—partly out of jealousy and partly out of a conviction that they could repair the political damage done by the

5 Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, 12.

6 Higashibaba, *Christianity in Early Modern Japan*, 13.

7 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 254.

Jesuits. In fact, they considered the Jesuits' mistakes to be the real cause of Hideyoshi's persecution in 1587.[8]

Due to several political factors, as the document that banned Christianity and ordered the expulsion of all missionaries in 1614,[9] Christianity was weakened and entered an era of persecution. Milton Terry demonstrates that Japan closed its doors over two hundred years to all foreigner influences.[10] Lee points out that the connection of Japanese Christianity with the pope left Japanese rulers worried.[11] Such rulers were seeing Christianity as a potentially subversive force, so persecution prevailed, and Christianity was expelled.[12] The 250 years of persecution of Christians only ended in the eighteenth century. In this period, Christians became known as *kakure kirishitan*, "hidden Christians," since they had to live out their faith privately to avoid the Japanese hostility.

After that period of persecution, the Meiji era (1868–1912) arrived and brought "westernization" with it. Ideas such as "military strength," "rich nation," and the need for technology and science took hold of the Japanese. However, according to Lee, in the religious dimension there were thinkers who accepted Western innovation but defended maintaining the Japanese religion. Others believed that all the success of the West was due to the combination of culture and religion experienced in developed countries.[13] In the Meiji era, Catholic missionaries could enter the country again. From this point on, Japan also began to have a different experience with Christianity, due to the introduction of Protestantism. [14]

8 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 274.

9 M. Antoni J. Ucerler, "The Christian Mission in Japan in the Early Modern Period," in *A Companion to the Early Modern Catholic Global Missions*, ed. Hsia Ronnie Po-Chia (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 328.

10 Milton Spenser Terry, *The Shinto Cult: A Christian Study of the Ancient Religion of Japan* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1910).

11 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 303.

12 Scott W. Sunquist, *Understanding Christian Missions: Participation in Suffering and Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

13 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 332.

14 John Breen, "Shinto and Christianity: A History of Conflict and Compromise," in *Handbook of Christianity in Japan*, ed. Mark R. Mullins (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 249.

2. The Catholic Church's Current Challenges in Japan

Japanese cultural expression within the Catholic Church in Japan has always been a difficult subject. Even after the Second Vatican Council began to implement far-reaching changes, the first generation of Japanese Roman Catholics who attempted inculturation encountered opposition from the Catholic elite. Alec R. LeMay claims that it is a challenge for the church today to present a coherent picture of what it means to be Roman Catholic and Japanese at the same time.[15] For example, in 1969, the English version of *Chinmoku* (*Silence*) by Endō Shūsaku was banned for parishioners. Another example is the beatification of Peter Kibe (1587–1639) and the 188 martyrs of whom they preached that "the most important thing is the teaching of the Gospel."[16] These exemples clarify the misinterpretation of the gospel by the Japanese Catholics who LeMay complained about. Chinmoku is an example of missionary behavior among a missiological community and prioritizing the teaching of the Gospel is the duty of all Christian.

Another issue with inculturation is that current Catholic churches in Japan are multicultural. Planting an all-Japanese church is ignoring members who come from other cultures and have been loyal to the church for a long time. LeMay observes that Japanese parishioners have tried to keep a "pure culture" while expelling the international community, precisely to inculturate an essentialized and romanticized Japanese culture at any cost.[17] The consequence of this enculturation means liberating local churches by giving them the opportunity to create their own expressions of the gospel, yet rejecting foreign church members, robbing them of the chance to participate through their own cultures. For LeMay, inculturation in Japan must focus on multiculturalism.[18] Churches in Japan cannot confuse inculturation with an imposed monoculturalism. It is rather an opportunity to explore God's revelation in Japanese culture through the tools available. Brighenti mentions some concepts that are incompatible

[15] Alec R. LeMay, "Inculturation and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan," *Horizontes Decoloniales* 3 (2017): 111–12.

[16] Peter Kibe as quoted in LeMay, "Inculturation and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan," 111.

[17] LeMay, "Inculturation and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan," 113.

