Critical Contextualization

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When is your initiation ceremony to be held?'' [the journalist asked].The reply was a depressing one. . . . "There will be no ceremony. God is against it. We have turned our backs on all these things."
  It was a breach with the past indeed. The *Katayino*, the great male initiation ceremony . . . is for the Panare [of Venezuela] the culmination of the annual cycle, and to them the equivalent of all the religious and secular feasts of the West rolled into one. . . . It ends with the boys' investiture with the loincloths signifying their attainment of adult status. . . . [T]o destroy the *Katayino* ceremony is to remove the corner-stone and expunge the future of their culture . . . No one understands this better than the missionaries, for whom all such ceremonies, and the wearing of the loincloth itself, shackles the Indian — as they see it — to the heathen past (Lewis 1983:21).

This report in a recent Sunday magazine of the *London Times* is obviously written with an anti-Christian bias. Nevertheless, it raises one of the most troublesome questions facing missionaries. What should people do with their past customs when they become Christians?

Similar questions were asked of us not long ago by new high caste converts in a South Indian village. "Should the parents of the bride wash the feet of the groom as is our custom or is this unChristian?" "May our wives wear *tikkas* [spots on the forehead]?" "May we attend the Hindu funerals of our nonChristian relatives?"

Must all of a people's past culture change when they become Christians? If not, what must change and who should make the decisions? How should a missionary or church leader respond to traditional rituals, songs, myths, proverbs and other cultural customs? Answers cannot be delayed, for children are born, young people want to be married, the aged die and crops must be planted.

Reject the Old

One common response has been to reject all old customs as pagan. Drums,

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songs, dramas, dances, body decorations, certain types of dress and food, marriage customs and funeral rites have been condemned because they were thought to be directly or indirectly related to traditional religions.

For missionaries and outsiders, this rejection is often rooted in ethnocentrism. We all see our own cultures as positive because we understand and appreciate them, and they are ours. We tend to prejudge other cultures using as the criteria for our judgments the standards of our culture rather than those of the Bible.

Many missionaries, however, are aware of the fact that in most traditional cultures no sharp lines can be drawn between religious and mundane practices. The mental compartmentalization and social specialization that make distinctions between sacred and secular beliefs, behavior, roles and institutions in modern societies are not found in many tribal and peasant cultures. In societies where all traditional customs have religious connotations, some missionaries feel that they must be rejected wholesale.

This wholesale rejection of old customs, however, creates several serious theological and missiological problems. First, it is based on the implicit assumption that the cultural forms of western Christians are themselves Christian. An uncritical rejection of other cultures as pagan is generally tied to an uncritical acceptance of our own cultural expressions as biblical. Consequently, we are in danger of losing a prophetic stance that calls our own culture into judgment, and of making Christianity a civil religion that justifies our cultural ways (cf. Linder and Pierard 1978).

A second problem is that new customs must be found to replace the old ones that have been rejected. Too often the missionary imports customs from his or her own culture, unaware that these will be reinterpreted and often misunderstood within the local culture. For example, missionaries in India rejected the red sariis used by Hindu brides, and substituted white ones, not realizing that in India red stands for fertility and life, and white for barrenness and death.

The importation of cultural practices from outside has made Christianity a foreign religion in many lands, and alienated Christians from their own peoples and cultures. It is this foreignness and not the offense of the Gospel that has often kept people from following Christ. We must be careful not to confuse the two.

In the third place, attempts to suppress old customs generally fail. Paun points out,

Many missionaries have come to realize that an attempt to eradicate an undesirable custom may merely drive it underground or result in an undesirable reactionary behavior (1975:208).

It is not uncommon, for instance, in places where missionaries and pastors have tried to eradicate old ways, for the people to have a formal wedding in the church, and then to go to the bush or town for the "real celebration." There the old customs are perpetuated out of sight of the leaders. Too often, the leaders end up as "policemen" trying to enforce the rules they have made.

A fourth problem is that past customs and beliefs that go underground often combine with orthodox practices and resurface in the form of Christopaganism (cf. Yamamori and Taber 1975). For example, the worship of traditional African gods in the privacy of many Latin American homes combined in many instances with the Catholic veneration of the Christian saints and led to the perpetuation of the old beliefs under a Christian veneer.

