Critical Contextualization

Paul G. Hiebert

A great deal has been written on contextualization in the past few years (see bibliographies of Bevans 1985, Gitari 1982, Haleblian 1983, and Lind 1982). I shall not summarize this literature or trace its development. Rather, I wish to propose a model, made up of three "ideal types" in the Weberian sense, which we can use to examine the ways in which Protestant missionaries have handled the problem over the past 100 years. This is not a history of events, but an analysis of how missionaries dealt with the awareness of cultural pluralism that swept the West following the age of exploration.

I shall limit myself to the narrow question of how the missionaries responded to the traditional beliefs and practices of new converts—in other words, to the "old" culture. Missionaries do not enter cultural vacuums. The people to whom they go are members of ongoing societies and cultures. The people raise food and build houses. They marry their young and bury their dead. They pray to their gods and propitiate their spirits. How did—and how should—missionaries who bring a new gospel respond to the old one?

The data will be drawn from the Indian scene, which has a long history of debates on the subject and with which I am most familiar. I believe, however, that the model is applicable to many other parts of the world.

Early Responses to the Question

There is a long history of answers given in missions to the question of what to do with traditional cultures. The early Roman Catholic missionaries struggled with the issue when they came to India. They were impressed with the sophistication of Indian culture. In many ways it was superior to that of Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But they were sharply divided over the question of what to do with the existing culture. The Jesuits advocated accommodation and the retention of traditional Indian cultural forms. The Franciscans contended that they were selling out the gospel.

Early Protestant missionaries, too, were impressed with the Indian culture and its philosophical foundations. Many of them learned Indian languages well enough not only to produce dictionaries and to write classical literature and hymnology in them, but also to translate Indian sacred texts into German and English. This was later to play an important role in the rise of the Orientalist movement in the West. By the early nineteenth century, however, a major shift had taken place. With some notable exceptions, Protestant missionaries entered an era of noncontextualization.

The Era of Noncontextualization

Roughly from 1800 to 1950 most Protestant missionaries in India, and later in Africa, rejected the beliefs and practices of the people they served as "pagan." John Pobee writes: ". . . to the

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present time all the historical churches by and large implemented the doctrine of the *tabula rasa*, i.e. the missionary doctrine that there is nothing in the non-Christian culture on which the Christian missionary can build and, therefore, every aspect of the traditional non-Christian culture had to be destroyed before Christianity could be built up." Consequently, the gospel was seen by the people as a foreign gospel. To become Christian one had to accept not only Christianity but also Western cultural ways.

In view of the earlier willingness to use traditional cultural forms, what had changed? Why this growing rejection of existing cultures?

Rise of Colonialism

One reason was the emergence of colonialism with its belief in the superiority of Western cultures. The expansion of the East India Trading Company in India came at a time when the Mogul and Vijayanagar empires were decadent and collapsing. By default it became not only the economic but also the political master of much of India. The process was completed in 1858 when, because of the Indian Mutiny, the British government made India its star colony.

Colonialism proved to the West its cultural superiority. Western civilization had triumphed. It was the task, therefore, of the West to bring the benefits of this civilization to the world. Old medical systems were seen as witchcraft and hocus-pocus, and had to be stamped out. Old governments were seen as feudalistic and had to be replaced by modern, national governments. The result was "direct" rule in which the British sought to replace the Indian governmental structures from the top to the bottom.

For Christians, the parallel was the superiority of the gospel. Paganism had to be rooted out. Many missionaries, in fact, equated the two. Christianity, civilization and, later, commerce (the three Cs) went hand in hand. Western civilization was spreading around the world, and it was assumed that people would become both Christian and "modern." There was no need, therefore, to study old cultures or to take them seriously. They were on the way out.

Not all rejection of traditional cultures, however, was rooted in a naïve equation of Christianity with Western civilization, as Pobee suggests. Some missionaries developed a deep understanding of the local cultures. For example, in India, W. T. Elmore, H. Whitehead, and W. H. and C. V. Wiser wrote early ethnographies based on their lives in the villages. There they came face to face with Indian culture little changed by modernity and Christianity, and saw the burning of widows, infant sacrifice to idols, the cruelties of untouchability, and demon worship.

These missionaries were profoundly aware that in peasant and tribal societies, religion is at the center of culture and permeates most of its forms. Food, clothing, house construction, marriages, markets, farming, fishing, hunting, festivals, music, dance, and drums all had religious significance in traditional cultures. In India, even the direction in which you place your head when you sleep has theological importance. If that is the case, they argued, religion and culture, and forms and meanings cannot be arbitrarily separated. One cannot simply change the meanings of old forms in order to communicate the gospel, for the ties between them are rooted in social convention and cultural history.

