

CONTEXTUALIZATION: CONSTRUCTIVE INTERACTION BETWEEN CULTURE, PEOPLE, CHURCH, AND THE THEOLOGICAL PROGRAMME

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INTRODUCTION:

The question of contextualization must crop up whenever one religion is introduced to a people whose culture differs from that of the one who brings the religion. It is surprising that until recently no major Christian denomination in Africa made any serious effort to address itself to the problem.

There is no intention here to present an exhaustive treatment of the subject. I only want to describe the problem and the need for theological educators to come to grips with it in their curriculum revision. I will then suggest some guidelines that may be considered in the process of contextualization.

1. **Contextualization: What it is**

As I was preparing this paper I asked my faculty, especially the new missionary teachers, to let me have the benefit of their efforts at contextualization in the teaching process. I got some interesting responses. One of them in a two-page monograph defined his understanding of contextualization as a process "whereby concepts are translated from one cultural setting to another without loss of essential meanings and also whereby the application of these concepts can be demonstrated in a new setting." He went on to add: "A distinction needs to be made between bridging cultural gaps on the one hand and what we call simple accommodation to another culture. Decisions need to be made between essential, unchangeable elements in concepts and what is less essential and therefore can be changed. An example of the latter in religious context would be that the church formats can change. The former would require that the Christian God cannot simply be identified with Zeus without regard to His essential nature

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and attributes. One has to decide what can and what cannot be changed, what can be identified with another culture and what must be filled with an entirely new meaning.” (Charles Egedy)

I must confess that I find it impossible to improve on that definition. For the purpose of our discussion here let us look at contextualization as a process of systematic presentation of the Christian faith that is informed by a serious and critical consideration of the culture of a people and the world view that fashions that culture.

This is presupposed on the assumption that man’s apprehension of Christ is greatly influenced by his total experience and needs as perceived through the spectacles provided by his culture. The importance of this view is underscored by the fact that no religion can be considered valid if it does not meet the total needs of a person as perceived by that person. In other words, if Christ is to be the Lord of a particular people, the Word must become flesh anew in the culture and the concomitant thought-pattern of the particular people; otherwise Christianity remains a foreign religion transplanted on a foreign soil. In that case, Santayana’s maxim that “any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is no more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular” becomes true.

On the surface it would appear that one is belabouring the obvious but that is far from the truth. The truth is that many Christian theologians or educators are not usually aware of the subtle influences that determine their theological formulations and theological educational programmes. No one theologizes in a vacuum. Whether the theologian is aware or not there are certain **givens** which condition his theological activities and thought. Among these are; 1) His existential experience of Christ, 2) his church tradition; 3) his own imaginative insights; 4) his intuitive reactions to the ideas of others; 5) his self-understanding within his world view and 6) his cultural background which provides the thought-pattern, the perspective from which he experiences reality and the language in which he expresses himself. Unfortunately, most theologians have not been acutely conscious of these hidden factors in their theologizing. The result is that there has been a confusion or an equation of Christian faith with the cultural hue or form in which it is presented. This can only lead to superficial commitment on the part of the average people the missionaries try to evangelize. Such a veneer of Christianity invariably peels off under stress and the faith based on it

crumbles because it has not taken root in the total life of the convert involved.

One may wonder why this is the case. The reason is that by ignoring his world-view and self-understanding, the African Christian convert is not given the opportunity to confront his self-understanding with the claims of Christ. Consequently, the average African Christian is a man of two faiths. When faced with existential crises a conflict invariably develops as to the relevance of his Christian faith to what he perceives as a metaphysical problem.

He usually resolves the conflict in favour of his traditional religious practices for coping with such life problems. His unconscious rationale for opting for an unchristian solution is that the "Christian God" must not be familiar with this type of problem; otherwise his pastor or missionary would have taught him something about this.

It is sad to note that the mainstream Christian denominations in Africa have not made any tangibly serious attempt to come to grips with this problem of contextualization. The so-called Independent Churches that have sprung up from the mainstream Christian groups have done so in protest and, in most cases, by people of questionable character and limited Christian theological understanding. The result is syncretism because they are unable to carry out a proper contextualization that does not violate the core of Christian faith.

This is where we must come in as theological educators to take the lead in contextualizing Christianity in Africa. If it is to be done right it must be done by people with an acceptable measure of theological understanding that grows out of existential experience with the living Lord. It may be in order to remind ourselves that what we are called upon to do is not new in Christian history; what is strange is that we did not start earlier than this. Much of the history of Christian doctrine is a commentary on the struggle between Jewish thought-patterns and the Greek world view, vis-a-vis the existential apprehension of Christ within the two thought-patterns. As John Cobb puts it:

In the long run it was Greek and not Jewish Christianity that triumphed; hence it was the problems of relating Greek thought to Christian faith that determined much of the intellectual history of Christianity.

Of course, by "triumph" here, Cobb means the basic formulation of the Christian faith. This must be because in terms of detail the Eastern Orthodox

Christianity is different from the Western version of Christianity. Within the Western sector, the Roman Catholic expression of it differs from the Protestant's. In the same way, within each of these groups the theology of one specific confession, say, in Germany, is different from the same confession on the other side of the Atlantic ocean. In other words, the Word must always become flesh in a particular culture before His glory can be recognized existentially as the glory "as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14 NEB).

II Suggested Guidelines for Contextualizing Theological Educational Programme.

I confess that I have neither the intention nor the expertise to tell you how to contextualize your theological educational curriculum. All I can do, having described my understanding of it, is to urge you to make a serious attempt to do it. To this end, I would like to suggest some guidelines which, I believe, are essential points for consideration in any meaningful effort at contextualization that is both Christian and Biblical. These are:

1. An existential conviction that the Gospel of the Incarnate Son of God has eternal saving efficacy for man everywhere and in all generations who, in repentant faith, is committed to Him.
2. A conviction that man's spiritual needs which are essentially universal are perceived through the spectacles of cultural colouring.
3. A recognition of the fact that every man's apprehension of Christ as God's answer to human needs is crucially influenced by his culture. This creates the need to overhaul the current theological curriculum which was devised in a different culture to meet specific needs as perceived there. This is necessary if theological education is to equip the minister for meeting the total needs of his people in their cultural setting. Overhauling does not necessarily mean that the existing curriculum will be discarded. Some elements are basic and must be retained, but this will be done because they are found to be universally relevant following an objective evaluation.
4. A realization that a theological curriculum that is relevant must include an in-depth study of the African world view, his self-understanding and the resultant traditional religions. Such an exercise will afford the minister an opportunity to sit where his people sit in order to see life through their eyes and thus be able to identify their deep spiritual needs which only Christ can satisfy.

With the foregoing, the Christian theologian is ready to begin a meaningful contextualization of the theological curriculum that will become relevant because it has grown out of the world view, culture and thought-pattern of the African as viewed from the perspective of Biblical Christianity. The theological educator must never lose sight of the fact that his main function is to "equip the saints for the work of the ministry." This the saints do by mediating the saving knowledge of Christ to men in their particular total environment. Unless the Gospel is so contextualized the people may not give an existential response to the Christ who came that men may have life and to have it more abundantly.

If this is our task, then we must resist the temptation to defend the status quo. We must be open and re-examine our present curriculum, delete, add and modify as needed in the light of the result of the findings from our objective studies.