[18] LeMay, "Inculturation and the Roman Catholic Church in Japan," 117.

with inculturation, namely: "integration," "adaptation," and "acculturation":[19]

1. "Integration" is transculturation, in the sense of forced acculturation, either by physical or symbolic violence, therefore a deadly process, as it implies the elimination or replacement of one cultural system by another.
2. "Adaptation" concerns the adjustment or accommodation to the target culture of evangelization, both of the evangelist and the evangelical message. There is a translation into more superficial and sectorial planes of the cultural reality and, therefore, unstable or transitory.
3. "Acculturation" is the process of interaction between two or more cultures, through which there is a transposition of symbols and meanings, producing a loss of original elements of cultures and generating a syncretic culture. It is an ambitious passage from one culture to another, which is always problematic since, given the near impossibility of completely leaving one's own culture to assume another, acculturation can lead to uprooting or deculturation.

3. A Brief History of the Protestant Mission in Japan

Protestantism entered Japan in the Meiji era, at a time when the Eastern country was opening to the Western world. Lee says that Protestants were sent to the country by two groups: missionary boards and church agencies.[20] The missionaries who set foot on Japanese soil in 1858 were sponsored by one of these. Protestants were in fact invited or offered jobs by Japanese institutions such as schools. Those who went as missionaries were generally Puritans and Evangelicals. They were from revivalist traditions such as Pietism, the Great Awakening, and the Methodist movement.[21]

Initially, the church grew so fast that many Christians believed that Japan could soon become a Christian nation. All this growth was due to the

[19] Agenor Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada: Princípios Pedagógicos e Passos Metodológicos* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 1998), 19.

[20] Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 1193.

[21] Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 1205.

acceptance of Western culture by the Japanese. When Japan later became a nationalist country, the church began to encounter difficulties.[22]

Between 1887 and 1907 the Shinto state, Imperial Japan's ideological use of the Japanese folk religion and traditions of Shinto, was established in Japan. During that period, nationalism grew stronger than Westernism, and the country established an institutional system centered on the emperor, which was supported by the Shinto state. Some academics believe that the Shinto state was established, with the deification of the emperor as one of the central doctrines, to curb the growth of the presence of Western Christianity in the country, that is, Shinto was institutionalized to stop the process of Christianization.[23]

During that period, missionaries had a lot of difficulties in Japan as they were forced to agree with the government.[24] They had to leave the country after the beginning of the war in 1941. When the Pacific War ended and the occupation of Japan by the Allied forces began in 1945, Shintoism was abolished as a national religion, emperor worship was banned, and missionaries were able to return to their activities. The postwar constitution guaranteed freedom of religion and separation of religion and state.[25]

4. Culturally Sensitive Mission

The ultimate goal of missionary communication is to present the supra-cultural message of the gospel in culturally relevant terms. There are two potential risks that must be avoided in this effort: (1) the perception of the communicator's own cultural baggage as an integral element of the gospel, and (2) syncretic inclusion of elements from the receiving culture that would alter or eliminate aspects of the message on which the integrity of the gospel depends. Missionaries of all ages have had to deal not only with their own inculturation, but also with customs, languages, and belief systems of different people groups.[26] Therefore, the study of cultural anthropology is instrumental for missionaries to be effective.[27]

22 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 1209.

23 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 1213.

24 Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 86.

25 Lee, *The Japanese and Christianity*, 1230.

26 David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 1.

27 Alan R. Tippett, *Introduction to Missiology* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library,

For Paulo Suess the paradigm of "evangelization of cultures" presupposes the approximation of the gospel to a given culture.[28] The gospel has always been expressed in cultural ways. Mission is about missionaries from a certain culture communicating the good news to social groups of another culture.

5. Culturally Sensitive Mission Approaches

Hesselgrave has pointed out that different missiological methodologies follow specific theological streams.[29] He cites four different ways of contextualizing the message. The first is the liberal one, which is supported by philosophical, scientific, and critical thinking, validating religious experience that is lived in sincerity, resulting in a syncretism represented by the exchange of ideas coming from different religions. This type of contextualization is based on dialogue.

At the other extreme of the continuum is the orthodox way, which employs the methodologies of the biblical apostles. The proposal is to teach the people with whom they come into contact, understanding that the people need to hear the established truth. Didactics is their tool.

In the middle, Hesselgrave suggests neo-orthodoxy and neoliberalism. He finds similarities between these two. They employ prophetic contextualization through dialectics. Prophetic contextualization refers to their identification with the prophet as the biblical prototype who hears and delivers a word from the Lord vis-à-vis a given historical situation. In the dialectic of human situations the divine word is discerned and delivered.[30] Such models intend to bring about both spiritual and social change. This discussion by Hesselgrave is summarized and adapted in the following table:

Orthodox matrix	Neo-orthodox matrix	Neoliberal matrix	Liberal matrix
Apostolic Contextualization	Prophetic Contextualization	Prophetic Contextualization	Syncretic Contextualization
Didactics: teaching the truth	Dialectic: discovering the truth	Dialectic: discovering the truth	Dialogue: Seeking the truth

1987), 113.

