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When Culture Leaves Contextualized Christianity Behind

JOHN H. CONNOR

Contextualized Christianity is culturally specific. If the process is consistent with objective truth and subjective reality, it leads not only to stability, but also to fixed position. Cultures are dynamic entities going through constant and, in this age of global mass media, rapid change. The contextualized church faces the danger of being left out of context unless it can impartially understand the forces of change in its own cultural setting and constantly decontextualize and recontextualize in new culture as it develops.

Syncretism has been a problem with which Christianity has had to contend from the very beginning. Contextualization is one way in which Christianity deals with the problem of syncretism. If the truths of the gospel, the forms which it takes, and its communication in culture are objective in essence yet subjective in cultural identity, it is contextualized. The process itself, however, can go astray as acknowledged in *The Willowbank Report* of the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism under the title of "The danger of syncretism":

As the church seeks to express its life in the local cultural forms, it soon has to face the problem of cultural elements which either are evil or have evil associations. How should the church react to these? Elements which are intrinsically false or evil clearly cannot be assimilated into Christianity without a lapse into syncretism. . . .

By what guidelines, therefore, does a church accept or reject culture traits in the process of contextualization? How does it prevent or detect and eliminate heresy (wrong teaching) and syncretism (harmful carry-overs from the old way of life)? (*The Willowbank Report* 1978:28)

The paper then gives a short methodology for avoiding syncretism within the contextualizing process. Paul Hiebert (1985:186-190) gives a four-step method for avoiding syncretism produced either by a "rejection of

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contextualization" or by "uncritical contextualization." He calls his method "critical contextualization" (1985:171ff). David Hesselgrave (1978:96-463) deals with the same problem using a kind of matrix filter of seven contextualizing universals for communication. The purpose of the process is contextualization, but it also "sets the parameters outside of which Christian orthodoxy, and good science and sound logic, will not allow us to go ..." (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:203), in other words, to avoid syncretism.

Whatever method is advocated, the process of contextualization seeks not only to contextualize, but also to avoid syncretism. While this aspect of syncretism in relationship to the contextualizing process has been addressed, there is another related problem that has not been adequately addressed as a problem. What happens to the contextualized church when culture goes into a major paradigm shift and the church does not recontextualize in the new culture?

Contextualized Christianity is culturally specific. It is almost impossible to find any definition of contextualization that does not mention this fact. The following are a few.

... the dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in the light of the Word of God and historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the lordship of Christ. As members of the body of Christ interpret the Word, using their own thoughts and employing their own cultural gifts, they are better able to understand the gospel as incarnation. (Gilliland 1989:12-13)

... to the degree possible without violating supracultural biblical principles, aspects of Christian life and ministry—such as life-style, theological formulations, worship patterns, music, ethics, leadership structure, and others—should be free to take on the forms of the new culture which Christianity enters. (Wagner 1983:147)

... Christian contextualization can be thought of as the attempt to communicate the message of the person, works, Word, and will of God in a way that is faithful to God's revelation, especially as it is put forth in the teaching of the Holy Scripture, and that is meaningful to respondents in their respective cultural existential contexts.

Contextualization is both verbal and nonverbal and has to do with theologizing; Bible translation, interpretation, and application; incarnational lifestyle; evangelism; Christian instruction; church planting and growth; church organization; worship style—indeed with all of those activities involved in carrying out the Great Commission. (Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989:200)

Contextualization is culturally specific, and it is difficult to get the process to take place no matter what method is adopted. Contextualization is not simply a plan worked out in a study or boardroom; contextualization takes place with the interaction of people. It is not simply an academic exercise. Furthermore, as the devil is not interested in seeing contextualization take place, true contextualization involves spiritual warfare. Finally, cultures are not static, and the subjective nature of the end result of

contextualization tends not only to stability, but to fixed position. Major paradigm shifts in culture can leave contextualized Christianity behind as a syncretistic anachronism if it does not remain dynamically relevant.

