Sharing the Truth with Courtesy and Respect: Contextualization without Syncretism[1]

by Rick Brown, 2010

> But set Christ apart as Lord in your hearts and always be ready
> to give an answer to anyone who asks about the hope you possess.
> Yet do it with courtesy and respect, keeping a good conscience,
> so that those who slander your good conduct in Christ
> may be put to shame when they accuse you.
> 1 Pet 3:15 NET

Worldview should be distinguished from culture

The world exhibits a diversity of ethnic groups, each with its own particularities of language and culture. Paul wrote that God is the Father of every clan on heaven and earth (Eph 3:15–16). It is not surprising, therefore, that his Son Jesus Christ commissioned his followers to disciple people from every ethnic group, and said he would not return until the Gospel had been proclaimed to all of them:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. [= all ethnic groups] (Matt 28:19)
>
> And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. (Matt 24:14)[2]

Revelation 5:9 reports a future date at which Jesus will have successfully "ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (ESV). In Revelation 7:9, when John the Apostle reports his vision of the redeemed in heaven, he could "see" that they were "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages", indicating a recognizable cultural diversity in God's Kingdom community. These passages indicate that God values ethnic diversity and wants to save representatives of every culture.

If God loves people and values every ethnic group, then they deserve our courtesy and respect as well. Peter said we should "honor all people" and share the Gospel hope "with courtesy and respect (1 Pet 2:17; 3:16 NET). Paul said we should "not give offense to Jews or Greeks" either one (1 Cor 10:32 NET). He described how he did this:

> When I was with the Jews, I lived like a Jew to bring the Jews to Christ. When I was with those who follow the Jewish law, I too lived under that law. When I am with the Gentiles who do not follow the Jewish law, I too live apart from that law so I can bring them to Christ. But I do not ignore the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. (1 Cor 9:20–21 NLT)

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[1] This essay is a completely revised and updated version of 'Contextualization without Syncretism', *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, 23/3 (2006), 127–133.

[2] Except where otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Paul does not say he "became" a Jew or Gentile but that he lived like those among whom he lived, insofar as he could without violating the law of Christ. Actually, this is what we expect foreigners to do when they come to our own countries and communities: we expect them to speak a language we know, respect our customs, obey our laws, and fit in as best they can, but we do not demand that they convert to our own ethnicities and religions.

The world exhibits a diversity of conflicting worldviews, meaning the set of core values and beliefs that a person holds.[3] God is not the father of unbiblical worldviews. In the Bible God has revealed a set of core values and beliefs that he calls all people to accept and follow, calling them in effect to bring their worldviews into accord with the Bible. This call to re-align worldviews is evident in the Great Commission, when Jesus told his followers to teach every ethnic group to obey everything he had commanded his disciples (Mat 28:20). So while God values cultural diversity and plans to preserve aspects of every culture, he also aims to reform their worldviews by instilling in all people the core values and beliefs he has revealed in the Bible. The Kingdom of God, therefore, includes ethnolinguistic diversity and values that diversity, but aims for worldviews to be aligned with all that Jesus has commanded.

We therefore need to distinguish carefully between culture and worldview. A culture consists of the normal patterns of behavior shared among members of a society and transmitted to their children, usually through stories, examples, and laws. Examples include driving on the left (or the right), shaking hands (or bowing), giving thanks before a meal (or afterwards), praying on one's knees (or while sitting), and praying with hands and eyes lifted heavenward (or downward). A worldview, on the other hand, consists of a network of core values and beliefs by which a person interprets the world and decides what is best to do. A biblical worldview usually includes the following beliefs:

There is one God. He is good. He created all things. He is sovereign over all things.

The world was created good but has fallen into evil.

There is a purpose for life. There is life after death. There is a new age to come.

There is good and evil. There is right and wrong. There is honour and shame.

A biblical worldview usually includes the following values (beliefs about goodness):

It is good to love and serve God with all one's heart.

It is good to love others and show them respect.

It is good to honour one's parents.

It is good to obey those in authority (insofar as this is compatible with "the law of Christ").

It is good to be kind to others.

It is good to think, speak, and act in accord with what God has revealed in the Bible.

It is not good to divide one's loyalty between God and other things.

It is not good to think, say, or do anything that God dislikes.

While in the past there were traditional, homogenous societies that transmitted particular worldviews along with their cultures, in today's world it is common for different individuals in a

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[3] In *Worldview for Christian Witness* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), p. 12, Charles Kraft describes worldview as "the totality of the culturally structured images and assumptions (including value and commitment or allegiance assumptions) in terms of which a people both perceive and respond to reality."

society to have different worldviews, even though they share the same culture. For example, they might drive on the same side of the road, and greet people in the same way, reflecting commonalities of their culture, yet have different beliefs about authority and different values regarding compliance with traffic laws or courtesy in personal relations. Similarly, people in different cultures can share the same basic worldview, even though their customs differ. For example, one can find humanists, Reformed Christians or Marxists in diverse cultures. It is more helpful, therefore, to use the term 'culture' to refer to the shared and transmitted social conventions of an ethnic community, and 'worldview' to refer to the framework of core values and beliefs that individuals have, including core elements of theology, whether others in their society share them or not.

It is evident, then, that people in the *same* culture can have *different* worldviews (meaning core values and beliefs), and that people in *different* cultures can have the *same* core values and beliefs. Therefore, a person's worldview can become biblical without that person moving to a different culture.

It is clear in the Bible that God wants everyone in his Kingdom to adopt the core values and beliefs he has revealed in it. The Bible is a record of revelations urging people to change their values and beliefs, i.e., their worldview, to align with what it calls "the faith" and "the truth." Paul wrote that "God our Savior … desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:3–4 ESV). The biblical authors communicated these true beliefs through the assertion of propositions and through the narration of meaningful events. They communicated true values by revealing the causes, consequences and purposes of those historical events and by recording commandments, such as the Ten Commandments, the Greatest Commandment, and the Great Commission. Thus one of the chief functions of the Bible is to transform the worldviews that people have and bring their worldviews into alignment with what God has revealed. Jesus said, "For this reason I was born, and for this reason I came into the world – to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice" (John 18:37 NET).

The Bible mandates cultural diversity and hence contextualization

The situation is quite different with regard to culture, because the New Testament affirms cultural diversity rather than uniformity. Jesus demonstrated this in his own ministry by preaching the Gospel to the Samaritans in Samaria (Luke 17:11–19; John 4:5–42), to Gentiles in Lebanon and Decapolis (Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–8:10), and to Romans in Galilee (Matthew 8:5-13) without demanding they convert to Jewish customs and identity. Yet he clearly aimed to promote a unity of core values and beliefs amidst a diversity of cultures. He emphasized the value of cultural diversity in God's plan when he said the Gospel must be preached to every ethnic group before He returns (Matt 24:14). He gave John a vision of the end-time fulfillment of this goal, in which people of every tribe and tongue will praise God (Rev 5:9–10; 7:9–10). A preview of this goal was even demonstrated at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to praise God in a multitude of languages (Acts 2:4–11). The implication is that God's Kingdom will not be complete until it includes people representing the full diversity of races, cultures and languages!