The only way to avoid syncretism was to bring radical changes into the whole of the culture.

The Theory of Cultural Evolution

A second reason for the rejection of non-Western cultures was the emergence of the theory of cultural evolution. If the political solution to the awareness of cultural pluralism created by the age of exploration was colonialism, the intellectual solution was evolutionism. Westerners could ignore other cultures by labeling them "primitive," "animistic," and "uncivilized." In fact, anthropologists until 1915 spoke of "culture," not of "cultures." They saw all cultures as different stages of development of the same thing; some were more advanced and others more primitive.

After the debates over the monogenetic versus polygenetic origins of human races that had wracked anthropology in the last half of the nineteenth century, anthropoligists united in emphasizing the commonness of all humanity. Differences, therefore, whether in race or culture, were seen as variations in the same thing, not as different things.

Christians argued with secular biologists over biological evolution, but cultural evolution was another matter. While biological evolution challenged the fundamental Christian tenet of the uniqueness and divine nature of human beings, cultural evolution was simply another updating (along with Marxism) of the Christian medieval paradigm that sought meaning in a universal history of humankind. Both sought meaning in diachronic (historical) rather than synchronic (structural) paradigms. Both saw history as directional—with an origin, a progression or regression, and a culmination in an ideal state whether through redemption or development.[1] There was argument over the causes of historical progression, but not over the fact that history was going somewhere.

Given this historical paradigm, noncontextualization made sense. Why contextualize the gospel in other cultures when they are in the process of dying out? It is only a matter of time before all people are civilized. What is important, therefore, is to bring the gospel along with civilization.

The Triumph of Science

A third factor leading to the rejection of other cultures was the triumph of science. When William Carey went to India, he was much impressed by its cultural sophistication. Certainly in the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries there was nothing in Europe comparable to the sophistication and technological advancement of the Mogul empire.

The rise of science changed all this. By the end of the nineteenth century, Western technology had conquered the world, and science had made giant strides in conquering nature. Faith in the final triumph of science was widespread. As late as 1953, in his Reith Lectures for the British Broadcasting Corporation, J. Robert Oppenheimer could say without fear of contradiction: "Science has changed the conditions of man's life. . . . the ideas of science have changed the way men think of themselves and of the world" (Raven 1953:101). Sir Frances Smith could write in the preface of his *The Neglect of Science:* "The world to-day is moulded, in the last resort, by scientific discovery. . . . whether we like it or not, science is forcing the pace" (1951:iv). As C. A. Coulson points out (1955:20):

> It is important to realize that . . . the influences of a scientific view . . . have passed far beyond mere technology or gadgeteering. We may begin there, because that is about as far as the man-in-the-street, or the young apprentice at his lathe, can state his beliefs.

But his unrecognized convictions go much deeper. For he knows that science grows, even though he may have no personal knowledge of any of its fundamental principles; and he knows that scientific controversy nearly always issues in a universal agreement, frequently very quickly. Science becomes the cohesive force in modern society, the ground on which may be built a secure way of life for man and for communities.

F. S. C. Northrop of Yale added (1952:9): "[I]f one wants to understand the culture of the United States, one must not look at its departments of economics, sociology or politics, important as they are, but at its universal education in the natural sciences and their skills, its agricultural colleges, technological institutes and research laboratories."

Underlying this optimism was a positivist (or, to use Ian Barbour's term, "naïve realist") epistemology (cf. Hiebert 1985a and 1985b). This held that a careful examination of experience can lead us to the discovery of the "laws of nature," which upon further examination can be proved to be "true." Scientific knowledge was seen as objective (uncontaminated by the subjectivity of the scientist), cumulative, and true in an ultimate sense. In contrast to this, the knowledge of other cultures was thought to be subjective, piecemeal, and false.

The same epistemological foundations were widespread among many conservative Christians, including most missionaries. Only here, theology replaced science, and revelation re-

placed experience. Carefully crafted, theology could be totally objective and absolutely true. In the light of this, other religions were seen as highly subjective and totally false. Consequently, Christians did not need to take other religions seriously, just as scientists refused to take other belief systems about nature seriously. The task of the missionary was to transmit his or her theology into new cultures unchanged.