Finally, when decisions to reject old customs and to replace them with new ones are made by the missionary or pastor, the church as a body does not mature. The Christians remain spiritual children who learn compliance, not personal discipleship. A strong church is based upon the priesthood of all believers, and all members must be taught to discern right and wrong in their own lives, to encourage one another in leaving old ways they have corporately rejected, and to check the errors of the leaders.

Accept the Old

A second response to traditional practices has been to accept them uncritically into the church. The old cultural ways are seen as basically good, and few if any changes are thought to be necessary when people become Christians.

Those who advocate this approach generally have a deep respect for other peoples and their cultures, and recognize the high value people place on their own cultural heritage. They also recognize that the foreignness of the Gospel has been one of the major barriers to its acceptance. Consequently, they stress the communication of the Gospel in indigenous forms and call for little or no cultural dislocation.

This approach, too, has serious weaknesses. A tendency exists to overlook the fact that there are corporate and cultural sins as well as personal ones. Sin is found in the institutions and structures of a society, and to overlook this is to bar sin at the front door of the church, but to allow it in at the back. We dare not equate indigenization with an uncritical acceptance of a culture. The Gospel calls both individuals and societies to change. Indigenization is communicating the Gospel in ways the people understand, but in ways that challenge them in their personal and corporate lives with God's call to discipleship.

New converts often feel this call to change most deeply, and are most adamant in rejecting specific customs in their past. This is particularly true in situations where power encounters occur (cf. Tippett 1971). But we must not confuse rejections made by the people themselves with those imposed upon them from without.

An uncritical acceptance of a culture also opens the door to syncretism of all kinds. It is based on the philosophical assumption of cultural relativism, and, as Berger points out (1970), relativism in the end destroys all authority. The result is generally some form of eclectic neo-paganism.
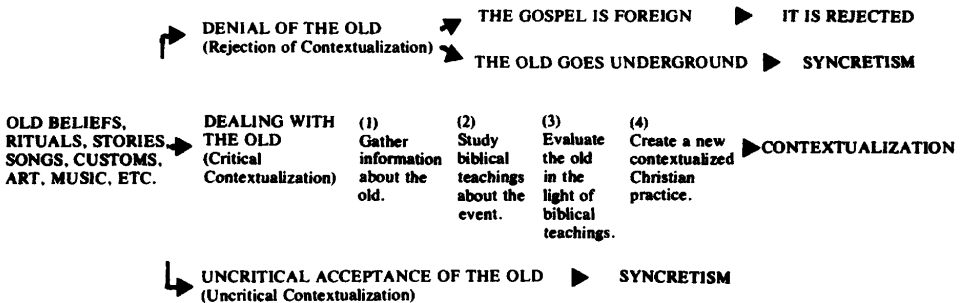
Dealing With the Old

Are there other alternatives open to us? A third approach to past customs is

to deal with them consciously in a process I call critical contextualization.[1] In this the old is neither rejected or accepted uncritically. It is explicitly examined with regard to its meanings and functions in the society, and then evaluated in the light of biblical norms (see figure 1).

How does this occur? First, the church becomes aware of the need to deal with some area of its life. This awareness may arise as people are faced with specific occasions such as funerals or the planting of crops. Or someone may sensitize the church to practices that need to be examined. This discernment of areas of Christian life that need biblical critique is one of the important functions of the leaders in the church, for failure to deal with the culture in which the church finds itself often allows subChristian practices to enter the Christian community unnoticed. An example of this is the failure of many western churches to critique their own dating practices, marriage and funeral rites, music and entertainment and business and governmental procedures.[2]

FIGURE 1 — TYPES OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

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                    DENIAL OF THE OLD          THE GOSPEL IS FOREIGN    ▶  IT IS REJECTED
                    (Rejection of Contextualization)
                                               THE OLD GOES UNDERGROUND ▶  SYNCRETISM

OLD BELIEFS,        DEALING WITH   (1)        (2)        (3)         (4)
RITUALS, STORIES,   THE OLD        Gather     Study      Evaluate    Create a new    ▶ CONTEXTUALIZATION
SONGS, CUSTOMS,     (Critical      information biblical   the old     contextualized
ART, MUSIC, ETC.    Contextualization) about the teachings in the     Christian
                                   old.       about the  light of     practice.
                                              event.     biblical
                                                         teachings.