Most of the disciples remained reluctant to invite Gentiles to follow Christ (Acts 11:19–20), but the Lord showed Peter in a vision and by the outpouring of His Spirit that He grants faith and salvation to Gentiles, even if they are not converts to Jewish religious customs (Acts 10:1–11:18).

More importantly, He showed James and the Apostles, through key Scriptures and through the manifest evidence of the Holy Spirit, that Gentile believers everywhere should follow the customs of their own cultural norms rather than adopting Jewish religious practices, although they would need to shun some practices common to their indigenous communities (Acts 15:1–35). Paul modeled this policy by establishing house churches that maintained or adapted local customs rather than requiring them to adopt the customs of his own Jewish background (Acts 17–28). He insisted on this in spite of severe criticism from Christians who wanted him to enforce uniformity of custom and Jewish tradition in the churches.

Paul's ministry team modeled cultural diversity as well by including people from a variety of ethnic groups (Acts 20:4). In his letters Paul emphasized spiritual unity amidst cultural diversity (Col 3:11; Rom 10:12; 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 5:6). He modeled respect for different cultures by adapting his lifestyle (1 Cor 9:20–23) and preaching style[4] to fit the customs of the people to whom he was ministering.

The result of all this was that believers in different cultural contexts had different ways of worshiping and different ways of living out their faith in community with one another, presumably in ways appropriate for their culture. Yet they shared the same biblical faith. In other words, the outward expression of their evangelism, discipleship, fellowship and worship was *contextualized* to their local cultures, while their shared a common faith in Christ. They continued to have differences of culture and ethnic identity, but this no longer constituted a barrier preventing fellowship among them, because they shared a common spiritual identity as disciples of Christ and members of God's Kingdom.

The Apostle Peter said, "in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15)." One way an outsider to a culture can show courtesy and respect is to "contextualize" their own approach to fit the customs and language of the people. This has not always been the practice. Some Christians have insisted that believers in other cultures use the same kinds of music, dress, and style of worship that they use in their own culture, or even worship in the same language that they use. Some Christians have learned to speak the language of a Muslim people group, yet they have rejected the group's names for prophets of the Bible and their terms for religious concepts, and they have insisted on using imported terms instead of them. This conveys disrespect for the people because it pointedly rejects their authentic mother tongue. *When Christians present the message with disrespect for their audience, by rejecting the way their audience speak and ignoring their sensitivities of language and custom, this often provokes the audience to reject the message.*

Another reason for contextualization is to communicate the biblical meaning and worldview more accurately within the people's own cultural and linguistic context. If a Christian is speaking

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[4] In Acts 22:3 and 23:4, Paul begins his message by identifying with the religious Jews and in particular with the Pharisees, while in general he begins his preaching to Jews and proselytes by citing OT passages, as in Acts 17:2–4. But when Paul preaches to Greeks at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22–31), he begins by praising their religious concerns and by affirming the principle that all ethnic groups should seek God because he created them all from one man (Acts 17:26–27), supported by relevant quotations from two Greek poets (vs.28).

with a Muslim and refers to the Spirit of God as the “Holy Spirit”, the Muslim will generally think he means the angel Gabriel, since Muslims call him the holy spirit. To contextualize his statement for a Muslim, the Christian may need to say “the Spirit of God.” Jesus used the term ‘son of man’ to identify himself as the heavenly ruler foretold in Daniel 7:13, but in many languages it means a bastard. To convey the intended meaning in such a language, one may need to use a different expression.

A biblical mandate for contextualization is to maintain both the biblical faith and the diversity of cultures by ensuring that in each language and culture the faith is expressed in forms that preserve its meaning and integrity.

Based on the foregoing, we can say that a community of local believers is contextualized to the extent that (1) they conform to the worldview revealed in the Bible, and (2) they conform to the customs of their native culture insofar as these are compatible with the Bible. I will argue further below that local believers are syncretistic to the extent that they (1) diverge from the worldview framework revealed in the Bible or (2) diverge from native customs that are compatible with the Bible.

Distinguishing contextualization from indigenization

Discussions of contextualization have been muddied by divergent uses of the term. Some missionaries use *contextualization* loosely as if it were a synonym for *indigenization*. To **indigenize** something, however, means to "make it conform to local custom" (or to put it under local control). One could conceivably indigenize a form of “Christianity” to the point that it has little in common with the biblical worldview, and a number of Western Christian traditions seem to have done just that. To **contextualize** something, on the other hand, is to adjust its form to a new context so that its meaning is preserved in that context. *So while it is possible to over-indigenize, it is impossible to over-contextualize.*

This can be seen in the “Exercise in Linguistic Contextualization,” where one is required to contextualize the concept *manager* in every context. For that exercise, suppose you are a public health inspector and you need to inspect a number of sites in a port city. You want to approach each site by first asking to see the most senior administrator present, and for that you want to use the administrative title that is normal for that context. You want to say, “May I please speak to speak to the _____” but to do that you need to contextualize the expression of a *manager* concept to fit the context. Note that it is not possible to overcontextualize a concept, but one can undercontextualize it by using the word ‘manager’ in every context. One can miscontextualize it by asking for the “captain” of a train or the “warden” of an army camp or the “governor” of a supermarket. Such mistakes characterize poorly contextualized translations.

An Exercise in Linguistic Contextualization

For each context on the left, see if you can find the most appropriate term for its manager somewhere in the right column. Note that some contexts involve geography as well as type of facility. (EH = eastern hemisphere, WH = western hemisphere)

This account of contextualization conforms with the normal usage of the term in English, where it means to select a manner of speech or custom suitable for a given linguistic or cultural context so that it fulfills the purpose intended for it in that context. Note that this differs somewhat from indigenization, which means to use local manners of speech or custom, whether they fulfill the same intended purpose or not. Sometimes a local phrase or custom is like one in the Bible, but it has a different meaning, so while its use is indigenous, it is not a contextualization of the biblical meaning. In proper contextualization, the core beliefs, values, and goals remain constant and only the form change.