The wedding of Christianity and science in the minds of missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is not surprising. Herbert Butterfield (1949) and A. N. Whitehead (1926) have shown convincingly that science grew up within a Christian tradition, and for many years it was in no sense distinct or separate. Robert Grosseteste, founder of the first department of science at Oxford University, was later the bishop of Lincoln. The British Royal Society counted among its members numerous bishops and ministers. And leading scientists such as Robert Boyle, John Ray (founder of systematic botany and zoology), Christopher Wren (astronomer and architect), and Isaac Newton not only professed Christian faith but participated in theological debates.

The Intellectual Consequences of "Noncontextualization"

Colonialism demonstrated the superiority of Western civilization, evolutionism legitimized this in terms of history, and science and Christianity provided the intellectual foundations on which the whole was built. It is not surprising, therefore, that the period from 1800 to 1950 was anticontextual in its approach.

This stance was essentially monocultural and monoreligious. Truth was seen as supracultural. Everything had to be seen from the perspective of Western civilization and Christianity, which had shown themselves to be technologically, historically, and intellectually superior to other cultures; and so those cultures could be discounted as "uncivilized." The missionary's culture was "good," "advanced," and "normative." Other cultures were "bad," "backward," and "distorted." Christianity was true, other religions were false.

In missions this had two consequences. First, Christianity was perceived in other cultures as a foreign religion identified with Western culture. Christian converts were expected to adopt Western ways. This cultural foreignness was a great barrier in the spread of the gospel.

The second consequence was more subtle. Old beliefs and customs did not die out. Because they were not consciously dealt with, they went underground. Young converts knew they dare not tell the missionary about their old ways lest they incur his or her anger. So these ways became part of the new Christians' hidden culture. Public marriage ceremonies were held in the church, and then the people returned to their homes to celebrate the wedding in private. Amulets were hidden under shirts, and Christians did not admit to Christian doctors that they were also going to the village shaman. In India caste differences were denied in public, although Christians privately continued to marry their children along caste lines.

In the long run, this uneasy coexistence of public Christianity and private "paganism" has led to syncretism. Non-Christian beliefs and practices have infiltrated the church from below. In India caste is becoming public in the church and destroying it with political strife and lawsuits. In Latin America, spiritism taught by nannies to upper-class children is becoming public and respectable in Kardicism and Umbanda.

From a Christian point of view this monocultural point of view has its good sides. First, it affirmed the oneness of humanity and of human history. Second, it took history and culture change seriously. Third, it affirmed absolutes and universals, both in human cultures and in the gospel. It was concerned with preserving the uniqueness of the gospel and avoiding the syncretism that might result from the incorporation of non-Christian beliefs and practices in the church.

But this view also had its bad sides. It was reductionist and acultural—it did not take other cultures and religions seriously. It was ethnocentric—it judged other cultures and religions by its own standards and found them wanting, while assuming that its own ways were right. And in the end it hindered the missionary task. The foreignness of the gospel was a barrier to evangelism, and syncretism was not prevented. Far too often the missionaries ended as policemen enforcing what they believed to be Christian practices on the people.

The Case for Contextualization

The picture began to change by the end of the nineteenth century. Colonial rule was expanding, but already the seeds of its destruction had been planted. These were to bear fruit in the recognition that other cultures had to be understood and appreciated in terms of their own worldviews, and in a revolution that would call into question the nature and supremacy of science itself.

Postcolonialism

By 1900 three important forces were at work that would bring about the destruction of colonialism and its intellectual founda-

tions. The first of these was the growing cry against colonialism voiced in the West. As Conrad Reining points out (1970), by 1833 the Defense of the Natives League had been formed to oppose colonial oppression. This was a loose coalition of humanists of various stripes, of evangelical Christians led by Wilberforce, and of other fruits of the Wesleyan revivals. Shortly thereafter Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson articulated in the "three-self" formula the need for churches to be organizationally independent. Discussions about the contextualization of the gospel message in local cultural forms began soon afterward. Many missions continued to exercise authority, to used translated hymns, and to impose Western forms of church polity, but some encouraged the autonomy of young churches, the use of local music, and the adoption of indigenous forms of church organization. It took, however, more than 100 years before the fourth self—self-theologizing—was raised.

The second force undermining colonialism was the very success of the colonial endeavor. In India the aim of colonialism was to bring "civilization" to the land. It is not surprising, then, that by the twentieth century there was a growing number of highly educated Indian leaders with a nationalist vision. By 1930 they had organized into an effective movement for independence. Culturally they bought into the ideas of the benevolent nation-state based on democratic principles, the British understanding of law, and modern science, health, and education. But socially they wanted the rights that British law affirmed to be enforced by Indians, not foreigners. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first area in which the Indian churches sought autonomy was self-rule.