In exploring the problem of nominality in Europe and the United States, Eddie Gibbs says that the churches which are losing the greatest numbers in membership are the ones which "tend to have a more static mindset, which says that our doors are open for people to come to us rather than our going out to find the lost sheep" (1989:245). In the United States his contention seems to be that the church is allowing itself to be forced to the edges of culture ("social marginalizing of the church" [1989:252]), and thus becoming a cultural anomaly rather than a contextual entity. A church which is extraneous to the culture in which it exists is not contextualized. When culture shifts and the church remains where it was, it loses contextualization.

If we can understand the nature of cultural paradigm shifts, it may help us to keep the contextualizing process on track. The following diagrams try to analyze the process of paradigm shifts as it relates to contextualization.

Insulated Culture

The diagram below (figure 1) represents a culture in containment. The inner circle (#1) is the cultural core, the base for worldview, custom, and tradition. The middle ring is the area of tolerant latitude, not the way it *should* be done, thought, or produced, but tolerated cultural form. The outer ring represents the area of cultural rejection, cultural forms of which the society is aware, but which are not tolerated (especially by the cultural core). The arrows represent pressure within the culture. Iran in its present stage of Islamic revolution would be an example of a culture in containment.

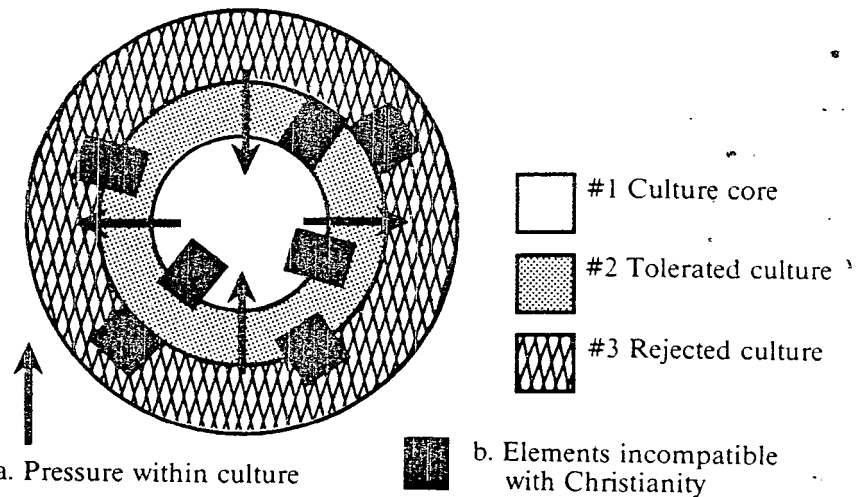


Figure 1. Insulated Culture

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Within the insulated culture, the pressure is predominantly directed toward the cultural core. The small sections (b.) represent portions of cultural patterns which are incompatible with Christianity. Within Korean culture, ancestral sacrifice would be an example. In American culture, abortion as a means of birth control would be an example of a culturally acceptable pattern which is incompatible with Christianity. Christianity can fit contextually into any of the rings of culture and remain pure to objective truth and reality; however, there are areas in all rings with which Christianity is incompatible. If Christianity were to move totally into the inner core of an insulated culture and take up even those cultural areas designated by the coloring of "b.," then it would be syncretistic.

Within any cultural pattern, portions of the core will have been in the outer ring at some point in time past, will have moved through the second ring (as tolerated), and finally into the core. As an example of this, commercialism and international trade are a strong part of the inner core of present South Korean culture, but just a little over 100 years ago they were not allowed on the basis of Confucian ethic (Han 1970:362). Goods coming in had to be presents to the king, for which the king returned presents at his discretion. Even the ports for the presents were restricted. A number of times this system got out of control (by persons labeled as "pirates"), but was brought back with severe restriction. Certain nations were only allowed a yearly quota of "gifts," and international trade as such was banned. Through time, commercialism has moved through the toleration ring to a prominent place in the core of the culture today. This type of paradigm shift is common in all cultures.

In an insulated culture there are a number of things which exert pressure toward the core. One is the established strength of worldview and the security that it gives. Another is the security needs of established leadership (the king, the party, the government). Culture does not easily go into a paradigm shift, and that rigidity itself can keep a society in an insulated position for long periods of time.