For example, imagine that an advertising firm has been given the task of increasing global sales of a particular product by creating effective advertisements for it in a variety of locations. The firm may find that it cannot do this effectively with a uniform presentation of the product, not even in English. An advertisement that is effective in California will often fall flat in London, and one designed for Sydney will not always succeed in Nairobi. So the advertising firm has to contextualize its message for different cultures. And when it goes to advertise its message in other languages, such as Hindi, Arabic or Chinese, the contextualization required is even greater.

"May I please speak to speak to the _____."

facilities (contexts)	titles for people in charge
1. Anglican church	a. store manager
2. apartment building (WH)	b. master
3. army camp	c. conductor
4. block of flats / tower (EH)	d. commanding officer
5. church (Roman Catholic)	e. guard
6. church (Methodist)	f. site manager
7. church (Pentecostal)	g. charge nurse (UK: sister)
8. convent	h. minister
9. hospital ward / unit	i. pastor
10. house	j. rector (or vicar)
11. monastery	k. rabbi
12. prison (EH)	l. head teacher
13. prison (WH)	m. head of household
14. school (EH)	n. construction foreman
15. school (WH)	o. superintendent (super)
16. ship (merchant)	p. abbot
17. ship (naval)	q. residential block manager
18. railway station	r. captain
19. supermarket	s. abbess (or superior)
20. synagogue	t. warden
21. train (WH)	u. governor
22. train (EH)	v. principal
23. worksite (EH)	w. stationmaster
24. worksite (WH)	x. priest

Failure to contextualize one's message and practices to fit the local context can lead to misunderstandings and unintended responses. When Coca-Cola was first introduced into China, people misunderstood its name to mean "bite the wax tadpole." The company, however, found a way to write its name that had a good meaning. When Pepsi's 1960's "Come Alive" advertising campaign was imported to Chinese audiences with no recontextualization, they thought it was promising new life for their dead ancestors.[5]

[5] See http://www.snopes.com/business/misxlate/ancestor.asp.

Recent research in mission fruitfulness highlights the importance of using linguistic expressions that are natural to the idiom of the audience.[6] In a study cited by Adams, Allen, and Fish,[7] practitioners who focus on establishing fellowships among Muslims were asked this question: "When communicating the Gospel, I intentionally use terms that local Muslims will understand from their own culture, language, or religious background." There was a positive relationship between the frequency of use of terms they judge Muslims to understand and their self-reported fruitfulness in church-planting. Adams, Allen, and Fish showed this in a diagram reproduced here as Figure 1 below.[8]

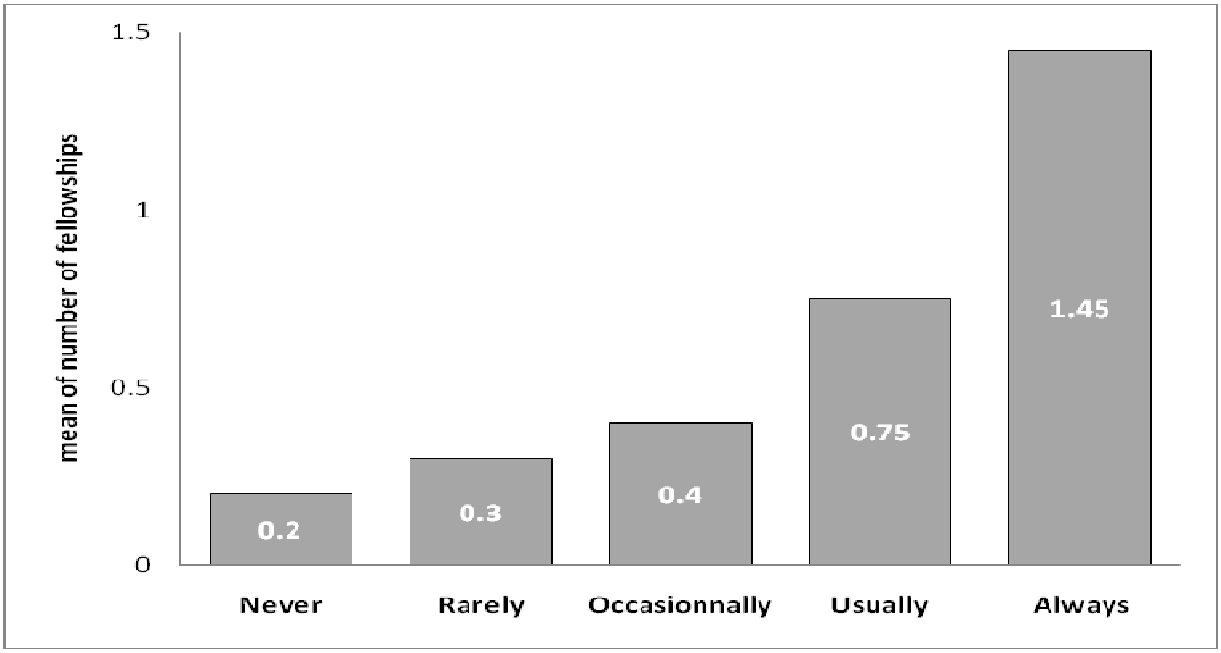

Figure 1 The mean number of fellowships established per team as a function of how regularly the team used terms that local Muslims understand when communicating the Gospel.

Ministries which always use authentic heart-language terminology saw four to six times more churches emerge from their work than ministries which never, rarely, or only occasionally use heart terminology. The correlation is probably not with the terminology alone but with a positive attitude towards the culture, in which the use of the people's heart language was just one of several ways in which courtesy and respect was shown to them.

Western Christianity has been contextualized to Western culture, but when it is imported into Asian cultures, without recontextualization, the result can be misunderstanding and syncretism. In other words, undercontextualization breeds syncretism.[9] An example is the practice of wearing shoes

[6] For a brief summary, see Brown, 'Like Bright Sunlight: The Benefit of Communicating in Heart Language', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/2 (2009), 85–88.

[7] See Eric Adams, Don Allen, and Bob Fish, 'Seven Themes of Fruitfulness', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/2 (2009), 75–81.

[8] *ibid.*, p. 79.

[9] See Larry Owens, 'Syncretism and the Scriptures', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 43/1 (2007), 74–80.

into church, letting people put their Bibles on the ground, and letting unrelated men and women sit next to one another, with the women bareheaded. In some cultures these practices are understood to be acts of impiety and lewdness, and this leads visitors and even new believers to think that piety and purity are unimportant in the life of Christians. When Western Christians publish Bibles on pure white paper, with no border around the sacred text, with pictures in the text, and with plain black covers or even paperback, Muslims interpret this to mean either the book is not holy or Christians treat it disrespectfully. If Muslim background believers do the same, they seem impious and their testimony lacks credibility. The need is for these believers to practice "critical contextualization," as described by Paul Hiebert,[10] so they can express their faith and practice their discipleship in culturally appropriate ways that nevertheless conform to the "law of Christ" as revealed in the Bible. This requires them to make a careful assessment of each custom in their culture to see if it is

(1) compatible with what the Bible teaches about mature Christian behavior, in which case it should be retained,

(2) capable of being adapted to biblical standards of behavior, in which case it should be retained in a modified form, or

(3) irredeemably incompatible with the Bible, in which case that custom should be abandoned or replaced.

