

Radical Contextualization

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distilled by Beth Snodderly from the articles listed in the Bibliography

Introduction

Christianity is the religious system (if you wish to call it that) which has been most willing to take upon itself the cultural clothes of every tradition. Christianity makes people healthy. It turns “the hearts of the fathers to the children.” There is a lower infant mortality instantly when a population becomes Christian. There are all kinds of good things that happen: orphanages and hospitals, insane asylums. Science itself is a result of the cosmology which is uniquely found in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Its roots are the godly reflections of Christian people upon the orderliness and beauty of a creation which God designed.

The Christian tradition began in a liberation from political and cultural wrappings. The Bible talks of our conveying a treasure in earthen vessels. The earthen vessels are not the important thing, but the treasure is. The new vessel will be another very different earthen vessel. This is what happened when the faith of the Bible was first conveyed to Greeks. In that case the treasure of Biblical faith in an earthen Jewish vessel became contained in a Greek earthen vessel. Later it went to Latin vessels and to Germanic vessels and to English vessels, and is now contained in Muslim vessels, Hindu vessels, and Buddhist vessels.

It is just as unreasonable for a Hindu to be dragged completely out of his culture in the process of becoming a follower of Christ as it would have been if Paul the Apostle had insisted that a Greek become a Jew in the process of following Christ. Dragging people out of their culture, and converting them to what someone thinks a “Christian” should look like, is not what the Bible teaches. Ours is a multicultural faith!

The Biblical Basis for Radical Contextualization

What was not clear to me for an embarrassingly long time was that Paul’s chief contribution was to make the Gospel into a runaway best seller by detaching it from the Jewish cultural tradition—just as Luther did later by detaching the Gospel from the Latin tradition. What Paul did was to release the Gospel from its Jewish clothes. What Luther did was to release the Gospel from its Latin clothing. What is about to happen on a global level is the release of the Gospel from its distinctively Western clothing. In all of these substantial changes—throughout 4,000 years—the basic Biblical faith has not changed over time. The heart-faith and obedience God favors—the “fear of God that is the beginning of wisdom”—has not changed.

The various stages throughout the Old and New Testaments can be described as diachronic, that is, within the same cultural tradition but changes over time. However, the New Testament picture was also a much more radical type of “lateral” change, where the earthen vessel of one culture changes over to a very different culture, and continues to exist simultaneously with the very different cultural vehicle of the source culture.

These lateral shifts are the most disconcerting because almost always those whose faith is carried in the earlier vessel fail to recognize the validity of the faith contained in a contemporary, but different cultural vessel. That is, some of the Jews who believed in Christ could not conceive of Greeks being faithful followers of Christ without switching

over to Jewish foods, clothing, language, etc. So also the Greeks who followed Christ could not conceive of that same faith being truly represented within the Jewish culture, which they thought to be out of date, never adequate, or dead wrong.

The most important thing NOT to believe is that the polarization we see in the New Testament (between Jewish and Greek carrier vehicles of the faith) portrayed one false, older religion contrasted with a new, pure, ideal religion. Or, that there is an inherent difference between the kind of heart faith intended in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Then, as now, it is the obvious Biblical emphasis on faith—not culture—which is the great enemy of those who wish to canonize a particular type of Christianity.

As we reflect on the enormous significance of the New Beginning portrayed in Paul’s ministry—a lateral shift from Jew to Greek—we must ruefully acknowledge at the same time that the many diachronic shifts in our precious Bible cause lots of problems for merely religious people whether they shift or not! Not only do we see the Greek believers scoffing at the Jewish wrappings. We see earnest Jewish followers of Christ, the “Judaizers,” insistently seeking to make the Greek followers more Jewish. Do we today sometimes think like the Judaizers? Do we seek to make Muslim and Hindu followers of Christ more “Christian,” by urging them to call themselves Christian, or by following certain Western Christian customs?

We need to expect significant differences of wrapping paper for the Biblical faith. When any of us adopts one of these re-clothings of the faith, we must relentlessly resist the temptation to overly exalt our own culturally wrapped Gospel and be unable to see the validity of any other form.