Ironically, the third force weakening Western dominance was the introduction of "indirect rule." In India the British totally replaced the existing governmental structures from the village level to the national government. The expense of this, however, was prohibitive. Consequently, when they expanded their empire in Africa, they needed a less costly way of administering the colonies. The answer was indirect rule, in which British administrators provided the overarching government under which indigenous tribal political structures continued to function in tribal matters. But indirect rule required that British administrators know something about the political, economic, and social structures of the people they ruled. Consequently, early anthropological research in Africa, often funded by the government, focused on indigenous forms of social organization.

Africa began to play a key role in the formation of anthropological theory. Unlike India with its multilayered, interdependent, and unbounded cultures, Africa presented anthropologists with discrete and autonomous social groups or tribes. Following the lead of Emile Durkheim and sociology, anthropology saw each of these societies as an organic entity having its own language, culture, and territory. Anthropologists no longer spoke of "culture" but of "cultures." And field work in non-Western societies became the hallmark of anthropological research.

Phenomenology, Structural Functionalism, Linguistics, and New Anthropology

The impact of all this on anthropological theory was profound. In many circles, evolutionism with its diachronic models was replaced by British structural functionalism with its emphasis on phenomenology and synchronic analysis. The central questions were no longer ones of origin but of the structure and integration of a society and the function of its various parts. Each society had to be understood in its own terms, not in comparison with Western society.
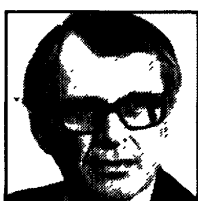
A parallel development was the emergence in North America of descriptive linguistics. In studying tribal cultures, which for the most part had no writing, new methods for reducing to writing and learning languages had to be developed. These methods not only enabled anthropologists to learn languages, but also to analyze the structures and internal organizations of these languages as ends in themselves. They also provided anthropologists with tools for recapturing images of cultures from aged informants and for reconstructing tribal histories.

The combination of British structural functionalism, with its emphasis on the social organization of tribes, and of the American interest in languages and cultures as cognitive maps led to the

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school of thought known as ethnoscience, or new anthropology. This theory, like those from which it was derived, emphasized the differences between cultures and the ways in which they see reality. Each culture was seen as an autonomous paradigm with a worldview of its own. In the end, all three schools of thought were forced to acknowledge the cultural relativism that was the logical outcome of their theories. Obviously, if we take all cultures seriously and emphasize their differences, no one of them can be used to judge the others. Where, then, are moral and cultural absolutes?

Postmodern Science

Not only was belief in Western cultural superiority called into question, but the certainty and absolute nature of science itself was under attack. By the mid-twentieth century, the charge was led by the social scientists who began to apply their theories to analyzing science itself. Psychologists began to examine the subjective nature of all human knowledge; sociologists showed that science was a community affair, influenced by normal social dynamics; anthropologists placed science into its larger cultural and worldview context; and historians of science showed that our textbook understanding of the nature of science was misplaced. Michael Polanyi's writings and T. S. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) drew these strands together in their theory that science was not a lineal, cumulative progression of objective knowledge, but a series of subjective, competing paradigms. Old positivist science had received a mortal blow. But where would postpositivist science find its new epistemological foundations?

For phenomenologists, including many psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, and for Kuhn himself, the answer was "instrumentalism." Since we could no longer show that one theory or paradigm or culture was better than another, we could no longer speak of absolutes or truth. At best, we could appeal to pragmatism. Any paradigm was adequate so long as it solved the problems humans faced.

Implications for Contextualization

In such an intellectual milieu, it is not surprising that missionaries and missiologists placed a great deal of emphasis on contextualization, not only of the church in local social structures, but also of the gospel and theology in local cultural forms.

First, on the positive side, this approach avoided the foreignness of a gospel dressed in Western clothes that had characterized the era of noncontextualization. The gospel message had to be communicated in ways the people understood. It avoided the ethnocentrism of a monocultural approach by taking cultural differences seriously, and by affirming the good in all cultures. And it affirmed the right of Christians in every country not only to be institutionally but also cognitively free from Western domination. The right of every church to develop its own theology began to be recognized.