[28] Paulo Suess, "Evangelizar os Pobres e os Outros a Partir de suas Culturas: Uma Proposta de Fundo para Santo Domingo," *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira* 52 (1992): 370.

[29] Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 138–43.

[30] Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 141.

Hesselgrave argues that contextualization can be thought of as an attempt to communicate God's message in a way that is faithful to the Bible.[31] The current trend of contextualization seems to be the discovery of truth through dialectics. Dialectics is a way of bringing the biblical message and culture together to discover the truth of the gospel and live a life in Christ, as well as a way of bringing the orthodox and the liberals together in the *missio Dei*.[32]

Stephen B. Bevans also warns Western missionaries about specific cultural dynamics.[33] The author invites people who are doing contextual theology outside their context to approach it with humility and honesty, as they will always be on the margins of the society where the missionary chose to work and will never really be a direct part of it. This is how they can meaningfully contribute to the understanding of the Christian faith in the cultural and social context. In other words, genuine contextual theology can emerge from genuine interaction between participants in a given culture and those outside it. This is not easy and requires true spirituality. On the part of the culture non-participant, it demands a spirituality of "letting go" (that means not letting the ethnocentrism be in charge of missionary decisions), while on the part of the culture participants, the exercise demands a spirituality of "speaking openly" (that means letting the culture speak as it is).

Among the different proposed methodologies for how missionaries should deal with cultural dynamics, in the following we will analyze and compare one model for inculturation and one for critical contextualization. While Brighenti's work suggests seven steps for the inculturation of the gospel, Paul G. Hiebert develops the concept of critical contextualization in his studies.[34]

6. A Method of Inculturation

For Brighenti the church was born inculturated in Israel, in a small group of

31 Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally*, 143–44.

32 *Missio Dei* is a term that describes God's initiative in mission.

33 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 21.

34 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*; Paul G. Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas: Um Guia De Antropologia Missionária* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 1999).

people that understood that mission was both local and universal.[35] He argues that it was precisely this double character of the church—local and universal—that made inculturation possible in Israel. It also supported the understanding that the salvific mission should address all peoples, which sparked the first conflict within the incipient Church and required the so-called "Council of Jerusalem" (Acts 15).

Brighenti explains that the use of the term "inculturation" since it is composed of a central root "culture," flanked by a prefix and a suffix. The prefix "in" refers to a movement from the outside and in. From the perspective of the mystery of the Incarnation, the gospel is incarnated in cultures to enlighten, elevate, and complete them. The suffix "tion" indicates a process or a pastoral task, that is, the mission to transform cultures through the mystery of Christ for the sake of every human being.[36]

Inculturation offers Christ and His gospel as a gift to all cultures. This communication must be free, characterized by love and truth, giving each one the right to accept that gift or not. The evangelist is only a mediator who must renounce ethnocentrism.

In the final chapter of *Constants in Context*, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder propose the idea of a "prophetic dialogue," as a synthesis of the three main theologies of mission articulated in the second half of the twentieth century: (1) Mission as participation in the mission of the divine Trinity (*missio Dei*); (2) Mission as a liberating service of the Reign of God; and (3) Mission as the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the universal savior.[37] Bevans and Schroeder describe prophetic dialogue as an understanding of mission today involving several elements such as witness and proclamation, liturgical action and contemplation, inculturation, interreligious dialogue, working for justice and commitment to reconciliation.[38] All contribute to a missionary practice that is both dialogical and prophetic, faithful to contemporary context as well as to the constants of Christian faith.

In another work, the same authors expand on the foundational understanding of the Church about a Trinitarian theology of mission.[39] As a

[35] Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 9.

[36] Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 21.

[37] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 281–347, esp. p. 284.

[38] Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 284.

[39] Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, 158.

source of love that overflows and gives life, quoting the document *Ad Gentes*,[40] they propose that God the Father created the universe and humanity in His image. But since humanity refused to live in a relationship with Him, He attempts to rescue humanity through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit throughout history is part of the same plan.[41]

Thus, the "prophetic dialogue" develops within that missiological context characterized by the trinitarian salvific activity toward human beings. Bevans and Schroeder explain that dialogue draws primarily from the *missio Dei* theology, with its emphasis on the sanctity of the world, cultures, religions, human experience, and context in general.[42] One should understand that all are wonderful gifts from God while respecting the dignity and freedom of human beings and approaching them with humility and vulnerability.