For example, (1) marriage is compatible with what the Bible teaches, but (2) the local customs regarding the marriage relationship might need to be revised for believers, while (3) customs like wife-beating should be abandoned. Indigenization alone will not lead to these conclusions because it lacks a criterion for deciding what to retain or reject. So what is needed is critical biblical contextualization. This shows respect for both the biblical faith and the local cultures by safeguarding both of them.

Proper contextualization facilitates faith movements within social networks

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of research data by Andrea and Leith Gray showed the importance of social networks for church growth and faith movements, and the importance of contextualization for allowing believers to remain in their natural social networks as effective witnesses.[11] The describe a **transformational model** of church planting that views social networks as "pre-churches" where bonds of loyalty, trust, and sharing are well established. Practitioners can then use God's Word to transform social networks in such a way that faith communities emerge from them. They showed that this approach was more effective than an attractional model of forming fellowships, in which the practitioner seeks to extract people from their natural social networks and gather them into groups of relative strangers with weak social bonds. They showed that in cases where the attractional approach had succeeded, it was often because the Gospel spread along pre-existing social networks of families and friends, with the church emerging from those social

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[10] See Paul Hiebert, 'Critical Contextualization', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 11/3 (July 1987), 104–112.

[11] Andrea and Leith Gray, 'Paradigms and Praxis: Part I: Social Networks and Fruitfulness in Church Planting', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/1 (2009), 19–28; Part II, *IJFM* 26/2, 63–73.

networks, in spite of the attractional model being followed by the church planters. The results are shown in the chart below:

Interviews with participants revealed that because contextualization allowed MBB followers of Jesus to retain more of their culture and social identity, it allowed them to remain in their social networks as confessing followers of Jesus. This in turn enabled their faith communities to witness, grow, and multiply along the pre-existing lines of their social networks. The Grays write:

> While contextualization is a highly debated topic in church planting circles, our analysis of these interviews indicates that contextualization in and of itself is not the chief factor in the formation of church planting movements. It appears from the interviews we analyzed that contextualization is effective only insofar as it supports a transformational model of church.[12]

The C-spectrum classifies MBB faith communities according to the degree to which they retain their social identity and customs without becoming syncretistic or violating biblical doctrines and injunctions. Analysis of data across the MBB world showed that levels C3 to C5 correlate with the formation of faith communities, and that C4 and C5 correlate with the development of actual faith movements. In some communities, like Kabyle, Azerbaijan, and Farsi middle class, there is widespread antipathy towards traditional religious identity, so a C3 approach was adequate and probably more effective. This is shown in Figure 2.[13] Critical contextualization, therefore, is needed on a case-by-case basis to discover what's most appropriate for proper contextualization in a given culture, sub-culture, or economic class at a given time.

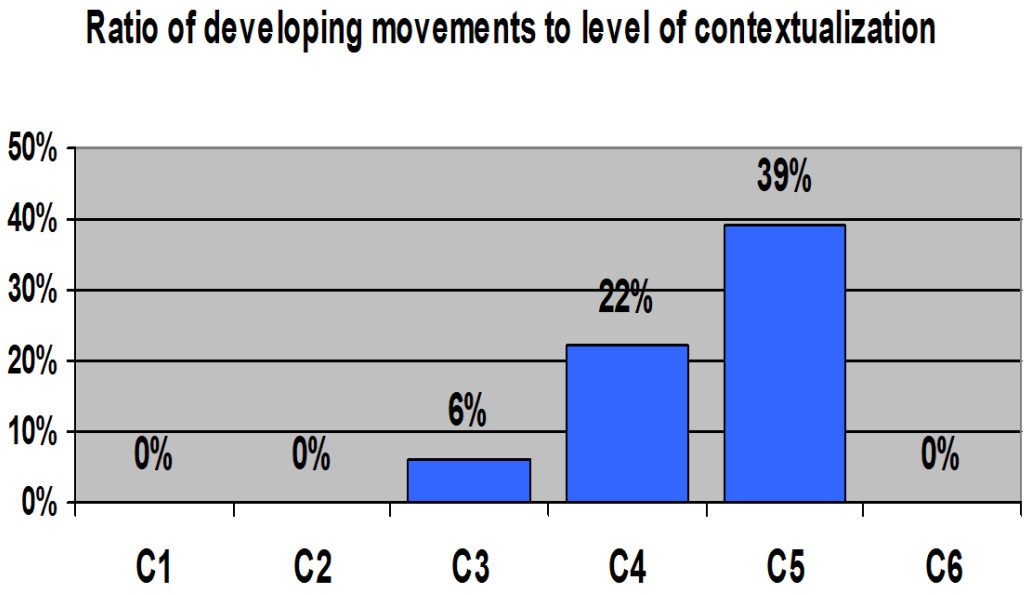
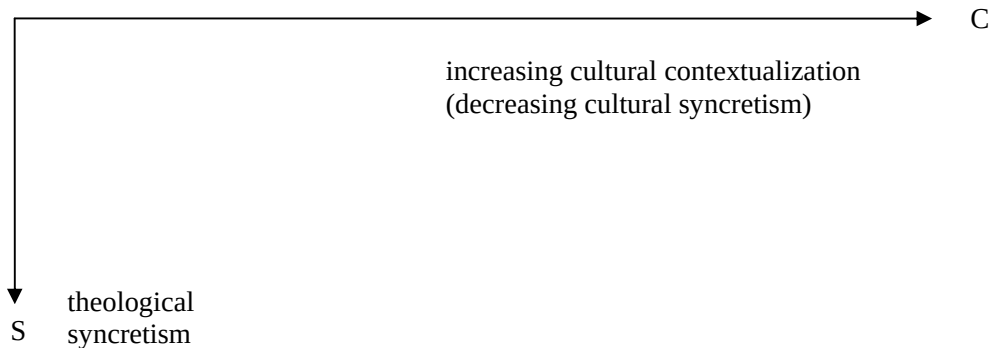


Figure 2 The correlation of faith movements to contextualization and social identity

[12] Andrea and Leith Gray, 'Paradigms and Praxis: Part I', p. 28.

[13] Graph and data are from Rick Brown, Eric Adams, Don Allen, Bob Fish, John Travis, 'Movements and Contextualization: Is There Really a Correlation?', *International Journal of Frontier Missiology*, 26/1 (2009), 29–31.