Embracing an uncritical contextualization, however, had its problems. Obviously the denial of absolutes and of "truth" itself runs counter to the core Christian claims about the truth of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ. Moreover, if the gospel is contextualized, what are the checks against biblical and theological distortion? Where are the absolutes?

Second, as Mary Douglas points out (1970), the separation between form and meaning implicit in these theories blinds us to the nature of most tribal and peasant societies in which form and meaning are inextricably linked. For example, names and shadows are tied to a person's identity, and religious rites are performances, not simply the communication of messages.

A third problem has to do with the emphasis that contextualization places on the accurate communication of meaning, often to the point of ignoring the emotive and volitional dimensions of the gospel. We are in danger of reducing the gospel to a set of disembodied beliefs that can be individually appropriated, forgetting that it has to do with discipleship, with the church as the body of Christ, and with the kingdom of God on earth. Here Charles Kraft's call (1979) for a "dynamic-equivalent" response to the gospel message is a healthy reminder that in the Bible "to believe" is not simply to give mental assent to something; it is to act upon it in life.

A fourth area of concern is the ahistorical nature of most discussions on contextualization. Contemporary cultural contexts are taken seriously, but historical contexts are largely ignored. In each culture Christians face new questions for which they must find biblical answers. But in many things, particularly in developing their biblical and systematic theologies (and all Christians develop these implicitly or explicitly as diachronic and synchronic paradigms of Christian truth), they can learn much from church history. Exegesis and hermeneutics are not the rights of individuals but of the church as an exegetical and hermeneutical community. And that community includes not only the saints within our cultural context, and even the saints outside our culture, but also the saints down through history. To become a Christian is to become a part of a new history, and that history must be learned.

A fifth area of concern is that uncritical contextualization, at least in its more extreme forms, provides us with no means for working toward the unity of churches in different cultures. Instrumentalism is built on the belief that different cultures and paradigms are incommensurable—there is no basis for mutual understanding. Each can be understood only in its own terms. But if this is so, there can be no real communication between Christians in different cultures, no comparison between their theologies, and no common foundations of faith. At best Christianity is made up of a great many isolated churches. For any one of these to claim that its theology is normative is ethnocentric. There may be some common ground in our common human experiences, but that is limited and certainly not enough to provide the

basis for developing a common theology. The best we can do, then, is to affirm pluralism and to forget unity.

Sixth, uncritical contextualization has a weak view of sin. It tends to affirm human social organizations and cultures as essentially good. Sin is confined largely to personal evil. But social systems and cultures are human creations and are marked by sin. This is clear in Scriptures in which more than 75 percent of the time terms such as *arché* and *archón* (organizational power), *exousia* (authority), *dynamis* (power), and *thronos* (thrones) refer to human institutions (Wink 1984). There is a need, therefore, to take a stand against corporate evil as well as individual sin.

Finally, a call for contextualization without an equal call for preserving the gospel without compromise opens the door to syncretism. William Willimon points out (1986: 26): "[T]he persistent problem is not how to keep the church from withdrawing from the world but how to keep the world from subverting the church. In each age the church succumbs to that Constantinian notion that we can get a handle on the way the world is run." There is an offense in the foreignness of the culture we bring along with the gospel, which must be eliminated. But there is the offense of the gospel itself, which we dare not weaken. The gospel must be contextualized, but it also must remain prophetic—standing in judgment on what is evil in all cultures as well as in all persons.

Critical Contextualization

Where do we go from here? We cannot go back to noncontextualization with its ethnocentrism and cultural foreignness. Nor can we stay in more extreme forms of contextualization with their relativism and syncretism. As Peter Berger points out (Berger and Luckmann 1966), cross-cultural workers must move from monoculturalism, through the river of relativism that comes when we take other cultures and systems of belief seriously, to the firm bank of postrelativism that lies beyond. But what is this bank?

Interdependence

As the battle against colonialism is won (and the battle in more subtle forms is not yet over), we must look beyond the reactionary stance of "anticolonialism" and recognize the need to build institutions and understandings that take into account our common human context. We are rapidly becoming one world (though not one culture), and the peace, prosperity, and survival of all depends upon our thinking and working together as different cultures, peoples, and nations. As E. Stanley Jones put it, on the level of both the world and the church we must move beyond dependency and independency to interdependency.