Upon reviewing history and current challenges, it is clear that the Catholic Church in Japan has never experienced complete inculturation due to the challenges faced in its history, such as the Japanese persecution of the church and the difficulty in retaining its members. Proposals that allow the Shinto culture to assimilate the gospel with its cultural matrices are needed. Brighenti suggests that, methodologically, a process of inculturated evangelization involves at least seven steps, which is described below.[43] The first three constitute implicit evangelism; the next three, are an explicit evangelization; and the last, as a result of the previous six steps, is already the emergence or renewal of a Church with its own identity. The goal is, at first, to confirm the Shinto cultural matrices and second upon this basis to clarify what the gospel message has to offer for the Shinto culture.

Brighenti explains that the first step consists of free and respectful insertion in the context in which one wants to trigger a process of inculturated evangelization.[44] It is related to solidarity with the different aspects of a people's culture.

Brighenti says: "A second methodological step consists in establishing a dialogic relationship between pastoral agents and culture members, in such

40 Paulo VI, *Decreto do Concílio Vaticano II: Ad Gentes. Sobre a atividade missionária da Igreja* (1965), 2.

41 Paulo VI, *Ad Gentes*, 3–4.

42 Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Diálogo Profético: Reflexões sobre a Missão Cristã Hoje* (São Paulo: Paulinas, 2016), 172.

43 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 34.

44 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 34.

a way that, in a climate of trust, both parties express their existential world, pronounce their own word and encourages the capacity to listen and to appropriation that requires an authentic conversation."[45] Once the elements of a religion and culture are understood with empathy, the initial contact with the given culture is one of sympathy, without judgments or impositions, also without ignoring subjects that may be difficult to discuss.

Brighenti points out that the third step is to identify and recognize the values of the culture and its religion as "Seeds of the Verb," which is represented as the echo of God's voice in cultures through its symbolic and ethical dimensions. In that case, religion itself would be a reaction by the culture to these "Seeds of the Verb."[46] There are both positive and negative reactions, either by accepting the "Seeds" or by rejecting them, in addition to ambiguous questions that are difficult to discern. It is important to deal with the challenges, but also to recognize the values as "Seeds of the Verb."

In the fourth step, after showing that the god of culture was the God of Jesus, Brighenti suggests sharing all positive aspects of the Christian faith, which means to show all the contributions by Christianity to that specific culture.[47] The beginning of explicit evangelization is given by this attitude. In addition, it shows that the kerygmatic announcement must be centered on Jesus, explaining God and the Kingdom, as well as the project of salvation for humanity, thus confirming the "Seeds of the Verb" in addition to a call to conversion.

As part of the fifth step, Brighenti explains that those changes caused by a reciprocal evangelization between the missionary and the members of a culture trigger a common critical reflection of both parties.[48] It is a common critical reflection or joint community discernment, in the sense of each helping the other not to absolutize one's own culture in the face of the transcendence of the gospel. If, on the one hand, culture members need to distinguish the gospel from its cultural guise or the version of Christianity with which it is presented to them, on the other hand, evangelization agents need to allow themselves to be questioned or criticized by culture members in relation to their own version of Christianity. It is a struggle against ethnocentrism.

45 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 35.

46 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 35–36.

47 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 36.

48 Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 37.

Brighenti's sixth step is "a symbiosis between the Gospel and culture, both on the part of the members of the culture who come into contact with the Gospel, and on the part of the evangelizers who … established a dialogical relationship with the new members."[49] From that moment on the church begins to look more like the local culture.

In the seventh and last step, a new church emerges, with its own "physiognomy." The members of the new church, according to Brighenti, have their cultural identity respected, as well as the identity of the gospel developed.[50] The new community is called to discipleship and mission—a "discipleship that consists of the commitment to transform their sociocultural context in view of the establishment of the Kingdom and the mission as the sending to all peoples to offer the gift of the Good News."[51]

The endoculturation of the Church does not consist in the creation of a new Church in the sense of a schismatic movement, much less in the reproduction of a pre-established model, but in the emergence of a Church in and of the same Church of Jesus Christ—culturally new and, consequently, pluricultural. There should be mutual respect between the institutional and world church and the cultural and local church.

7. A Method of Critical Contextualization

In this study we have also selected a neo-orthodoxy methodology for analysis, critical contextualization. This is a methodology widely adopted by Protestant missionaries. To conduct critical contextualization, first of all, Hiebert encourages gathering information about a specific culture in a non-critical way, followed by the analysis of the customs associated with their faith.[52] This approach can also be seen as recommending first an implicit evangelization, and then an explicit evangelization.