The C scale was devised to describe "Christ-centered communities" whose beliefs and values have conformed with the Bible. Even for C5, "Parts of Islam that do not fit with the Bible are rejected or if possible, reinterpreted."[14] Corresponding to each of these C styles are S churches, let's say, that are theologically syncretistic to various degrees. S1 and S2 churches, for example, resemble C1 and C2 in terms of low levels of contextualization (and high levels of cultural syncretism), but unlike C1 and C2 they are theologically syncretistic in one of many ways. Their values and beliefs may be drawn from secular culture rather than the Bible, or from denominational tradition more than the Bible; they may reject the authority of the Bible or the deity of Jesus or be tritheistic. As for S3 to S5 fellowships, they resemble C3 to C5, but they some beliefs and values from their background culture that conflict with the Bible. Yet with continued Bible study and Bible-based teaching, and with critical contextualization, they can shed their syncretism and adopt a more biblical worldview.



Missionaries can foster critical contextualization

Since Scripture calls for people to re-align their worldview with the Bible in a way that retains customs compatible with the Bible, it obliges missionaries to foster critical contextualization as well. Darrell Whiteman describes this missionary task as follows:

> Contextualization attempts to *communicate the Gospel in word and deed and to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to <u>follow</u> Christ and <u>remain</u> within their own culture*.[15] [italics original, underlining added]

Contextualization makes the meaning of the believer's words and practices clear while showing courteous respect for all that is good or redeemable in their native culture and identity. This can lead to greater fruitfulness. But beyond that it complies with God's plan to redeem every culture without rejecting any of them. Thus critical contextualization is a duty to God, as Whiteman also notes:

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[14] *ibid*., p. 30.

[15] Whiteman, Darrell, 'Contextualization: The Theory, The Gap, The Challenge', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 21/1 (January 1997), 2–7, p. 2.

> Contextualization is not something we pursue motivated by an agenda of pragmatic efficiency. Rather, it must be followed because of our faithfulness to God, who sent God's son as a servant to die so that we all may live.[16]

Whiteman presents the incarnational ministry of Jesus as the chief mandate for appropriately adapting the behaviors of believers to local customs. As noted above, however, the Scriptures make it clear in many places that God calls peoples and communities to be transformed into the moral and mental likeness of His Son in contextualized ways that maintain their cultural identity.[17] A first step, Whiteman notes, is for the Word to "penetrate their worldview", but it seems to me that the ideal goal cannot be less than full alignment of the audience's worldview with the one promoted in the Bible.

Although the Bible as a whole does not endorse a particular culture or dictate a full set of cultural customs (as do Islam and Hinduism), the biblical worldview does require certain beliefs and values while excluding some others. Faith communities then need to work out, with the leading of the Holy Spirit, how to apply these to their culture. The New Testament, for example, does not dictate any particular mode of dress, but it does command modesty, and different cultures have different perceptions of what is modest. The NT does not dictate any particular political system, but it does call for servant leadership, and societies might work that out in different ways. The NT does not mandate any particular economic system, but it does condemn greed and advocate generosity. It does not dictate certain postures for prayer, but it does call for people to pray often to God.[18] It does not dictate particular forms of music and instrumentation, but it does call for one to sing praises to the Lord.

Part of God's program and purpose, then, is to save and sanctify His people in the context of community of faith. Ideally these Christ-centered communities learn and practice the biblical worldview in a way that brings out the best in their local cultures, while shunning practices that conflict with the biblical standards. In this way they can achieve an expression of God's Kingdom in their society that shows "courtesy and respect" for their culture and identity, while "honoring Christ from the heart as Lord" (1 Pet 3:15–16).

Syncretism is an obstacle to contextualization

The main threat to contextualization is syncretism. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (11th edn.) defines syncretism as "the amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought". We can see in this definition at least two kinds of syncretism: cultural syncretism, which results from mixing elements from different cultures, and ideological syncretism, which results from mixing elements of different worldviews. Since we are concerned here with the interplay of theistic worldviews, we can follow Nicholls in calling this latter

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[16] *ibid.*

[17] For a thorough discussion of the biblical mandate for contextualization, see Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2005).

[18] There are Scriptures that endorse kneeling, bowing to the ground, and raising hands in prayer, such as Psalm 95:6: "Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker" (NIV) and Psalm 134:2: "Lift up your hands in the sanctuary and praise the LORD" (NIV). The Bible provides several models of prayer posture, but does not say they are necessary in order for prayers to be effective.

theological syncretism and the other *cultural syncretism*.[19] Given the argument thus far, it can be seen that *both forms of syncretism stem from undercontextualization or miscontextualization*.

Cultural syncretism is the unnecessary imposition of foreign customs

Most aspects of a believer's life are culturally determined, for example, the kind of clothing they wear, the kinds of homes and buildings they erect, their customs of greeting and social interaction, the relationships between the sexes, the way they sit (or stand) during meetings, the way they sing, the instruments they use, the way they transmit skills and information, the role of reading in their lives, and their conventions of music, poetry, song, and art. If a form of Western Christian behavior is imported or imposed from outside, this can lead to cultural syncretism in the Christian community. Such cultural syncretism disfigures the host culture by needlessly replacing parts of the existing culture with elements of a foreign culture.

For example, imagine how Christian leaders might induce people to wear foreign clothing, use foreign music, eat in a foreign way, and even use words from a foreign language. This is especially likely if the leaders are themselves foreigners or have been trained in a foreign country or in a foreign institution. It often happens because people do not have a model of church to follow that is natural to their culture, so they copy a foreign one.

The adoption of alien customs by believers can make their faith appear to the host society as a foreign intrusion or even a threat to their culture. It can seem to others that these foreign-acting Christians no longer belong to their society and that, consequently, members of the community should not belong to the Christian community. There are, of course, people who dislike their society and happily reject it in favor of a foreign culture and identity, but these misfits have little positive impact on their society. In fact, their neighbors and relatives may view them as renegades who have rejected their own people and despised their own culture.

Alien customs often prevent seekers from finding. It has often happened, for example, that Muslim seekers have visited a Christian meeting with sincere openness yet have left in disgust because of the culturally syncretistic behavior. Think about what they saw:

the people wore shoes in the place of prayer and worship;

they sat on chairs and benches as if they were in a tavern;

they put their Bibles on the unclean floor;

the women had their heads uncovered and mixed among the men,

the Christians prayed without kneeling or lifting hands, and

they sang "pop" songs with western melodies, often with foreign lyrics.