Protestant Christianity came into Korea through the ring of toleration at a time when the outer ring had special circumstances of rejection. The Roman Catholic Church had just gone through severe persecution with the martyrdom of the majority of leaders, missionaries, and prominent converts from about 1866-1870 (Park 1987:10-13; Han 1970:364-367). Then in "1876 it [Korea] was rudely jolted out of its self-imposed isolation by Japan..." (Thernstrom 1980:601). Japan forced a treaty with Korea in 1876, defeated China in 1895, murdered the Korean queen in 1895, defeated the Russians in 1905, made Korea a colony in 1905, and annexed it in 1910 (Hoare and Pares 1988:43-49). The first permanent Protestant missionaries arrived in 1884 (Kane 1971:263-264), and the great revival of Korea took place in 1907. The toleration ring at that point was wide enough to take in almost anything that would condemn Japan.

The Korean national independence hall near Chonan in South Korea has a complete section dedicated to the missionary influence of that period. There are articles in international newspapers written by missionaries

condemning Japan; there are pictures of missionaries being subjected to humiliations inflicted by the Japanese. The stability of Christianity before this period had been erratic in Korea, with times of severe persecution to missionaries and converts alike.

After Christianity slipped into the toleration ring, it quickly contextualized and moved into the cultural core. It became Korean in almost every way. One classic example is the leadership style and organization that has been adopted by almost every Protestant church in Korea. Although it has been called the "elder system" and can also be translated as the "presbyter system," it is more Confucian than Presbyterian; it has no exact parallel outside of the Korean Church. It unconsciously emphasizes the cardinal doctrine "li" of the Confucian ethic, which has been explained by Lin Yutang as follows: "an ideal social order with everything in its place and particularly a rationalized feudal order..." (Ross 1980:271). Virtually every aspect of Protestant Church organization in Korea is based on vertical relationships; people know who is over them and who is under them. This is only one aspect of the contextualization that took place.

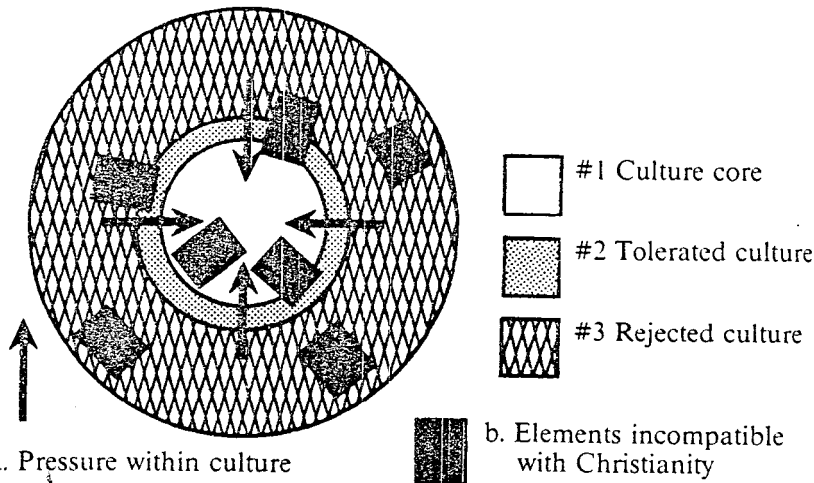
The things Christianity rejected within the core and toleration rings which had brought them in conflict with the culture were now ignored, because the pressures of the rejection ring were a greater threat. Christians seemed to defend the core against Japan even to death. A disproportionate number of Christians were in the underground movement against Japan (Kane 1971:268). Christianity came to be identified with nationalism.

Contextualization means that the culture is penetrated by Christianity, and there is a sense in which Christianity is penetrated by the culture. Forms and meanings merge into culturally dynamic configurations. Part of the contextualization process is what Paul Hiebert (1985:193ff.) calls "the fourth self"—self theologizing. Contextualized Christianity not only builds the local worldview into its logic, it systematizes biblical theology to support itself. There comes a place and time in which certain aspects of contextualized truth can not be distinguished by the majority in the culture from absolute truth. In a sense, true contextualization gives objective truth a subjective form for the culture. Most Koreans would reject any organizational style except the basic "elder system" of Korea as non-Christian (whether they happen to be Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Holiness, or other).