Hiebert discusses three dimensions of culture: the cognitive, affective, and evaluative. He identifies the relevant themes of the culture under study which the missionary must be aware of in the first contact. These cultural themes must be accepted at first in a sympathetic and empathetic way. Later they can be critiqued while seeking to understand all of them.[53]

[49] Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 38.

[50] Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 39.

[51] Brighenti, *Por uma Evangelização Inculturada*, 39.

[52] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 186.

[53] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 30.

According to Hierbert, cognitive themes are those that deal with shared knowledge.[54] Without such knowledge, communication and community life are impossible. Knowledge provides the conceptual content of a culture, and organizes and categorizes it into larger systems of knowledge. Some cultures divide the rainbow into seven colors, for example, while others, such as the *Telugus* in southern India, divide it into two: *erras,* warm colors, and *patsas,* cool colors. It is knowledge that defines what exists and what is invented.

People interact with reality using cognitive themes. For example, Christians speak of God, angels, the devil, sin, and salvation. Hindus, in turn, speak of *devas* (gods), *rakshasas* (demons), *karma* (the cosmic law that punishes and rewards gods, human beings and animals, as well as determines their future lives), and *moksha* (release from the endless cycles of births and re-births, commonly referred to as salvation). Other people attribute illnesses to witchcraft. It is through common beliefs that communication and community life are possible.[55]

Culture also encompasses people's feelings. Attitudes, notions of beauty, food and clothing preferences, personal tastes, and the way they rejoice and suffer are examples of how affective themes work in culture. Depending on the culture, for example, some tribes solve their problems with aggression or with calm and self-control.[56]

Different religions use meditation, mysticism, and substances to achieve inner peace and tranquility, while others have parties, dances, frenetic music, and self-flagellation to reinforce the ecstasy. Cultures vary in how they deal with emotions. Products that make people different, such as clothes, food, houses, furniture, and transport, among others, are part of the affective themes. Otherwise all food and clothing would be the same.

Finally, emotions, such as love, hate, respect, and joy are communicated through gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. In expressive cultures art, literature, music, theater, and dance manifest such themes and ways of seeing the world.

Hiebert shows that the aesthetic culture is often poorly understood by missionaries and encourages them to research affective themes in the cultures in which they work, as these things show how people live on a daily

[54] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 30–32.

[55] Paul G. Hiebert, *Transformando Cosmovisões: Uma Análise Antropológica de Co-mo as Pessoas Mudam* (São Paulo: Vida Nova, 2016), 59–61.

[56] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 32–33.

basis.[57] The result is seen among lay members, as well as their clergy leaders. The missionary who is concerned with an approximation of culture, with incentive to research and observation of expressive culture, is led to approach and respect the environment in which he or she is seeking to contextualize the message.

Prejudices toward cultural aspects, particularly in relation to affective themes in a culture, can represent barriers to the transmission of the Christian message. Christ Himself dressed and ate according to His cultural environment. He participated in parties and attended synagogues. He even mingled with marginalized subcultures and interacted with people of different professions. Such behaviors of Christ demonstrates how the Christian message can interact with the affective themes of the culture.

Hiebert also argues that every culture has values. Since human relations are judged as moral or immoral, each culture determines what is right or wrong.[58] For example, in American culture it is worse to tell a lie than to hurt someone's feelings, but in Lebanese culture, it is more important to console someone even if it means twisting the truth a little. Every culture has its own moral code and its own culturally-defined "sins." That cultural baggage is manifested in two ways: behavior and everything created by humans, i.e., products. These two ways allow human beings to see, hear, and experience the culture of the other.[59]

Understanding the themes of a specific culture also helps missionaries to prepare for the culture shock. Hiebert defines that psychological discomfort as the disorientation that one experiences when all the maps and cultural guidelines that one learns as a child no longer work, therefore, one becomes confused, frightened, and angry, not knowing what to do.[60] This whole shock process makes a sympathetic reception of the culture challenging.

Hiebert also affirms the importance of theological presuppositions for missionary activity, stating that they cannot be separated from Anthropological models of theology.[61] The history of humans needs to be understood within cosmic events, pointing to a God who participates in human history, since the mission is His (*missio Dei).* Through His actions, one

[57] Hiebert, *Transformando Cosmovisões*, 134.

[58] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 33–34.

[59] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 35.

[60] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 66.

