The World Council of Churches (WCC) has launched a major study project on the gospel and cultures resulting in the formation of study groups around the world and the publication of 15 study pamphlets that discuss how the gospel relates to different cultures. This article reviews the contents of these pamphlets around the themes of the gospel and cultural pluralism and the church and social pluralism. In evaluating these materials, it is noted that the tension between gospel and culture, revelation and hearing, divine and human is central to the Christian Faith. The WCC debate on the relationship of the gospel to cultures and the church to the world is an attempt to move ahead and chart a mission course for the twenty-first century.

Mission has always shaken the complacency of the church. This was true in the early church (Acts 11-15). It is true today. The modern mission movement encountered a bewildering variety of peoples and cultures in newly discovered worlds. At the outset it subsumed this diversity under the concept of civilization, and Christianity was equated with Western ways. Other peoples were seen as barbarians and pagans. Because religion was seen as the core of other cultures, the mission encounter with other people was seen essentially as religious in character. This raised two critical questions: How should Christians relate to non-Christian religions (debated at the meeting of the International Missionary Council at Tambaram, 1938), and how should missionaries respond to the fact that young churches around the world were often copies of the Western churches that planted them and foreign to their own contexts?

Two forces altered the nature of these debates. The first was the reemergence of local identities and the rise of nationalism around the world. The second was the deep personal encounters between missionaries and the people among whom they ministered. These encounters challenged the West’s denigration of other peoples and their ways of life, and led to the rejection of the word civilization as arrogant and ethnocentric. A new word, culture, was adopted in its place. McGrane writes,

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The emergence of the concept “culture” has made possible the democratization of differences. . . . The twentieth-century concept of “culture” has rescued the non-European Other from the depths of the past and prehistory and reasserted him in the present; he is once again contemporary with us. Twentieth-century “culture” was a concept forged in the teeth of “evolution,” in a struggle to the death with “evolution” and the hierarchical scheme implicit in it. (McGrane 1989:114)

This change in words reflects a profound shift in the way Western people viewed other peoples. In it people belong to cultures which enabled them to live in community. All cultures are equally good, and their preservation is of unquestioned value. From a missionary perspective, all cultures are equally capable of receiving and embodying the gospel.

This worldview shift was reflected in the changing focus of World Council of Churches (WCC) conferences. The East Asia Christian Conference (Bangkok, 1949), and the All Africa Conference of Churches (Ibadan, 1958) looked at the cultural context of Asian and African churches and called missions to address local human needs and to present the gospel in the voices of traditional cultures. They also challenged their Christians to live more actually in the cultures of their own people and to see their non-Christian neighbors not as “other peoples” but as “their peoples” (Ariarajah 1995:12). There was also a growing emphasis on the contextualization of the gospel and a call for a mission theology for the West where Christianity was being seduced by materialism and secularism.

The question of how the gospel should be experienced in local cultural forms came to the fore in Canberra (1991) when Professor Chung Hyun-Kyung invited the participants to listen to “the cries of creation and the cries of the Spirit within it.” These included the spirit of the people killed in Hiroshima; of Mahatma Gandhi; Steve Biko; of the Amazon rain forest; and of earth, air, and water exploited by human greed (Ariarajah 1995:47).

Many participants objected to this, and the relationship of gospel and culture reemerged as a central issue of discussion. The World Council of Churches Central Committee chose as the topic for the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism to be held in Salvador, Brazil, 24 November-3 December 1996, “Called to One Hope: The Gospel in Diverse Cultures.” It charted a global study process to investigate the relationship between the gospel and human cultures with four components: (1) the development of a bibliography of resources on the topic, (2) a series of popular pamphlets which tell the story of the engagement of the gospel with particular cultures, (3) a series of small consultations on the issues related to an ecumenical hermeneutics of gospel and culture, and (4) the development of small local study groups in every region to explore the question.

So far 12 pamphlets have been published. These served as the basis for participants from various cultural settings to share their experiences of the encounters of gospel and their particular historical and cultural contexts. The pamphlets reflect the views of their authors. There was no prior definition of either culture or gospel. Consequently, the studies take diverse approaches to the subject. The Salvador conference focused the discussion around a question: How is the one gospel related to the many cultures of the world? Four themes were addressed: (1) authentic witness within each culture, (2) gospel and identity in community, (3) local congregations in pluralistic societies, and (4) one gospel—diverse cultures.
For analytical purposes we will differentiate here between the relationship of gospel to cultures and cultural pluralism and the relationship of cultures to communities and social pluralism.

The Gospel and Cultural Pluralism: The WCC Debate

The authors of these pamphlets point out that the modern missionary movement and the increasing globalization of the world have led to increasing encounters between cultures and religions which raise critical questions that churches and missions must answer. It is clear that the discussions are framed not only by reflections on biblical passages, but also by the particular cultural and historical contexts of those involved.