Theoretical Complementarity

In anthropology the move is away from relativism and purely emic approaches to complementary theories and metacultural[2] grids. Complementarity is rooted in a critical realist epistemology. In this, human knowledge is seen not as a photograph of reality but, rather, as a map or blueprint that gives us real but partial understandings of reality (Coulson 1955). Just as we need several blueprints to get a mental picture of what a house is like, so we need several complementary theories to show us the nature of reality. In anthropology there is a growing number of scholars who use more than one theory or paradigm, depending upon the questions being asked and the reality being examined. For example, emic and etic models are seen as complementing each other.

There appears, also, to be a growing affirmation that anthropology can provide us with metacultural grids by which we can compare cultures and translate between them. Certainly anthropology has its roots in Western culture, and it is deeply molded by Western presuppositions. But in its analysis of, and dialogue with, other cultures it has begun to free itself of some of its theoretical ethnocentrism.

Beyond Postmodern Science

As Huston Smith points out (1982), we are moving beyond postmodern science and its instrumentalism and relativism. In his chapter on "The Death and Rebirth of Metaphysics" Smith argues that a "comprehensive vision, an overview of some sort, remains a human requirement; reflective creatures cannot retain the sense of direction life requires without it" (1982:16). The epistemological foundation now emerging is critical realism (Barbour 1974; Hiebert 1985a) that affirms both the objective and the subjective nature of knowledge. We see through a glass darkly, but we do see.

In critical realism, theories are limited in the information they convey, but that information may be shown to be true by means of reality testing. In other words, theories are not totally subjective, relative, and arbitrary. Moreover, theories, like maps, may be complementary. Consequently, contradictions between them must be taken seriously. Finally, in critical realism, theories and paradigms are not incommensurable. As Larry Laudin (1977) and D.R. Hofstadter (1980) point out, metatheoretical models can be developed to compare them and to translate meaning from one to the other.

Critical Contextualization

What does all this have to say to the question of contextualization? Specifically, what does one do with traditional cultural beliefs and practices? Here I am indebted to Jacob Loewen (1975) and the work of John Geertz, who developed a method of contextualization among the Wanana of Panama that is applicable in other cultural contexts.

Exegesis of the Culture: The first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically. Here the local church leaders and the missionary lead the congregation in *uncritically* gathering and analyzing the traditional beliefs and customs associated with some question at hand. For example, in asking how Christians should bury their dead, the people begin by analyzing their traditional rites: first by describing each song, dance, recitation, and rite that makes up their old ceremony; and then by discussing its meaning and function within the overall ritual. The purpose here is to understand the old ways, not to judge them. If at this point the missionary shows any criticism of the customary beliefs and practices, the people will not talk about them for fear of being condemned. We shall only drive the old ways underground.

Exegesis of the Scripture and the Hermeneutical Bridge: In the second step, the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study of the Scriptures related to the question at hand. In the example we are considering, the leader uses the occasion to teach the Christian beliefs about death and resurrection. Here the pastor or missionary plays a major role, for this is the area of his or her expertise.

The leader must also have a metacultural framework that enables him or her to translate the biblical message into the cognitive, affective, and evaluative dimensions of another culture. This step is crucial, for if the people do not clearly grasp the

biblical message as originally intended, they will have a distorted view of the gospel. This is where the pastor or missionary, along with theology, anthropology, and linguistics, has the most to offer in an understanding of biblical truth and in making it known in other cultures. While the people must be involved in the study of Scripture so that they grow in their own abilities to discern truth, the leader must have the metacultural grids that enable him or her to move between cultures. Without this, biblical meanings will often be forced to fit the local cultural categories. The result is a distortion of the message.

Critical response: The third step is for the people corporately to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to make decisions regarding

"The priesthood of believers is not a license for theological lone-rangerism."

their response to their new-found truths. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated. It is a message to which people must respond. Moreover, it is not enough that the leaders be convinced about changes that may be needed. Leaders may share their personal convictions and point out the consequences of various decisions, but they must allow the people to make the final decision in evaluating their past customs. If the leaders make the decisions, they must enforce these decisions. In the end, the people themselves will enforce decisions arrived at corporately, and there will be little likelihood that the customs they reject will go underground.

To involve the people in evaluating their own culture in the light of new truth draws upon their strength. They know their old culture better than the missionary, and are in a better position to critique it, once they have biblical instruction. Moreover, to involve them is to help them to grow spiritually by teaching them discernment and by helping them to learn to apply scriptural teachings to their own lives. It also puts into practice the priesthood of believers within a hermeneutical community.

A congregation may respond to old beliefs and practices in several ways. Many past beliefs and practices they will keep, for these are not unbiblical. Western Christians, for example, see no problem in eating hamburgers, singing secular songs such as "Home on the Range," wearing business suits, or driving cars. In many areas of their lives, Christians are no different from their non-Christian neighbors. In keeping these practices they reaffirm their own cultural identity and heritage.