[61] Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 16–17.

understands the main foundations of God's being manifested in cultural and human environments. Therefore, in the action of God, theology and anthropology meet. Concepts such as the *missio Dei,* the kingdom of God, the church, and the priesthood of all believers are essential to the practice of critical contextualization.

Another central concept for Hiebert is worldview, which he defines as "the assumptions and fundamental cognitive, affective and evaluative structures that a group adopts in relation to the nature of reality and that it uses to organize its life."[62] It involves the images or mental maps that people make of the reality of all the things that human beings employ to live their lives. It is the cosmos that is considered true, desirable, and moral by a community. Basically, the lived experiences transit through the beliefs, feelings, and values of a culture, resulting in decision-making to produce the resulting behavior.

Hiebert points out five functions of the worldview that operates in human beings.[63] A cosmovision gives (1) *cognitive foundations* that base all explanations for life and (2) *emotional security* in a world of crises that plague life all the time. That is why rites such as weddings, funerals, initiations, celebrations, and gatherings of a community are important. It provides (3) a *legitimation of deeper cultural norms,* which offer the ideas of justice and sin, as well as dealing justly and punishing wrong. The worldview (4) *integrates the culture* while organizing ideas, feelings, and values in a general plan and giving a unified view of reality, and (5) *monitors cultural change*. There is always a constant confrontation of ideas, behaviors, and products that can come from different places and will challenge the personal worldview. The worldview dictates what can be readjusted or rejected, also reinterpreting some assumptions. Such changes are the objective of observation by the missionaries, because in them there is found the core of their activities: to transform worldviews.

The missionary's objective should not be to dominate or abandon the worldview a person has, but to redeem it. One should take others' world-view seriously. One might even disagree with aspects of it, but the desire to understand and share the good news of the gospel with such a specific group demands sensitivity to the culture. A worldview represents how things really are perceived, a real map about truth and meaning. If the world

62 Hiebert, *Transformando Cosmovisões*, 31.

63 Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 48–49.

view is not shaped by the gospel, there is a risk that changes will happen only in behavioral patterns.

After considering the more implicit process of contextualization, Hiebert turns to the explicit dimension, while proposing three different approaches toward cultural traditions.[64] The first is the denial of the old, which happens when the missionary rejects contextualization. This rejection is rooted in the ethnocentrism of the missionary when they compare the gospel with their own culture. This attitude has two consequences: The gospel becomes foreign to the local culture and is soon rejected, or the old continues to undergird the culture so there is syncretism. A second attitude is that of uncritical acceptance, resulting in almost no change, as one judges that all cultural manifestations are essentially good. Hence, there is a disregard for cultural and corporate sins thwarting the gospel invitation to change. This also results in syncretism.

The third option is the critical contextualization proposed by Hiebert. As part of this approach, Hiebert suggests four steps in how to deal with cultural traditions. First, one gathers information about a tradition or a cultural element; second, he or she studies biblical teachings that apply to that element with a local congregation, who develops a theology based on exegetical precision and the cultural reading of the Bible; then they evaluate their own customs in the light of the biblical teachings; and, lastly, they create a new contextualized Christian practice. For the last step, he insists that the local people need to be the ones to decide what to keep, what to throw out, and how and what to modify. Suggested verbs to define this process are "create," "reject," "accept," "modify," "replace," or "tolerate."

8. Toward Culturally Sensitive Christian Mission in Japan

After analyzing two missiological proposals based on two different theological approaches, one can identify a common ground between them, as anticipated by Hesselgrave as discussed earlier in this article. Neoliberalism and neo-orthodoxy arise as alternatives for the conservative missionary activities that have not been successful in the Japanese context.

It is observed that current missiological initiatives have not been properly tried out as an academic application by the church in Japan. Throughout history, neither Catholicism nor Protestantism have managed to

64 Hiebert, *O Evangelho e a Diversidade das Culturas*, 188.

develop methodologies that confirm the Japanese identity that Shinto culture develops, nor been able to associate this identity with the confirmation of the lived gospel. Both inculturation and critical contextualization were incompletely applied in solving the problem of the lack of acceptance of Christianity by the Japanese.

Both proposals begin with the *missio Dei* and are based on the theology of the Trinity, in the salvific sacrifice of Christ, and in the spreading of the kingdom. It is believed that both philosophical and pedagogical aspects can join forces and find space in Christian missions in a country like Japan. Also, both ways follow a different path than the one taken in the first introduction of Christianity in Japan. Atsuyoshi Fujiwara points out that the missionaries believed in the superiority of Christianity over Japanese religion.[65] Xavier wrote that the mission in Japan would run well because there was no presence of Jews or Muslims there. Another missionary idea of Xavier was to debate against Buddhist scholars and leaders of that age, revealing no consideration for the religion of Japan or any other.