                    UNCRITICAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE OLD  ▶  SYNCRETISM
                    (Uncritical Contextualization)
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Second, the missionary or pastor leads the congregation in the gathering and analysis of the various practices that make up the custom under examination. For example, in dealing with traditional funeral rites, the people should list each song, dance, recitation and rite that makes up the ceremony, and discuss its meaning and function with the overall ritual. The purpose here is to understand the old ways with empathy. Consequently the leader must remain nonjudgmental, for the rush to judgment at this point is to close the door on dealing with the custom. People fear the criticisms of their leaders, and will not openly discuss past practices if they fear being condemned.

Third, the pastor or missionary should lead the church in a Bible study related to the question at hand. For example, he or she can use the occasion of a wedding or funeral to teach people the Christian beliefs about marriage and death. This draws upon what the leaders have most to contribute, namely their knowledge of the Bible. It is important that the people clearly understand and accept the biblical teachings, for failure here leads to an incomplete processing on their part of their cultural past. Obviously, as members of the congregation grow in spiritual maturity, they, too, should be encouraged to take an active part in studying and interpreting the scriptures.

Fourth, the people should be led to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to reach a decision regarding their use. It is important that the leader not impose a judgment upon the people. He or she may share personal opinions and suggest possible consequences of various decisions (cf. Loewen 1975), but the people themselves must make the decision if the leaders wish to avoid becoming policemen.

To involve people in evaluating their own culture draws upon their strength. They know the meanings of their own customs better than the missionary. Discernment also builds their maturity. In the end, the people themselves will enforce decisions arrived at corporately, and there is little likelihood that the customs they reject will go underground.

A congregation may respond in several ways after evaluating old customs in the light of biblical norms. It will choose to keep many old practices because it finds them not unbiblical. Most western Christians, for example, see no problem in singing secular songs such as "Home, Home on the Range," wearing business suits or driving cars. The greatest part of their culture they share with their nonChristian neighbors, and much of it came from their preChristian past.

Other customs the congregation will explicitly reject as unbecoming of Christians. The reasons for this rejection may not be apparent to the missionary who may see little difference between the songs and rites they reject and those they retain. But the people know the deeper hidden meanings of their own customs.

Occasionally the congregation will modify old practices in order to give them explicit Christian meanings, as Wesley did when he used the melodies of popular bar songs but gave them Christian words. Sometimes it will reinterpret old customs altogether, as western Christians did in their use of bridesmaids, who originally were used as decoys to draw off the power of those in the audience having an evil eye so as to spare the health and life of the bride. At other times the congregation will secularize what was once sacred, as the European church did with Grecian art.

Christians in young churches may incorporate foreign elements into their rituals, or replace a nonChristian custom with one borrowed from elsewhere. These functional substitutions are effective, for they minimize cultural dislocation and the foreignness of the Gospel, so long as the decisions to borrow them are made by the people. The churches will also add new rituals such as baptism and the Lord's Supper not only to give expression to their new faith, but also to symbolize their ties to the historical and international Church.

Finally, the people may create new symbols and rites that convey new Christian meanings, in forms understood within their own culture. For example, the faculty and students at a leading seminary in India decided to cut stalks of ripened grain to mark the inauguration of a new missions center. The conscious creation of new symbols and rituals by a congregation is one of the

most powerful ways of expressing the new Christian message in indigenous forms, yet it is probably the method most overlooked.

Having led the people to analyze their customs in the light of biblical teachings, the missionary or pastor must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of that tradition. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teachings. It will also be indigenous, for the congregation has created it using forms the people understand within their own culture.

Here a word of caution is needed. The leader may not always agree with the decisions the people make, but it is important, as far as conscience allows, to accept the decisions of the congregation. The church grows more by consciously making decisions in the light of scriptures, even when it does not make the wisest judgment, than by simply obeying orders from others.

An Example of Critical Contextualization

Cases illustrating this process of critical contextualization can be drawn from around the world, but one from the U.S. can illustrate both the process and its relevance to western churches in their response to their own cultures. We generally see the syncretism in churches in other cultures more clearly than we see it in our own. This is particularly true of churches like those in the west which, through long interaction with the surrounding culture, have developed a comfortable accommodation to it.