Culture in a Paradigm Shift

Figure 2 represents a culture under pressure of a paradigm shift. The core remains basically the same; however, the ring of tolerance has expanded considerably.

Societies go through considerable pressure to expand the toleration ring. Think of the pressure that the American society has gone through since World War II to expand the toleration band (McCarthy era, civil rights movement, Vietnam, women's rights—to name a few). The pressure often includes retreat back to the core and severe backlash in which very little is changed except that the ideas and influences are introduced, but the pressure



a. Pressure within culture
 Figure 2. Culture in a Paradigm Shift

of the core may be too great to allow more than slight movement in toleration. The recent action of the Chinese government against its own people is an example of a cultural core resisting a paradigm shift.

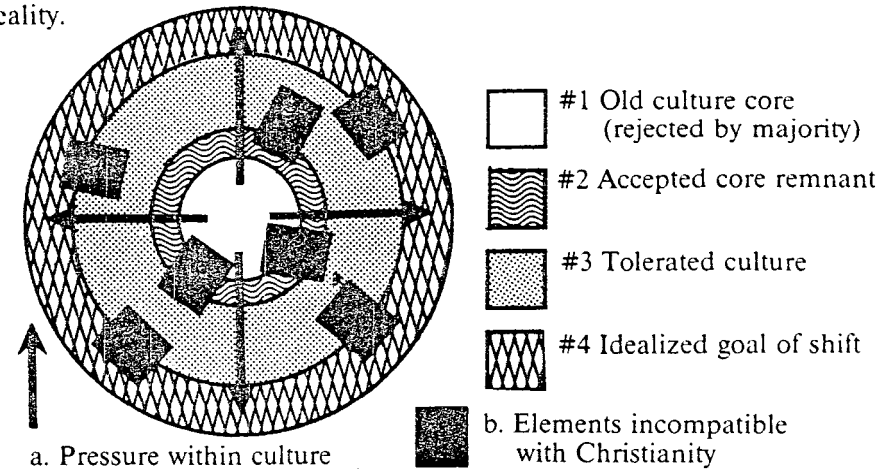
The problem as it relates to contextualized Christianity is that it (contextualized Christianity) tends to be conservative and remains close to, if not concentrated in, the cultural core, especially if it has built a theology around the cultural aspects of its contextualization. When the culture goes into a paradigm shift, contextualized Christianity tends to stand with the conservative core of the culture. If the cultural core is perceived to be *the truth*, in contrast to objective truth, then deeper retreat into the older core and traditions seems more spiritual. At this time in Korea, the society is in tremendous flux and is being pressured into shift. There is an unprecedented proliferation of cults springing up every day, which claim to be "more pure." Their "purity" rests most generally on some aspect of traditional cultural value, rather than on an objective truth, and embraces a wider range (including incompatible elements) of an older core. The ones that I am personally aware of emphasize a strong Confucian style of organization, and many emphasize a Buddhist style of asceticism. One such group, reported to be 50,000 in number, has taken up communal living. Another group has taken up the pantheism and demonology of shamanism as part of their emphasis. I have no doubt in my mind that these groups have stepped backward rather than forward. Contextualization at its best is dynamic; at its worst it can become syncretistic.

Paradigm Shift in Control

If we can agree that the gospel can be contextualized in any cultural setting, then we cannot logically argue that a major paradigm shift in culture is intrinsically bad. A paradigm shift simply creates a culture and a worldview that were not previously in existence.