Historical Examples of Radical Contextualization

It is uncommon to hear of the significant parallels between 1) the transmission of Biblical faith from Jewish to Greek and Latin worlds, 2) the transmission of Biblical faith from either Greek or Latin to several other worlds farther north, and 3) the transmission of Biblical faith from Western Christianity to forms of the faith that prefer not to adopt Western culture along with the treasure that always comes in earthen vessels.

Constantine introduced one of the biggest changes of the “earthen vessel” during the period of the Roman Empire. Later we see three different “earthen vessels” in which the treasure of true faith is carried—the Latin Roman, the Celtic, and the Semitic (Islam). All lean back to some extent on the Bible. Later, Roman Catholics of Mediterranean culture couldn’t conceive how the faith could be contained in a vessel of Germanic culture (the Reformation period).

Predictably, those who held the true Biblical faith in the Germanic culture vessel felt that the Mediterranean vessel was invalid and was now to be superseded, and those that held the faith in the Mediterranean vessel thought the Germanic vessel was invalid. Using different words, they nevertheless all recognized the same God. All are flawed, and their cultures are all very different from one another. What we see is clearly a recipe for misunderstanding and mutual opposition, but at the same time the very possibility of our faith being carried in quite different “earthen vessels” shines through.

There are other parallels. Islam can be seen as the transmission of Biblical faith from a Roman to a Semitic earthen vessel. Islam is, unfortunately, blighted by the simple fact that the form of faith from which Muslims drew their cues was itself a highly

defective Christianity. It possessed only parts of the Bible, and in particular it had a defective understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Muhammed was apparently able to evaluate the defective trinity of the Christians he knew and rejected it just as we today would reject such a misunderstanding. One insightful scholar for this reason has said that Islam is a victim of flawed Christianity.

Other parallels thus can be seen all over the mission world, that is, cases where the Bible becomes available and a considerable number of people prefer to interpret it for themselves instead of accepting the missionary's culturally laden interpretation. Today, however, the Biblical faith is to be found "everywhere" to a great extent in an enculturated form called Christianity. And, like the Jewish diaspora, it is unevenly leavened by true faith. The modern expansion of Christianity around the globe is a mixed movement, not just a pure faith. Millions of "Christians," East and West, are mere nominal followers. The true faith is found only partially but, nevertheless, vitally.

Thus, both Judaism and Christianity are enculturated vehicles of true faith—fairly specific cultural vehicles. The mission task is apparently then not to extend either of these vehicles but to extend the Biblical faith, preaching Christ, not Christianity, preaching the Bible, not all the twists and turns of our enormous theological tradition. And we return to our earlier conclusion: only to the extent that our faith can put on other clothes can it ever become a truly universal faith.

Contemporary Contextualization

But this is happening before our eyes. It becomes suddenly clear that history may be repeating itself and that the experiences of the New Testament and early church throw remarkable light on the present. Africans have taken the ball and run with it—in the enormous AIC movement. The same thing has happened in the phenomenal Chinese house church movement, and in the "Churchless Christianity" movement to faith in Jesus Christ in millions of Hindu homes. This is parallel to the Biblical shift from Jewish to Greek clothing, and also parallel to the shift from Latin to German clothing (which is usually called the Reformation).

African Independent Churches

In Africa, there are hundreds of denominations that, as in China, have someone who is considered a divine person leading them. All of these so called non-standard versions of Christianity are referred to as African Independent Churches or African Initiated Churches. They are often referred to as the AIC's for short. Their adherents number over 50 million in 20,000 "denominations." Donald McGavran's perspective on these African churches was to simply ask, Did they revere the Bible? He used to say, provocatively, "It doesn't matter what they believe if they are assiduously studying the Bible, they'll turn out OK."

In any event, in Africa, where there are less than 400 church traditions established by Western missionaries, the number of believers that don't track with Western Christianity of any sort are practically equal in number and may be growing faster. You might say that our faith is now "out of control." No matter how we look at this phenomenon we have to recognize that most of the Christianity which continues in much of Western culture is falling behind despite the fact that it might be more doctrinally correct.