The case involved the young people in an inner-city Los Angeles church who faced the question whether or not they should listen to hard rock music. Since most new converts were from gangs and the drug trail, they knew the hidden messages in many of the contemporary songs.

The response of many Christian parents in such a situation is to reject rock music altogether. As a result, their children often listen to rock at their friends' homes, and the parents end up as policemen. Other parents give in without a fight and permit their children to listen to rock uncritically. Their children learn no discernment and accept naively the ways of the world.

The youth leader in this Los Angeles church used critical contextualization to deal with the issue. He had the young people bring their rock records to a Bible study. There he discussed with them the ideal biblical life style of young Christians and the place of music in their lives. Then the young people played each record and evaluated it. Those they decided were unbecoming of Christians they broke. The rest they kept. On Sunday morning they triumphantly brought before the congregation the records they had broken for the Lord.

Theological Foundations

In the process of contextualization, the answers arrived at have theological significance, and so does the process itself. It is well, therefore, to examine the theological foundations underlying the process of critical contextualization.

The first is the priesthood of believers. In critical contextualization decisions are made not by the leadership for the believers; they are made by involving all of the believers. Leaders throughout history have been threatened by this approach, for they believe themselves to have greater understanding than the laity. They are also afraid that things will get out of hand.

What does keep matters from getting out of hand when one uses critical contextualization? Does the process not open the door to all types of wild interpretation of the scriptures and of Christian practices? (This assumes, of course, that leaders acting by themselves do not give such interpretations.)

There are three checks involved in critical contextualization. First, the Bible is taken as the final and definitive authority. We deal here only with the question of exegesis and hermeneutics — what did the text mean in the context in which it was written, and what does it mean for us in our situation?

Second, the priesthood of believers assumes that all believers have the Holy Spirit, who guides them in the understanding and application of the Scriptures to their own lives. It is all too easy for leaders, including missionaries, to accept this belief in theory, but to shy away from it in practice. But to deny young believers the right to be involved in decisions — even decisions regarding the interpretation of the Scriptures — is to deny that the same Holy Spirit who guides us in the truth is also leading them.

Third, there is the check of the church. As Kraus so effectively points out (1979), the contextualization of the Gospel is ultimately not the task of individuals or of leaders, but of the church as a "discerning community." Here we can do no better than to quote him at length:

Thus the Scripture can find its proper meaning as witness only within a *community of interpretation*. Principles of interpretation are important, but secondary. There needs to be an authentic correspondence between gospel announcement and a "new order" embodied in community for Scripture to play its proper role as part of the original witness. The authentic community is the hermeneutical community. It determines the actual enculturated meaning of Scripture.

According to Luke's account in Acts, individual witness was delayed in the first instance until the new *koinonia* of the Spirit was formed. . . . Peter's sermon was preached "standing in the midst" of the disciples . . . It was the community, under the apostles' leadership, that interpreted the Scriptures . . . as a witness to Jesus Christ, and the community under the aegis of the Spirit that decided questions of contextualization as the disciples spread the witness across cultural boundaries (Acts 15:28).

And so it remains today. The Bible, as guide and exemplar for authentic witness, can find its rightful place and function only in a community of discernment and obedience. "First of all [we] must understand that no prophetic word of scripture is a matter of one's own private interpretation (I Pet. 2:20).

We in the west, with our extreme forms of individualism, need to rediscover this corporate nature of the church in which the body checks the deviations of the individual, and in which the community of churches checks the deviations of the individual congregation. Just as others see our sins more clearly than we see them ourselves, so also others see our heresies more clearly than we see

them ourselves. Paradoxically, many of the young churches that have emerged in tribal societies have a far more biblical understanding of the church as a single body than those who come from "modern" societies.

In a critical contextualization that allows the church to act as a discerning community, Christians contribute according to their gifts and abilities. The leader or missionary has a greater knowledge of the Bible and assists in the exegesis of the appropriate texts. The people understand their culture and problems better and play an important part in determining the hermeneutical applications of the Scriptures to their settings.