Other customs will be explicitly rejected by the congregation as unbecoming for Christians. The reasons for such rejection may not be apparent to those outside who often see little difference between the songs and rites the people reject and those they retain. But the people know the deep, hidden meanings and associations of their old customs. On the other hand, at some points the missionary may need to raise questions that the people have overlooked, for they may fail to see clearly their own cultural assumptions.

Sometimes the people will chose to modify old practices by giving them explicit Christian meanings. For example, Charles Wesley used the melodies of popular bar songs, but gave them Christian words. Similarly, the early Christians used the style of worship found in Jewish synagogues, and modified it to fit their beliefs.

At points the Christians may substitute symbols and rites borrowed from another culture for those in their own that they reject. For example, the people may choose to adopt elements of the funeral practices of the missionary rather than to retain their own. Such functional substitutes are generally effective, for they minimize the cultural dislocation created by simply removing an old custom.

Sometimes the church may adopt rites drawn from its Christian heritage. In becoming Christians they enter into a second new history. The addition of such rituals as baptism and the Lord's Supper not only provides converts with ways to express their new faith, but also symbolizes their ties to the historical and international church.

Finally, the people may create new symbols and rituals to communicate Christian beliefs in forms that are indigenous to their own culture.

New Contextualized Practices: Having led the people to analyze their old customs in the light of biblical teaching, the pastor or missionary must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that expresses the Christian meaning of the event. Such a ritual will be Christian, for it explicitly seeks to express biblical teaching. It will also be contextual, for the church has created it, using forms the people understand within their own culture.

Checks Against Syncretism

What checks do we have to assure us that critical contextualization will not lead us astray? We must recognize that contextualization itself is an ongoing process. On the one hand, the world in which people live is constantly changing, raising new questions that need to be addressed. On the other, our understandings of the gospel and its application to our lives is partial. Through continued study and spiritual growth, we should, however, come to a greater understanding of the truth.

First, critical contextualization takes the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. Contextualized practices like contextualized theologies must be biblically based. This may seem obvious, but we must constantly remind ourselves that the standards against which all practices are measured is biblical revelation.

Second, this approach recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God's leading.

Third, the church is acting as a hermeneutical community (cf. Kraus 1979). The priesthood of believers is not a license for theological lone-rangerism. We need each other to see our sins, for we more readily see the sins of others than our own. Similarly, we see the ways others misinterpret Scriptures before we see our own misinterpretations. Along the same line, we need Christians from other cultures, for they often see how our cultural biases have distorted our interpretations of the Scriptures. This corporate nature of the church as a community of interpretation extends not only to the church in every culture, but also to the church in all ages. To say that exegesis and hermeneutics are corporate processes does not (as some sociologists of knowledge, such as Karl Mannheim and Richter, suggest) reduce them to social determinism.[3]

Fourth, there is a growing discussion among evangelical theologians from different cultures and, one hopes, a growing consensus on essential theological points. Just as one can often see the sins of others better than they do themselves, so also theologians can often detect the cultural biases of theologians from other cultures better than the latter do themselves. Out of the

exercise of the priesthood of believers within an international hermeneutical community should come a growing understanding, if not agreement, on key theological issues that can help us test the contextualization of cultural practices as well as theologies.

Critical contextualization does not operate from a monocultural perspective. Nor is it premised upon the pluralism of incommensurable cultures. It seeks to find metacultural and metatheological frameworks that enable people in one culture to understand messages and ritual practices from another culture with a minimum of distortion. It is based on a critical realist epistemology that sees all human knowledge as a combination of objective and subjective elements, and as partial but increasingly closer approximations of truth. It takes both historical and cultural contexts seriously. And it sees the relationship between form and meaning in symbols such as words and rituals, ranging all the way from an equation of the two to simply arbitrary associations between them. Finally, it sees contextualization as an ongoing process in which the church must constantly engage itself, a process that can lead us to a better understanding of what the Lordship of Christ and the kingdom of God on earth are about.