(The first-century Jewish Christians might have been surprised in such meetings as well, because their customs of worship were more like those of Muslims.) The bottom line is that syncretistic Christian behavior can put a stumbling block in the way of many seekers.

A second problem with cultural syncretism is that the use of alien lifestyles and languages in the community encourages people to compartmentalize their life and worldview. As a result, when they

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[19] Nicholls, Bruce J., *Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

are with Christians, they think and act like foreign Christians, but when they are elsewhere in the host community, they think and act like the others. Thus the adoption of foreign or syncretistic culture in the Christian community can lead to double-minded behavior and a syncretistic worldview. As Whiteman puts it,

> When we fail to contextualize, we run a much greater risk of establishing weak churches, whose members will turn to non-Christian syncretistic explanations, follow nonbiblical lifestyles, and engage in magical rituals.[20]

As noted previously, however, the main objection to cultural syncretism is theological rather methodological, namely that it conflicts with God's missional program by failing to value what God values, namely cultural diversity as designed by God. The adoption of foreign customs into the local Christian community denigrates and disfigures the host cultures which God wants to redeem and which He wants to have represented in His Kingdom. The great commission to make disciples of every ethnic group cannot be achieved if the ethnic groups lose their culture and identity. Thus undercontextualized approaches to mission are biblically unsound because they reject part of God's missional plan.

Cultural syncretism can be avoided by dealing with the obstacles to contextualization

There are ways to avoid cultural syncretism:

(1) understand and reject its unbiblical philosophical foundations,

(2) understand and reject its psychological foundations,

(3) identify and overcome other obstacles to contextualization, and

(4) honor Christ as Lord, builder, and leader of the local church.

Hiebert discusses (1) and (4) quite thoroughly in his aforementioned article "Critical Contextualization." Point (4) highlights the need for local Christian leaders to look to the Lord Jesus Christ to build and guide their churches in accord with His will for their specific community rather than blindly following other Christian communities, especially ones from other cultures.

As for point (2), the psychological causes of cultural syncretism, Hiebert repeatedly mentions ethnocentricity as a problem. It seems to me, however, that we need to recognize two kinds of ethnocentricity. One kind of ethnocentricity stems from **naïveté**. Cross-cultural missionaries, their leaders and supporters may not understand or appreciate the local culture or may naively assume that their own way of doing things is the only right way to do them. The local believers are often naive as well and assume that the way practiced by the missionaries is the one and only right way. One sees this in traditionally Buddhist countries like Thailand. This can happen even if the missionaries are from another ethnic group in the same country.

The second form of ethnocentricity stems from denominational **pride** and ethnic **prejudice**; people assume that their way is the best way and they are closed-minded to diversity. Some seek to rationalize cultural syncretism by saying that one cannot have Christian unity unless all believers practice the same religious customs throughout the world, namely the ones they practice. Their

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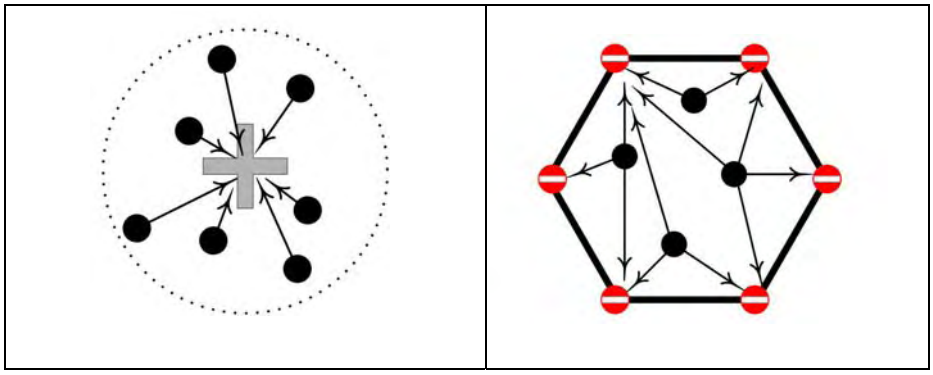
[20] *ibid.*

comfort is threatened by diversity and by the uncertainty of seeking God's will for the local church, and so they cling to religious patterns that are familiar to them.

As for (3), other obstacles, Whiteman mentions **denominational extensionism**. He cites the expectations of supporting churches and mission executives that Christian behavior in the field will be just like that at home, and that the pagans will be converted to become just like them.[21] There are home churches who are still asking Bible translators why they don't just teach everyone to read the Bible in English. The missionaries themselves are usually more contextual than this, but nevertheless the contextualization goal of most denominational missions is to contextualize, not simply the biblical faith, but their own denominational tradition. As a result, most denominational extension programs retain all of the boundary markers of their parent denomination and merely contextualize the local expressions of that tradition.[22]

For example many Roman Catholic Christians in Africa use local instruments, local styles of song and dance, and local versions of vestments and décor, while continuing to maintain almost everything else in their Catholic religious tradition, including all the boundary markers of being Catholic. Many Southern Baptist missionaries are more flexible, fostering contextualized house churches that are "baptistic" without being replicas of Southern Baptist churches; of course, the boundary markers that define membership in their denomination remain in place and are simply contextualized within the new culture. These include congregationalist forms of church polity, male-only leadership, believer's baptism by immersion, and a discouragement of charismatic ministries.[23] Some Presbyterian missions focus on the transfer of their entire tradition. This is a feature of most denominational missions.

Paul Hiebert[24] explains this as a difference between a centered-set view of Christianity and a bounded-set view. He says the centered-set model characterizes the Kingdom of God, while the second characterizes denominationalism and traditionalism. This is shown in Figure 3.



[21] *op. cit*. One of the ironies is that many western Christian practices have their origins in pagan culture, as Frank Viola has shown in *Pagan Christianity: The Origins of Our Modern Church Practices* (Gainesville: Present Testimony Ministry, 2002). This does not in itself make the practices contrary to the Bible, but it does make it ludicrous to impose them onto Christians in other cultures.

[22] For a discussion of boundary markers, see the discussion of centered-set models of behavior versus bounded-set models in Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

[23] It should be noted that some Baptist Associations, like the British Baptists, allow charismatic ministries.

[24] Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

centered-set Christianity	bounded-set Christianity

Figure 3 centered-set model versus bounded-set model

In the centered-set model, kingdom membership and identity are defined by a growing relationship to the center, which is the Lord Jesus, whereas in the bounded-set model, church membership and identity are defined by conformity with external boundary criteria, such as traditional sectarian practices. If the bounded-set model imports these criteria from another culture, it may foster cultural syncretism; people can avoid this by maintaining a centered-set view of the faith, centered on Christ as Lord rather than on denominational boundary markers.