The “Churchless Christianity” Factor

The phrase “churchless Christianity” has been employed to describe some phenomena in South India. According to the Missouri- Synod Lutheran theologian/missionary, Herbert Hofer, in his book *Churchless Christianity*, in the largest city of South India there may be four times as many Hindus who are devout followers of Christ as the number of devout believers who are affiliated with the official Christian churches.

It is possible that a more accurate phrase might be to speak of “Christianity-less churches,” since we see people still regarded as “Hindus” involved in home meetings much like the “*ecclesia*” of the New Testament but we do not see any close affiliation of these believers with the cultural tradition of Christianity. This raises the question whether we are to preach Christ and not Christianity.

This factor, to me, is the largest new factor in 21st-century missions. Very few understand it. It is not yet taken seriously. To some it may come as a huge, disturbing surprise. To others it may constitute the final evidence of the power of the Bible over all other strategies of mission. In any case, it radically changes our understanding of the kingdom of God and the work of God on earth in regard to the role of what we call Christianity.

“Resistant Blocs”

The so-called “Resistant blocs” of Chinese, Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists resist the Western cultural style of Christianity while being very acceptive of Christ. So while the Gospel has created a substantial movement of “Christianity” within most of the small groups (such as tribal peoples), it has only extracted a token few individuals out from within these large groups. At the same time, some people within these large blocs are accepting the Gospel and the Bible in strange and unexpected ways. We may wish to ignore them, but we cannot deny that they exist.

Is it possible that within these large blocs of humanity we have achieved (with trumpets blaring) only a *form* of Christianity that ranges from sturdy and valid but foreign, to maybe superficial or phony? Something which from the point of view of these large blocs has been acceptable only to a minority and is not going anyplace? What is the meaning of the oft-quoted statement that Christianity in Africa is “a mile wide and an inch deep?” (Isn’t that true in the USA too?) How many peoples which are supposedly already “reached” are not really reached?

Failure with the Large Groups and the Off-setting Trend to “Radical Contextualization.”

It’s not just how many minority peoples are left to reach. It’s how many large blocs are still untouched or unchosen. Thus, the idea of *radical contextualization* is an incredibly new frontier.

Isn’t it getting clearer that we’re never ever going to persuade all the Muslims to call themselves Christians and this itself is a very peripheral issue? Can’t we recognize that it’s not important, nor helpful—not merely impossible—to make very many Muslims to identify with the cultural stream called “Christianity.” If someone is a born-again believer, isn’t that enough? We can’t realistically set out to win over people to a new

faith if we intermix the requirement that they identify with a different community in a substantially different culture. Apart from those who want to be Westernized, we can't readily make Muslims or Hindus over into our cultural form of Christianity.

This gives rise to the idea of a "Third Reformation." The first reformation was the shift from Jewish clothing to Greek and Latin clothing. A second happened when our faith went from Latin Christianity to German Christianity. This "second" reformation is *the* Reformation that everyone talks about, of course. But now Western Christianity, if it really wants to give away its faith, is poised to recognize (and to become sensibly involved with) something already happening under our noses—a Third Reformation. Sorry to say, as before (both in the time of Paul and in the Reformation), this rising phenomenon probably will involve astonishment and antagonisms. The Bible itself describes vividly the profound antagonisms between Jewish and Greek forms of the faith. History records vividly the same thing between Latin and German forms of the faith. In each case the burning question has been "Just how Biblical are these various forms?"

What neither the Western church nor its converts in the Third World are fully prepared for is the radical de-Westernization of the Gospel. But the 21st century may be the time when this will happen without our power to stop it.

Lessons Learned

The ideal is for the Gospel to become effectively expressed within the language and culture of a people and not just be a transplant from the missionary's culture. The West today needs the help of the Third World churches and missions, especially if they are willing to follow faith and not form. This miraculous global fellowship would enable those of us in the West to reexamine our faith, our theology, our very study of the Bible.