Notes

1. Peter Berger traces the impact of this Christian paradigm on both the Western concept of development and the Marxist view of revolution in *Pyramids of Sacrifice* (1974).
2. The term "metacultural" here is used as D. R. Hofstadter uses it, as a position above two or more systems of the same level (1980). David Bidney discusses three uses of the term (1967:156–82). A. Comte, E. Durkheim, and C. Levy-Bruhl saw it as the "prelogical" thought that characterized tribal societies. Others such as Malinowski saw metaphysics as stepping in where science fails. Finally, Henri Bergson, P. Sorokin, F. S. C. Northrop, and D. R. Hofstadter appeal to metacultural grids as conceptual frameworks that emerge out of and stand above different cultures, allowing us to compare their beliefs and translate between them. This position would reject Kuhn's suggestion that paradigms are incommensurable. Such a position, in any case, falls under its own weight, for it makes intercultural understanding impossible and provides no basis for explaining cultural change. It also renders anthropology meaningless.

   In a sense any person who has lived in two or more cultures deeply becomes "bicultural." By this we mean that she or he has developed the ability to stand above these cultures and compare them. This "balcony" view is, in fact, a metacultural grid.
3. For a good critique of the sociology of knowledge with regard to science, see Larry Laudin, *Progress and Its Problems* (1977: 196–225).

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Mission as Seen from Geneva: A Conversation with Eugene L. Stockwell

Eugene L Stockwell is Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches He was born in Boston Massachusetts where his father was studying theology and was raised from the age of three in Argentina where his father served as president of Union Theological Seminary in Buenos Aires As a young man Stockwell studied and practiced law before deciding to enter Union Theological Seminary (New York) and the ministry He and his wife worked as United Methodist missionaries for ten years in Uruguay from 1952 to 1962 This was followed by two years as Latin American Secretary of the Methodist Board of Missions and then eight years as Assistant General Secretary for Program Administration In 1972 Stockwell became Associate General Secretary for Overseas Ministries of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U S A He took up his present responsibilities in Geneva in 1984

While visiting at the Overseas Ministries Study Center recently Stockwell shared some of his thoughts on developments and directions in world mission with Editor Gerald H Anderson and Research Assistant Robert T Coote of the International Bulletin

What are your reflections on the responsibilities, opportunities, and special demands of your present position in the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) of the World Council of Churches (WCC), as compared to your previous years of service with the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches in the United States?

There are two obvious differences One is that the World Council of Churches is, by its very nature, international in character whereas the work in the National Council of Churches is basically a United States-based operation The international nature of the work in the WCC obliges one to be in an intercultural situation constantly, and this is something I have greatly enjoyed and welcomed

The second major difference is that the Division of Overseas Ministries of the NCC, when I was with it, included under its mandate responsibility for Church World Service, which, as the interchurch-aid arm of the National Council of Churches, dealt with the whole area of relief and development worldwide But the work in the CWME does not directly concern that aspect of work The demands that I have found somewhat new in comparison with the previous position are the demands to take the question of evangelization far more seriously We always believed in the importance of evangelization, but how to go about it, how to train people for it, how to find the resources to help churches around the world engage in evangelization according to their own understanding of the meaning of that task is something that has been a very important thing and extremely challenging in Geneva

Perhaps one other thing to say is that in the CWME we say that, in one sense, we have no program at all That is to say, we don't develop programs out of Geneva to try to sell them across the world What we attempt to do is to respond to the requests, needs, and desires of churches and various communities around the world that want to engage in mission and evangelism, we make every effort to support them in what they want to do This is often not true of other agencies of the World Council that deliberately build certain kinds of programs and try to get people involved in them Basically we are not a programmatic commission That again is a difference from what we were doing in the National Council of Churches

Would it be correct to say that in the CWME you have far more association with the Orthodox churches than when you were with the National Council of Churches? What difference does that make in your work?

Yes, we do have more contact with the Orthodox in the CWME, although the relations of the National Council of Churches with the Orthodox denominations are of importance as well

We tend to say that there are three major sets of relationships we have in the CWME on behalf of the whole World Council one is with the Orthodox churches Many Orthodox churches are members of the World Council of Churches and we have a secretary for Orthodox studies and relations, Father Ion Bria [succeeded in 1987 by Yorgo Lemopulo], who is a key point of relationships between the World Council of Churches and the Orthodox churches around the world We in the CWME are learning about the Orthodox concept of mission The Orthodox, for instance, speak of the Eucharist as a missionary event That is not a common Protestant concept, that the liturgy and the Eucharist are so central to God's mission on earth At the same time we are trying to help the Orthodox churches understand a little more about the mission dimension of the church in terms of reaching out beyond their own community, or their own nation, or their own ethnic group In April 1988 there will be an Orthodox mission conference, organized by the CWME, in which Orthodox