Christianity, Civilization, and Non-Christian Religions

Prior to World War II, most Western Christians equated Christianity with civilization, and saw the relationship of the gospel to other belief systems as religious encounters. Many missionaries believed "that at the heart of each culture is a religion or a worldview that presents a general understanding of the nature of the universe and the place of human beings in it" (Ariarajah 1995:4). For the most part, these other religions were seen as human creations or as demonic in character. Some missionaries believed they had to challenge these religions at their core; others called for humility and a deep understanding of other religions to find points of contact for the communication of the gospel, but encounter they must. Few saw the need to study the social and cultural systems of the people to whom they ministered.

With the shift from the concept of civilization to culture came a shift in the way Christians viewed other religions. Increasingly, many affirmed that God saves all people through Christ who is Lord and Savior to all nations and in all spheres of life and that we know little of the understanding God has given to those in other faiths. Consequently, they argued, we must enter into dialogue with them, recognize our common humanity and admit that all have an equal place in the love of God. In this dialogue, those who held this position said that we must recognize that Christ addresses them through us and us through them.

The Foreignness of the Gospel

One theme that runs through most of the pamphlets is the foreignness of the gospel in most non-Western churches. The equation of Christianity with Western civilization and the rejection of other cultures as pagan led to a displacement approach to missions. Old customs had to be rejected, and Western Christian practices introduced. Consequently, mission churches were often copies of their Western founders, and the gospel was seen by many to be a foreign gospel. Converts often cut themselves off from their traditional cultures and adopted the customs of the missionaries.

Stan McKay and Janet Silman (1995) trace the impact of the laws the Canadian government passed in the nineteenth century forbidding people to hold pow-wows or to practice traditional religious rites. Government and mission agencies set up Indian residential schools in which First Nation children were taught English, trained to live in the white world, and forbidden to speak their native languages. In recent years the First Nation churches have begun to rediscover their cultural identities and sense of community and to govern themselves, making decisions in Indian, not Western, ways.
Some Native Americans have returned to lodges and their traditional ceremonies and religions to rediscover their roots.

John Pobee traces the foreign garb of the gospel in Africa. There most mission churches are seen as alien institutions, and people live much of their lives outside Christian activities. This foreignness is due in large measure to the identification of Christianity with civilization and colonialism. In the early nineteenth century, African clergy in South Africa were forbidden to wear native clothes and were instructed to wear European black woolen or alpaca coats and trousers, black shoes, white shirts, black ties, and black hats (Pobee 1996:35). African Christians also struggle with a Western theology that "has been passed through the prism of the culture of the Enlightenment" (1996:14).

**Contextualization**

Another theme running through most of the pamphlets is the need for the contextualization of the gospel in local cultures. Over the past four decades, there has been a growing emphasis in the WCC on taking the gospel to people in their cultures rather than calling them to reject their old beliefs and practices. Christians and churches are encouraged to live and to witness authentically in their contexts. The All Africa Conference of Churches in Ibadan in 1958 affirmed that "while the church cannot give Christian content to every African custom, we believe that the church throughout Africa has a very rich contribution to make to the life of the world church" (Ariarajah 1995:12). In other words, not all culture is bad; neither is everything good. All cultures have positive factors that hold them together, and all have negative factors that degrade humans.

Pobee calls for the contextualization of the gospel in African ritual forms, such as using drums, songs, and xylophones in liturgy, which have the capacity to combine beliefs, emotions, and values, and to grip people in a way verbal explanations alone cannot do. Moyo (1996) sees contextualization not only as a means for communicating the gospel, but also as an expression of the approach God has taken in dealing with humans—as an expression of the Incarnation of God becoming a human, born in history in a particular culture to bring salvation.

If true contextualization is the expression of the gospel in local cultural contexts without the loss of its truth and transforming power, does incomplete contextualization ever occur? Antonie Wessels shows that the contextualization of the gospel in Western Europe was slow and reached its climax in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Pre-Christian Indo-European and Old European beliefs persisted even after most of the people claimed to be Christian. Churches were frequently built on pre-Christian sacred sites, and old divinities became Christian saints. Old religious practices went underground.