Charles Kraft characterizes the centered-set model as "essential Christianity" and the bounded-set model as "cultural Christianity."[25] He describes essential Christianity as a worldview and as a relationship to God in Christ rather than as loyalty to a particular culture and tradition. Some denominational missions manage to merge the two approaches, but there is always a divided loyalty, with allegiance owed to both the Lord and to the denominational distinctives. Alan Hirsch calls this divided loyalty "polytheism," describing "monotheism" as a total loyalty to God in Christ and Him alone:

> When the surrounding culture intrudes on the lordship of Jesus and his exclusive claim over all aspects of our lives, then monotheism functions as the defining criterion by which we can discern between syncretism and incarnational mission." [26]

The second obstacle mentioned by Whiteman is **resistance** to contextualization on the part of local Christian leaders who have been trained by outsiders. Since the outsiders' model of Christianity is the only one the local leaders know, they feel comfortable with it and lack confidence in their ability to undertake critical contextualization. They need a model for practicing their new faith, and so they imitate the missionaries, including their foreign cultural habits, which then become normative for their Christian community. Stephen Neill describes the process as follows:

> Many missionaries went out with the best intentions of carrying out the declared intention of the London Missionary Society to preach the pure Gospel without tying it to any Western forms of organization or polity, but they usually ended by producing a copy, faithful down to the minutest detail, of that form of the Christian faith to which they themselves were accustomed in their own country. For this the missionaries were not entirely to blame; converts are imitative, and it is often they who wish to have everything done in the way which is traditional in the Western Churches.[27]

Hiebert notes a related obstacle, that local Christian leaders fear that have contextualized forms of church will put off the foreign donors and churches which fund them, so they seek to make their

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[25] See Charles Kraft, *Appropriate Christianity* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2005).

[26] Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos (Baker), 2007), p. 98.

[27] Stephen Neill, edited by Owen Chadwick, *A History of Christian Missions* (2nd edn.; London & New York: Penguin, 1990), 220.

local churches look familiar and comfortable to their donors. He calls this pressure from donors "**ecclesiastical hegemony**."[28]

A third obstacle to contextualization is cultural pride and **prejudice**, and this often characterizes national Christian subcultures more than foreign ones. For example, the bishop of a traditional Christian church in a predominantly Muslim country was asked why he opposed contextualized approaches to outreach among Muslims. He answered that Muslims did not merely need to be converted to Christ; they needed to be converted to a superior culture. By this he meant the subculture of his own community of traditional Christians. Few Muslims have been converted under the bishop's stipulations, which remain the conditions under which he will accept them. It is not uncommon for traditional cultural Christians to refuse to accept Muslims who come to faith in Christ unless they disavow their former culture and community and adopt the culture and language of the Christian community. Their bitterness towards Muslims is such that they will accept them only if their lives say, in effect, "Everything about us was bad, and everything we did was wrong. Everything you do is right, and we want to be your disciples."

Obviously this approach owes more to ethnicity than to missiology, and more to pride and disdain than to love and respect. It is not very successful. Imagine how it must feel to listen to someone sharing their faith with you, while he is trying to conceal his fear and hostility towards your culture and society. Would you be able to listen with a warm heart and an open, receptive mind? No, but that is what Muslims feel from many Christians. Yet "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8 ESV) as well as for "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Rev 5:9).

When missionaries and others refuse to honor the customs of Muslims and refuse to use the names and terms that they use, they communicate pride, disdain, and rejection. When they express the Gospel while feeling pride and disdain, they dishonor it. When they express it in the language of rejection, they ensure its rejection.

Theological syncretism results from the mixing of biblical and unbiblical worldviews

Although the Bible does not endorse any particular culture, it does challenge the worldviews which people hold. It does this by revealing one specific worldview as "the truth" and "the light." It exposes contrary viewpoints as "darkness." The term *light* is quite appropriate. Just as light dispels darkness, so the truth of God's Word exposes false beliefs and inappropriate values found in all human worldviews. The result of this reforming process is that some people in the ethnic group become disciples of Jesus and form Christian communities with transformed subcultures. Ideally the worldviews of these disciples of Jesus will be transformed into perfect harmony with the core biblical worldview, incorporating the values and beliefs illumined in the Bible and eliminating unbiblical values and beliefs. Then the disciples would truly be "the light of the world" (Matt 5:14). In reality, however, there are no Christian denominations that are in perfect harmony with the biblical worldview; all have syncretistic worldviews to some extent.

Here are some examples of syncretism found in many Western churches:

Some forbid movies, music, guitars, or work on Sundays, but accept materialistic values.

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[28] *op. cit.*

Many forbid wine, while allowing gluttony.

Most forbid polygamy, but approve of no-fault divorce.

Many hold loyalty to king or country to be as important as loyalty to Jesus.

Many affirm Jesus as a sacrifice, but ignore his ongoing role as Savior and Lord of all.

Many hope for heaven, but live for this life, resisting sanctification.

Many honor the Bible, but seldom read it.

Most obey traditional church teachings and practices, even if they are contrary to God's Word.

They derive their worldviews from modern and Greco-Roman sources more than from the Bible.

They practice individualism and Sunday ritualism rather than Christian worship and community.

They make religion a private matter rather than heeding the Bible's call to confront injustice, preach righteousness, and proclaim truth.

They treat Christianity as anthropocentric (human-centered) rather than theocentric (God-centered).

After observing American Christianity from a missiological perspective, Lesslie Newbigin concluded that it is poorly contextualized (not well adapted to local customs and cultures) and it is excessively syncretistic (contaminated with worldly worldviews).[29] By this he meant that American Christians had adopted many elements of the secular worldviews that dominate their society.

When converts in Muslim countries are incorporated into a traditional Christian community, they usually assimilate the traditional values and beliefs of that community, even those that are not biblical and not God-centered. Thus they are left with a syncretism that is both cultural and theological. Of course, if they remain as insider believers, then they risk retaining unbiblical elements of their community's traditional worldview, but that is the case for all believers who live in the world.[30]

The Good News, however, is that God has given us the Bible and His Spirit to transform our hearts and minds and worldview and behavior. When believers fill themselves with God's Word, receive good discipling, and are appropriately accountability for their behavior, they grow in their understanding and acceptance of the biblical worldview. So even though they may start off with a worldview that is dissonant with the Bible, their worldview becomes progressively more biblical as they continue to be nurtured with quality biblical input and discipling.

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[29] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986). Newbigin focuses on syncretism that results from accepting a "modern scientific worldview" that religion is a private matter separate from public life, that science is the only publicly acceptable way to discover truth, and that values must be kept separate from science and truth. As for values, most Western Christians have adopted their culture's values of materialism, hedonism, and individualism.