The combined method of inculturation and critical contextualization, as here proposed, takes into consideration the Shinto influence in Japanese culture. As presented, one should begin with implicit evangelization, through the affirmation of the local culture. It requires one to be open to understanding and experiencing aspects of the gospel in new ways so that the culture to be evangelized is prioritized and given opportunities to read and live the gospel message. It is a fight against ethnocentrism followed by a sympathetic and empathetic affirmation of the culture, seeking, for example, to learn about how God communicated with those people before the arrival of the missionary.

Then, a secondary phase of explicit evangelization is proposed. Through inculturation there is a common critical reflection done in the community. That is also part of the critical contextualization, which gathers cultural information, joins a group of local people, compares the information with biblical principles, and makes decisions about what to eliminate, replace, tolerate, maintain, and modify. Both proposals expect new believers to get engaged in evangelization and discipleship to keep the cycle going.

[65] Atsuyoshi Fujiwara, *Theology of Culture in a Japanese Context: A Believer's Church Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 197.

9. Toward Shinto Sensitive Christian Mission in Japan

The problem of Christianity in Japan is not an easy question to solve. The challenge of evangelization in Japan is real for both Catholics and Protestants, which points to the problem of Christianity in general. The situation is aggravated by denominational competition, with no discernible solution to a common problem. Mark R. Mullins highlights the problem by claiming that competition and conflict between various denominational missionary churches has led many Japanese to consider Christians as sectarian groups, since each one claims to be uniquely legitimate.[66] In fact, missionaries have been trying to find a solution for centuries.

Cultural and religious differences between Christians and Shintoists are enormous, and convergences need to be well thought out. But Shinto has not been taken seriously enough when it comes to Christian missions, something that in effect has undermined evangelism in Japan.[67] Careful research provides an honest and careful look at the values of the religion that profoundly impacted Japanese society. In searching for the "Seeds of the Verb," Christians will discover the "face" of Christ in a religion that they originally did not realize.

As Eiko Takamizawa indicates, in the history of the Catholic Church in the pre-modern era, there was a non-Christian approach both from missionaries and Christian *daimyos* to the local Japanese. Today the Protestant church is questioning whether it will take the same approach that failed previously.[68]

In addition to understanding Shinto, missionaries must allow themselves to be impacted by Shinto values. As Koyama indicates, one can only realize Asian theology through living, debating, eating, and being responsible for them.[69] It is not about ignoring problems between culture

[66] Mark R. Mullins, *Christianity Made in Japan: A Study of Indigenous Movements* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 28.

[67] Marcelo Reis Soares, "Xintoísmo e Cristianismo: Convergências, Diferenças e Proposições" (MA thesis, Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Paraná, 2022), 15.

[68] Eiko Takamizawa, "Is Japan a Mud Swamp? Exploring Causes of Kirishitan Persecution in Japan's Edo Period," in *Emerging Faith: Lessons from Mission History in Asia*, ed. Paul H. de Neui (Littleton, CO: William Carey Publishing, 2020), 224–45.

[69] Kosuke Koyama, "We had Rice with Jesus!," in *Asia Expressions of Christian Commitment: A Reader in Asian Theology*, ed. T. Dayanandan Francis and F. J. Balasundaram (Chennai, India: The Christian Literature Society, 1992), 15.

and missionaries but becoming aware of consistencies, in the first place, which allows one to critique the whole.

The visions of divinity and humanity in Shinto are in touch with the here and now and are truly concerned with human life, which has also been redeemed and valued by the death of Christ. Shinto purification does not place humanity as the main enemy, but rather the impurity that needs to be washed away.[70] For a Christian mind, sin is the true enemy and not humanity itself, which fosters a humanized view of others. The lack of a Shinto eschatological vision may balance out the problems of an overemphasis on the endtimes which could come with conspiracy theories. Once one focuses only on what will happen later, there can be a problem in not perceiving current issues. Shinto invites you to solve the problems of the present. Therefore, Shinto morality, even without a pre-established code, points to values that do not need to be written on a piece of paper but are truly incarnated in the Japanese people's lifestyle.