The following diagram (figure 3) depicts a paradigm shift in control

within a culture. The core tends to fragment, pressure is now outward, the toleration ring tends to be very wide, and the goal of the shift is often an idealized cultural goal rather than concrete reality. The great shift in progress in Eastern Europe may be representative of this pattern. A paradigm shift in control is often idealistic in nature until it stabilizes in practical reality.



a. Pressure within culture
 Figure 3. Paradigm Shift in Control

A fourth diagram could eventually be made in which a cultural core is stabilized, and the culture has once again become an insulated culture revolving around what condenses into the new core from the #2 and the #3 areas of this third stage. Other parts of the fragmented core would then be transferred into new toleration and rejection rings of the merging cultural identity. The United States today is on the verge of a new insulated culture.

Because of multimedia (especially television and videos) and the standardization of formal educational values, a paradigm shift can take place rapidly in this generation. The process over the next three generations may be beyond anything we can imagine.

I believe that Eddie Gibbs is correct in the following statement on cultural relativity and the church:

This is not to say that the world dictates the pattern for the Church to adopt, but to point out that the Church must be constantly examining itself to ensure that it is remaining true to the gospel and that the only barrier is the inescapable offence of the atoning message of the cross which stands at the center of the gospel. (1985:100)

Hesselgrave and Rommen use the term "decontextualization" to describe

the contextualizers' attempt to free themselves from the interpretational biases of their own culture insofar as possible before attempting to adapt the biblical message to the understandings and needs of other cultural contexts. (1989:34)

This concept should be expanded to the contextualized church in culture that has shifted substantially. The need for continued contextualization implies a need for decontextualization. If Christianity gets itself locked into a cultural core that is rejected by society, then it is no longer a dynamic force; it is a stagnant anachronism, at the very least.

Syncretism and Paradigm Shift

"Christian syncretism" may be defined as the combination of any belief or practice with Christian belief and/or practice which is objectively incompatible with Christian truth in the context of culture. In a real sense this is exactly the opposite of true contextualization; on the other hand, there is often a very fine line between the two. The guardian of the line is objective truth, not culture. But anything less than cultural relevancy is not contextualized and in that case is no longer objective truth in the culture. The vulcanization of objective truth and relevant culture constitutes contextualization. If the gospel is attached to the incompatible elements of culture, it becomes syncretistic. If it is attached to a cultural entity which is not relevant, either because it is imported or because of a paradigm shift, it is also syncretistic.

There was a time in the cultural context of the United States when prostitutes were known for wearing red dresses; the Christian community made the non-wearing of red dresses a standard. For that period of time it could have been classified as "contextualization." However, if that standard continued to be pressed after the culture has moved beyond the meaning, then the standard could become syncretistic. The truth principle no longer fits the culture.

The Mutual Exclusives of Contextualization

When contextualization takes place, choices are made between alternatives which are not in themselves either good or evil, but which are mutually exclusive. Usually the choice is natural, such as the Confucian style of leadership in the Korean organizational structure. However, when the preference is set, it often excludes other possibilities: in the contextualized result, the excluded alternative may actually now be non-Christian in the context. (I believe Romans chapter 14 as well as Galatians 2:11-16 would support this point.) If culture goes into a full paradigm shift and Christianity refuses to contextualize in the new setting because of a choice of an earlier contextualizing process, it ceases to be contextual and may be syncretistic because it is no longer culturally relevant.

Korea is going through tremendous democratic changes as well as changes in the status and place of women in the society. If this shift becomes general, then the church may need to recontextualize its form of church organization. If it stands in the old contextualized forms (this probably in combination with other forms which are mutually exclusive), it may lose its contextualized status. This may be what is happening in the American-Korean churches, where large numbers of the second- and third-generation Korean-American youth are rejecting the church. That church is no longer contextualized for their culture.

Conclusion

What happens when the culture moves and contextualized Christianity stays where it was? Christianity not only loses relevancy, it can become syncretistic. The contextualization of Christianity is a dynamic principle; anything less is not "Christian." The question that must be continually asked, and then answered, is, are the forms we export and cling to, and the "old time religion" we espouse, absolutes of truth or contextualizations now out of context? In the currency of the present culture what do the forms we use mean? The absolutes must be guarded without regard to cost, but as cross-cultural agents of change or guardians of truth in changing cultures, we must be certain as to the ground on which we stand.

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