A theme found in almost every pamphlet is the importance of local languages and Bible translation in the communication of the gospel and the creation of authentic local expressions of Christianity. The writers confirm Lamin Sanneh's (1993) thesis that Bible translation not only enables young churches to read and to interpret the gospel for themselves, but also empowers the people and gives worth to their cultures. Davidson (1996) shows that this was true for the Maoris; Moyo (1996) for Zimbabwe, Selvanayagam (1996) for Tamilnadu; Davies (1996) for Wales; and Pobee (1996) for West Africa.
One Gospel—Diverse Cultures

In recent years calls for contextualizing worship forms and church polity have been accepted readily. More difficult is the call for self-theologizing, the right for young churches to develop their own theological understandings. What is the gospel in specific human contexts, given the incredible diversity of human cultures and worldviews? Must it not address the local human needs and questions? D. T. Niles used the illustration of the potted plant. The Bangkok East Asia Christian Conference Assembly (1964) called for a self-emptying of foreign ways in order to be more indigenous and concluded that “proper theology includes reflection on the experience of the Christian community in a particular place, at a particular time (Ariarajah 1995:29).” All theology by nature and necessity can only be contextual.

How should theologies relate to the philosophical systems of the people? Ariarajah points out that the early church rejected idolatry, but its response to Greek philosophy was more complex. Tertullian rejected it and asked, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Justin Martyr defined Christianity as a school of philosophy and equated Christ with the logos. Clement and Origin of Alexandria saw the Old Testament and Greek philosophy as tutors bringing us to Christ.

The report of the WCC’s Uppsala assembly (1968) concluded, “the universality of the Christian faith does not contradict its particularity. Christ has to be responded to in a particular situation” (Ariarajah 1995:29). The church in Latin America in the context of poverty and oppression must proclaim liberation and good news to the poor; the church in Asia in the context of religious pluralism and caste must speak of dialogue and human dignity (Selvanayagam 1996; Massey 1996); the church in Africa in the context of traditional religions must draw on traditional wisdom and deal with the spirit world (Pobee 1996); and the West must challenge its growing secularism (Davies 1996; Wessels 1996). The global church needs to develop vital theologies that incorporate a rich diversity of theological approaches emerging out of varied experiences throughout the world.

If theologies are inextricably tied to their contexts, how can we speak of one gospel, one faith, and one church? What is the relationship between universality and particularity—between theology and theologies? In dealing with cultural differences, how concerned should we be if churches in one culture understand the gospel differently from those in another? What are the limits of diversity? When can we say that a particular understanding is so far from the traditions of the church that it no longer stands in that tradition?

These remain important questions in the current WCC debate. For many participants the only unity is to share and hear various cultural experiences of the gospel message. Kenyon, on the other hand, argues,

No fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith rests on a disputed reading . . . The Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true Word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation throughout the centuries. (Pobee 1996:13)

Sanneh (1993) argues that Bible translation takes vernacular paradigms seriously and so keeps any one of them from promoting itself as the universal exclusive norm.
Authentic Witness in Each Culture

If, as Philip Potter argued, ecumenism must begin with evangelism, how can the mission and the church have an authentic witness in each culture? In many parts of the world, a two-tiered Christianity has emerged (Massey 1996; Williams 1996; Moyo 1996; Pobee 1996). Christians turn to Christian doctrines to answer the ultimate questions of origin, purpose, and destiny, but they turn to traditional healers, diviners, and shamans to answer their existential needs for healing, guidance, and maintenance of community relationships because the Christianity they have received does not address these needs. In this setting the authentic witness is to bring all life under the lordship and providence of God, and to proclaim a gospel that includes healing, guidance, and social peace and justice (Moyo 1996; Pobee 1996). On the other hand, in the West where science proclaimed as public truth is divorced from religion which is relegated to private opinion, authentic witness is to proclaim the gospel as public truth for all to believe and as dealing with the whole of life (Davies 1996; Wessels 1996; Newbigin 1986).

The Church and Social Pluralism

If cultural pluralism raises difficult questions regarding the gospel and culture, social pluralism poses equally difficult problems for the church.

Local Congregations in Pluralistic Societies

The birth of young churches around the world raises the question of their relationship to their ethnic and national identities. Too often in the past, these identities were rejected, and new Christians were given Western identities. Many broke with their ethnic and national loyalties and were seen as foreign puppets. Even now, Pobee (1996) argues, African leaders often seek to maintain non-African constructs imported by missionaries. The result is an inferiority complex that needs to be overcome.

Donald Meek (1996) traces the encounter of missionaries with the Gaelic people of the Scottish Highlands. The Reformers placed a strong emphasis on vernacular languages, and from the beginning the Protestant churches used Gaelic to evangelize the Highlands. The result was a Gaelic church which affirmed the Gaelic identity of the people. The importance of this in the growth of the church cannot be overestimated. However, this identification of the gospel with the Gaelic identity is now a hindrance to the church in the Highlands as young people increasingly are joining the larger world and learning English as their primary language. For them Christianity is linked to their Gaelic past, not their future. Similarly, Davies (1996) shows how the church's identification with the Welsh struggle for autonomy contributed to its strength, but also led to its insulation from missions.