It is noted that there are differences and convergences between Shinto values and the Christian faith. Taking into consideration a plural Christianity, not every Christian may agree with all aspects. Some expressions of Christianity may find it easier to connect with Shinto. For example, there are several topics that can be explored when building bridges with Shintoism as an integral way of life, such as, honoring what is spiritual, valuing nature, values embodied in human life, the need for purification, and so on.

Differences between the two religions could also be mentioned. Those who would have been approached with sympathy and empathy, after an implicit evangelization, should establish agreements on specific terminology. One example is the understanding of peace as *wa,* which has similarities with the idea of *shalom*, even if *shalom* seems to be more complete. Even so, both *wa* and *shalom* invite the Western understanding to be reviewed to ask what peace really means, thus highlighting the transculturation process as a first challenge for missionaries who travel to a country far from their own.[71] Local missionaries could help the foreigners to understand better the meaning of *wa* and *shalom*.

The union of the theological matrices of Christianity can propose solutions to different challenges in Japan. An example is the hierarchical

[70] Soares, "Xintoísmo e Cristianismo," 121.

[71] Martin Heißwolf, *Japanese Understanding of Salvation: Soteriology in the Context of Japanese Animism* (Carlisle: Langham, 2018), 1:10038–41, Kindle.

(traditional) teaching setting, which usually takes place in a more orthodox context of discipleship. Due to the impact of Confucianism on Shinto, the Japanese tend to feel very comfortable with that model. Another example is liberation theology's interest in addressing contemporary social challenges. That emphasis can be helpful in the context of Japanese culture, which is influenced by the focus upon the "here and now" of Shinto.[72] It is evident that initiatives must not be seen in a simplistic way but as part of an integral culture that perceives problems in a holistic way.

The Japanese see Christianity as a Western endeavor that is threatening their lifestyle. Christians need to understand that Christ is already living with the Japanese in order to communicate the gospel within a Japanese identity. Therefore, Christian missionaries must allow for a "Japanese gospel" which contextualizes, inculturates, and also challenges Japanese culture.

The same discussion applies to current Christian expressions in Japan. Through contextualization and inculturation of the message, it is believed that the church can survive in the country and reverse the negative Christian experience in Japan. Furthermore, this whole process can produce a church attentive to the real problems of current Japanese society and thus make a difference that really makes a difference.

10. Conclusion

The analysis of two missiological methods that come from the two main strands of Christianity, Catholicism and Protestantism, can be placed in dialogue with each other and solutions be proposed for their common challenges. Both inculturation and critical contextualization propose a starting point in the local culture, and validating the revelation of the gospel found in the local culture before the arrival of the missionary. Both start from an implicit evangelization, based on sympathy, empathy and study of the culture, and they recommend secondarily that the missionary engage in an explicit evangelization. This will aid in detecting cultural issues and overcoming real or apparent contradictions with biblical values.

Concrete proposals for how the church should act in the Japanese environment start with the lack of experience of this missiological process. It would be premature to show definitive results, considering that it is admitted that the mission principles espoused here are not being implemented. The limited numbers of new persons being engagement in

[72] Heißwolf, *Japanese Understanding of Salvation*, 1:9216–25, Kindle.

the mission in Japan, and the limited bibliography that talks about the missiological implications in this context, demonstrate that new methodologies of mission have not been explored by the majority of the Christians in Japan. Therefore, the present research challenges new missionaries in new ways. What is proposed by this research are basic steps for the church toward the sharing of the gospel in that society. Some of the ideas presented here serve as pointers for how to start evangelistic initiatives that respect the Japanese and considers Shinto. Hope fuels the desire to present Jesus in a way in which He is recognized by the Japanese, who—like all human beings—are called to seek the path of grace and freedom offered through the lordship of Christ.

Mission results could be different only when Christian leaders and missionaries see the need for contextualized approaches in Japan. We suggest abandoning the focus on denominational competition, validating the "Seeds of the Verb" in Shintoism, and encouraging the Japanese to read the biblical text themselves in their cultural setting. Therefore, the results obtained would not be so much the transformations of Shinto, but the changes in the experience of Christianity in Japan, including a whole new way of looking at Japanese culture and Shintoism and transformation of the host culture as a well.

The culturally sensitive missionary should appreciate Shinto, and long for a gospel recognized by everyone who has been impacted by the Shinto worldview and searches for Christ. Christians can appreciate Shinto values such as the concern for humanity and nature as a whole, for honoring human life, for emphasizing the need for purification, for valuing those who have already died, and for living the "Seeds of the Verb." It is possible to present the Christian faith to the Japanese in a way that their oriental values and priorities are enhanced by the gospel.