Finally, the priesthood of believers assumes a model of growth and maturity. Young believers may not always make the wisest decisions, but by being involved in the decision-making process, they learn from their mistakes. But what about mistakes? Here the missionary and leader must allow the people the greatest privilege we all allow ourselves, namely the right to make mistakes. Much of what we all know theologically we have learned through failure and forgiveness.

Growth also involves an internalization of controls. There is a marked difference between compliance and true obedience. In the former, people observe rules not because they believe them, but because they accept the authority of leaders. In the latter, they act upon personal convictions. The former is characteristic of immaturity, and in the long run it leads to resentment and rebellion. The latter is characteristic of maturity and leads to mutual respect and cooperation.

A second theological foundation of critical contextualization has to do with the nature of contextualization itself. What is the relationship between the Gospel and its historico-cultural context? Uncritical rejection of a new context is often based upon an implicit assumption that meaning lies in the form. The two are seen as inseparable. This assumption guided the Roman Catholic church for many years when it insisted that the liturgy be said only in Latin. Along the same line, conservative Protestant missionaries have emphasized formal translations and imported their own denominational theologies and liturgical patterns. But this approach is in danger of equating the Gospel with the culture of the missionaries. The result, as Linder and Pierard (1978) point out, is that Christianity becomes a civil religion used to justify the cultural practices of the west. This approach also takes an unjustifiably negative view of other cultures.

Reacting to this equation of form and meaning, some leaders have adopted extreme forms of dynamic equivalence translation in which meanings are totally divorced from forms. Any form is accepted so long as the meaning is preserved. But Polanyi points out (1969:189ff) that forms and meanings are related in different ways in different levels of discourse. Some meanings consist of conceptions. For these the tie between forms and meanings is weak, and the translator has greater liberty in changing the forms without losing the meanings. But some meanings bear on objective events, and the forms and meanings are closely linked. In such cases one must remain true to the

objective facts in order to preserve the message. Nida and Reyburn apply this concept to biblical translation. They write,

[I]n contrast with the religious treatises of Buddhism (which contain primarily philosophically derived ethical principles) and with the Koran (which focuses upon the exhortations and warnings of the prophet), the Bible is rooted in history and consists primarily in recounting how God has entered history to reveal the divine power, will and person. Biblical faith is thus firmly rooted in events — in a God who acts . . . It is obvious, therefore, that the events recorded in the Bible cannot be altered (1981:29).

On another level, we must take into account the fact that symbols, whether words, objects or behavioral practices, operate in historical and cultural settings. Once forms have been given meanings, the relationship between them is no longer arbitrary. Attempts to redefine forms must always take into account the history and contemporary usage of those forms. For example, while Christians in India may seek to redefine the word *deva* to fit the Christian concept of God, they are a small minority in the country and can hardly do so in the face of the overwhelming historical and contemporary use of the word with Hindu connotations. In short, in uncritical contextualization we are in danger of losing the message of the Gospel itself.

A second danger in uncritical contextualization is syncretism. Because it does not examine carefully the meanings of words and practices in their cultural settings, it fails to detect their *implicit* connotations. Consequently, these slip into the message unnoticed and produce syncretisms at the deepest levels of world view.

True contextualization, whether of word, practice or institutional structure, requires a deep knowledge of the historico-cultural contexts of both the Christian message and the culture into which it is to be planted. This must include a knowledge not only of the explicit meanings of cultural forms, but also the implicit theological assumptions upon which they rest.

Finally, from a theological point of view, contextualization is always an ongoing process. It is not a static state we can attain. This does not mean we can ignore the great insights of the church down through history. We have much to learn from the theological debates and resolutions of the past. But we must test theologies against the Scriptures and make them our own. And we must extend our theology to answer questions not yet asked by the churches in the west — questions that arise in new cultural settings. Theologizing must be a living, growing experience, and the use of critical contextualization in dealing with the problems faced in mission settings, and in dealing with different areas of our own lives can help make it so.

Notes

1. I am indebted here to the work done among the Wanana Indians of Panama carried out by Jacob Loewen and John Goertz. Many of the ideas presented in this paper arise out of discussions with them about the processes of indigenization they encouraged in the young Wanana church.

2. Ironically, some of the better critiques of American rituals come from secular sources. One example of this is Jessica Mitford's *The American Way of Death* published by Fawcett Publications, Inc.

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