In Africa (Pobee 1996; Moyo 1996), North America (McKay and Silman 1995), and in other parts of the world the church has had to counter the acid of individualism that came from the West and to preserve the traditional sense of community by presenting God's people as a new family. More controversial are attempts to present Christ as the great ancestor or departed elder (Moyo 1996).

Church and Churches

The tension between the universal and the particular appears on the social level in the relationship of the church universal and the bewildering variety of local church-
es, and between churches deeply divided by theology, church polity, worship styles, and ecclesiastical loyalties. In Africa it has to do with the relationship between mission and independent churches, in India between churches from different castes, and in the West with segregation and class differences.

Theologically, many appeal to the Incarnation of God in Jesus as the theological model for understanding the mystery of the church. In practice, the Salvador conference sought to bridge the gap by listening to voices from local churches telling of the relationship among churches in their specific contexts.

*The Church in the World*

The tension between unity and diversity not only has to do with the relationship between particular churches, but also with the relationship of the churches to the worlds in which they live. On the political level, Protestant churches in Wales were defenders of Welsh nationalism, in Zimbabwe the Marxist government sees churches as partners in nation-building, in the Caribbean most churches have been apolitical, and in New Zealand missions and churches fought for the full citizenship and rights of the Maori. In the West the debate between state and free churches continues. On the social level, churches in India are struggling with their relationship to the caste system, in Latin America to oppressive systems and poverty, and in Africa to tribalism.

**Evaluation**

The Salvador debate on the relationship of the gospel to cultures and the church to the world is an attempt to move ahead and chart a mission course for the twenty-first century. It is the beginning of a process, not the end. It challenges us all by posing key questions and by calling us to listen to Christian voices from around the world. Listening to one another, however, is not enough. We must go beyond hearing to defining ourselves as Christians in the world in this age.

First, we must define what we mean by "gospel." While recognizing fully that we need to be humble in our relationship to people in other religions and to understand those religions deeply, we must affirm the uniqueness of Christ as the only way to salvation in the fullest sense of this word.

Second, we must define what we mean by "culture." It is a corrective to the arrogance and ethnocentrism of the colonial past, but it, too, is not a theological category. As Lamin Sanneh (1993) points out, we are in danger of a new cultural fundamentalism that sees all cultures as *sui generis* and equally good and that sees cultural change particularly if it is introduced from outside as inherently bad. We need to examine how the New Testament writers saw the relationship of the church to its surrounding world.

Finally, we need to develop a theological understanding of the relationship between gospel and cultures and church and social systems. Given the current stress on the way contexts shape the meaning of texts, we are in danger of losing sight that the Bible is God's revelation which can be understood in all cultural settings. This seems to be the case in the Riano statement (1987):

[W]e doubt whether it is possible and proper to the incarnational approach to sort out gospel criteria for evaluating cultures. If we take seriously the theological assumptions of the gospel transforming cultures from within, and if the gospel cannot be considered independent from its various cultural expressions, how can we single out universally applicable gospel criteria? (Ariarajah 1995:42-43)
Pobee (1996) provides us with three preliminary guidelines to further the discussion on the relationship of gospel and culture. First, it must be biblical. It must begin with the recognition that God has definitively revealed himself to us in Scripture and above all in Christ, and that the Bible is the primary source and resource for the life of the church. Second, it must be apostolic. The church as a hermeneutical community must draw upon disciples who have gone before. Seeking to contextualize the gospel does not in any way absolve us from seeking continuity with the apostles. Third, it must be catholic. We need to recognize that Christ is preparing one church as his bride.

The tension between gospel and culture, revelation and hearing, divine and human is central to the Christian faith. It is seen in the Incarnation in which the transcendent God took the form of a particular human in a particular culture and time. It is manifest in the divine revelation recorded in Scripture and translated into many languages. It is God accepting us in Christ and redeeming and transforming us. As Andrew Walls reminds us, to understand their relationship we have only to recall that both are the direct result of that incarnational and translational process whereby God redeems us through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

It is his life which enters the life of each new community where he is received by faith, and which is to be realized through all the courses of that community's thoughts and traditions. One result is the rich diversity of Christian life and experience. Another is a new transcendent commonality, shared across diverse communities. (1996:54)

Ultimately, the relationship of gospel and culture is not a problem to be solved, but the process of discipling all peoples—individuals and communities—in all things (Matthew 26:19).

Notes
1. One of these groups was The Gospel and Our Culture Network, which was independently organized earlier in response to Lesslie Newbigin's call for a missiology for the West. An excellent summary of the work of this network is found in The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America (Hunsberger and van Gelder [1996], particularly pages 3-25).
2. The same pattern appeared in Australia in relationship to the Aborigines.

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