[30] It should be noted, however, that some forms of syncretism are more harmful than others, simply because some elements of the biblical worldview are more critical to salvation and Kingdom growth than are others. For example, it is more detrimental to salvation to deny that Jesus is Lord and Savior (like liberals and Muslims do) than it is to deny the Trinity (like Jesus-only Protestants do). It is more detrimental for spiritual growth to reject the divine authority of the Bible than it is to attribute divine authority to both the Bible and to additional writings and traditions that are largely ignored. So in evaluating the dangers of syncretism, we need to recognize these differences in gravity.

The issue of Muslims who follow Christ

The term "Muslim" designates communities and cultures rather than one particular worldview. Just as there are ethnic Jews, religious Jews, nominal Jews, and a whole range of Messianic Jews, so there are cultural Muslims, religious Muslims, nominal Muslims and a whole range of Muslim followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many of these latter retain a Muslim identity as members of Muslim families in largely Muslim communities. This is where they feel they belong, as "Muslims" who **openly** follow Jesus, who study the Bible as the highest authority, and who adopt biblical beliefs and values, but **without** becoming public apostates by renouncing their Muslim heritage.[31]

Most members of Muslim societies are "nominal" Muslims, cultural Muslims. Muslim clerics regard them as Muslims but not as "true believers." What is required, however, for nominal Muslims to remain within the Muslim community is **not** that they be true believers in Islamic doctrine but that they **not refuse to voice assent** to the Islamic confession if so required, namely that God is one and that Muhammad was His messenger. In some countries and provinces, voicing assent is a legal requirement. So although it is rare for Muslims to be required to say the confession, if the occasion arises, then nominal Muslims readily comply because it is a legal or social requirement. Muslim followers of Christ are divided on this issue, but many will voice assent to this confession if so required, for one reason or another. Here are some examples:

In one country a Muslim evangelist of the Gospel was taken to court and accused of apostasy, a crime punishable with death. He testified that he was a Muslim who followed Jesus and that he encouraged others likewise, but he denied that he was an apostate. The judge told him to say the Muslim confession and he did so, including the part that Muhammad was a messenger of God. The judge then asked him to explain what he meant by this. The man answered by saying that at one time there was no Arab nation. There were just tribes who fought and raided one another and worshipped many idols. Then God in His mercy sent Muhammad (SAW) to lead the Arabs from polytheism to monotheism and from tribal chaos to political unity. The judge accepted this explanation and acquitted him. (Not all judges, however, would do that.)

In another case, in a country where saying the confession is a legal requirement for all citizens, the leader of a house fellowship was arrested and accused of apostasy. Again, he acknowledged his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ but denied being an apostate. The police told him to say the confession, which he did. Then he reminded the police of two Islamic teachings regarding the confession: (1) that saying the confession is valid only if the person says it with sincerity (*niya*), and (2) that only God knows if a person says it with sincerity. Since he had obeyed the law the police could not execute him, but they beat him before they let him go. As a result of his wise response, this man was able to stay alive, continue living in the community, and continue his ministry among them.

In a third country, militants stirred up a mob against a Muslim evangelist who had led many to faith in Christ and had baptized them publicly. The mob might have killed him had the police not arrested him and locked him up. The militants accused him of apostasy, so in court he was asked to say the confession. He did, with a meaning known to him, but added a third clause to the confession: "and Jesus Christ is the Word of God." The addition of this clause to the confession was a shock; it

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[31] See Rick Brown, 'Muslims who Believe the Bible', *Mission Frontiers*, 30/3 (2008), 19–23. <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/2008/04/pdftoc.htm#brown>

reportedly made the national newspapers and stirred up a lot of discussion. As for the evangelist, he was given a life sentence for "excessive praise of Jesus." But after eighteen months or so he was released, at the request of a certain diplomat. When he returned home he found the militants had been removed. He then expanded his ministry by training teachers, pastors, and evangelists.

The actions of these three men are not unusual. They follow a long-standing custom in Muslim societies, namely that no Muslim may refuse the confession. There are no statistics for the percentage of nominal Muslims in Muslim communities, but it is clearly high in many places, yet all of them give lip-service to the confession. When nominal Muslims come to faith in Jesus Christ, some carry on with this custom, especially if the alternative is death or exile. It is, however, uncommon for the occasion to rise where a Muslim is challenged to say it.

This custom of assenting to the confession if required has always been the case with secret believers, who do not openly identify themselves as being Jesus-followers. But secret believers have very limited witness, whereas C5 type Muslim followers of Jesus are open witnesses to their faith. They hold meetings in their homes for Bible study and fellowship, and they invite friends and relatives to join them. Some of these Bible study fellowships have multiplied at amazing rates. But this growth and openness is not usually possible with C6 believers, who remain secretive.

Most Muslim communities have a remarkable degree of tolerance for disciples of Jesus who remain loyal to their community. Since insiders do not apostatize, they are not perceived as having rejected their society and culture, and hence they do not shame their family and community or bring misfortune upon them. As a result they find a degree of social acceptance, and other Muslims in their community want to study the Bible with them, pray with them, and hear their testimonies. When it becomes evident that God is answering many of their prayers for people, their friends, relatives, and neighbors begin bringing prayer requests to them. Their ministry of prayer for others in their society confirms their loyalty and leads to greater social acceptance of their faith and ministry. Thus maintenance by believers of their social loyalty and identity contextualizes their faith community in a fruitful way that advances the Kingdom of God in their society.

Conclusions

- Culture is the set of normal behaviors in a local community.
- Worldview is framework of core beliefs and values by which they view reality.
- Contextualization is the expression of specific truths and functions in forms that are natural to the local language and culture.
- Cultural syncretism is the unnecessary imposition or importation of foreign customs.
- Theological syncretism is the contamination of biblical worldview (core beliefs and values) with contrary elements from other worldviews, whether local or foreign.
- Local believers are (1) theologically syncretistic to the extent that they diverge from the worldview revealed in the Bible, and they are (2) culturally syncretistic to the extent that they conform to imported customs at the expense of native customs that are compatible with the Bible or could be made compatible.

- Local believers are contextualized to the extent that they (1) conform to the worldview revealed in the Bible, and (2) conform to the customs of their native culture insofar as these are compatible with the Bible.
- The Bible mandates contextualization of the biblical faith, life, and worship behaviors appropriate to each local culture so that the lives, love, and testimonies of believers express the biblical faith in a clear and undistorted way, while preserving and reforming the culture itself.
- Proper contextualization allows faith movements to develop along lines of people's social networks.
- In regard to mission practice, we could define contextualized ministry as the courteous removal of self and self-culture from ministry, so that Jesus Christ alone may be Lord of each church within its own context.