Borrowing Patterns

The New Testament shows us how to borrow effective patterns; it is trying to free all future missionaries from the need to follow the precise forms of the Jewish synagogue and Jewish missionary band, and yet to allow them to choose comparable indigenous structures in the countless new situations across history and around the world—structures which will correspond faithfully to the function of patterns Paul employed, if not their form! It is no wonder that a considerable body of literature in the field of missiology today underlies the fact that world Christianity has generally employed the various existing languages and cultures of the world-human community—more so than any other religion—and in so doing, has cast into a shadow all efforts to canonize as universal any kind of mechanically formal extension of the New Testament church—which is "the people of God" however those individuals are organized.

Send Culturally Acceptable People

What are the missionary lessons we can learn from the invasion of the pagan Anglo-Saxons into England in the fifth century after Christ? We know that the Anglo-Saxons who invaded and conquered Britain (a Celtic name) were completely pagan, whereas those they conquered, the Celtic peoples, were to some extent Christian. It is usually very hard for the conquerors to take the faith of the people they have conquered. Therefore, we have to admit that it was a good thing that the Romans arrived with a different form of Christianity—they were culturally more acceptable to the Anglo-

Saxons. It was useful because then the Anglo-Saxons could become Christians without saying that they were now becoming Celts.

Likewise, it is a good thing today for another denomination to arrive if the Christians who are already in a given place represent a different ethnic or cultural tradition from the people they are trying to win. To give a modern-day example, it would be much easier for Southern Baptists to win the Turkana people of Kenya than for Presbyterians to try to win them. The Presbyterians of Kenya are mainly Kikuyus, who for many generations have been enemies of and have despised the Turkana. Therefore, in evangelizing the Turkana, it is better for some other denomination to take on that task than for the Turkana not to become Christians at all.

For the same reason some of the Brahmins and middle caste peoples of India need to become followers of Jesus without having to imply that by so doing they have become Untouchables, who make up the majority of Christians in the country. This parallel seems to be very close to what happened so long ago in England.

What Can We Do?

We can go humbly to these groups and try to help them understand the Bible more clearly without assuming they will accept our form of Christianity when they read the Bible. Furthermore, we can rejoice that there are millions outside the formal Christian tradition who are hungering and thirsting after righteousness and who have in their hands the Bible. Isn't that better than to add more millions who may call themselves Christians but who do not pay much attention to the Bible and who can hardly be described as "hungering and thirsting after righteousness?"

The practical question that arises no matter what kind of a person we are dealing with—whether Presbyterian, Mormon, or Muslim—is, do they hunger and seek after righteousness? Do they in their hearts seek to know God and do His will? If they are Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran, Hindu, or Baptist, do we feel they must leave their own people and join ours and call themselves by our name, whether Presbyterian, Anglican, Evangelical, or just Christian? In other words, is it our mission to insist on a change of name and a change of clothing? Isn't the Bible, isn't Jesus, God's Son, more important to them than what they call themselves or how they worship?

Conclusion: Who is a True Christian?¹

Evangelicals have a hard time figuring out who is and who is not a true Christian, in the sense of a born-again member of God's Kingdom. It seems to make little difference to most Evangelicals what a Christian needs to be and to do if they call themselves a Christian. But if they don't call themselves Christians, such as Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists, all of our powerful criteria are brought to bear and we tend to throw them out, no matter how seriously they seek God. It seems to me, however, that no form of Evangelicalism nor any other definition can be adequate as a criterion of acceptability to God. We need to realize God does not intend for us to decide who is a spiritual Christian (or part of Gods Kingdom) and who is not. That means the spiritual status of a lot of people is in doubt, and that's the way it should be.

¹ Excerpt from the last writing dictated by Ralph Winter April 27, 2009, a few days before he died.

Embarrassingly, a huge amount of God's will is being performed every day by people who do not call themselves "Christian." Jesus' expectation that the will of God would be enacted in this life is actually happening before our eyes. This also means that Kingdom mission is in many cases a joint operation with "Christians" and non-"Christians" whose status with God is ambiguous or unfinished.

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