

# **Checks Against Syncretism**

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Paul G. Hiebert

**I**n our well-intentioned efforts to make the Christian message meaningful in human settings, there is always the danger that we take an uncritical affirmative approach to contextualization and use the cultural context as the final authority in determining the limits of contextualization. The result is a syncretism that undermines the truth of the gospel.

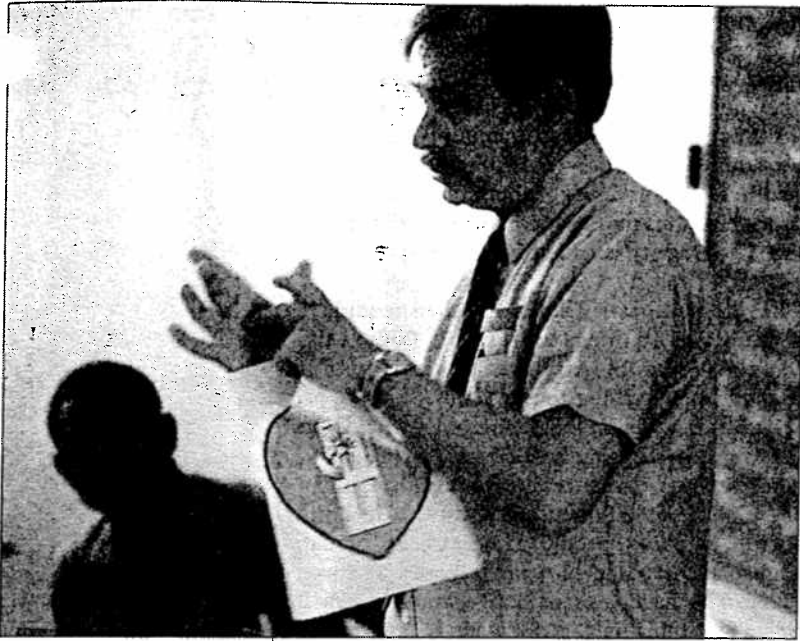
Examples of this are Yun Sung-Bumb's use of the Korean Tang-Gun Myth, Kazoh Kitamori's use of the Buddhist concepts of pain and enlightenment, S. Wesley Ariarajah's use of Hindu and Buddhist religious monism, and Rudolf Bultmann's use of a secularized scientism as foundations for understanding the gospel.

A strong case could also be made that the church in America has overcontextualized the gospel, especially in areas such as consumerism and individualism. Similarly, the incorporation of prayers and songs from other religions into Christian worship services opens the door for a

syncretism that in the end denies the uniqueness of the gospel.

How can we guard against a relativism engendered by theological pluralism, or the syncretism that surfaces when the gospel becomes captive to our cultures? The answer lies, in part, in a critical approach to contextualization in which we first study both the Scriptures and our cultural and historical settings, and then let the text transform us and our contexts. What we need is a biblically based way of doing theology in particular cultural and historical contexts. Such an approach would include four checks against overcontextualizing the gospel.

The first check against syncretism is Scripture. Christian beliefs and practices must be biblically based. This may seem obvious, but we must constantly remind ourselves that Scripture, not our theologies, is our starting point. The Bible is our final and definitive authority for Christian belief and practice. Because it is divine



*Clear answers: Seeking truth together.*

revelation that comes to us from outside our human contexts, it frees us from the subjectivity that comes from living in human cultures.

The second check is the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, who instructs us in the truth. We must listen on our knees to what God is saying to us through his Word. Moreover, we need to recognize that the same Holy Spirit at work in us is also at work in the lives of believers in other contexts. To deny them the right to interpret Scriptures for themselves is to deny this fact. This work of the Spirit guards us from our cultural parochialisms, and from theologies based on human reason alone.

A third check is the church acting as a community of interpretation. As C. Norman Kraus points out in *The Authentic Witness* (Eerdmans, 1979), contextualization is ultimately the task not of individuals or leaders, but of the church. Within it individuals contribute according to their gifts and maturity.

This corporate nature of the hermeneutical task helps guard us against the privatization of faith and from our individual misinterpretations of the Scriptures. Just as others see our sins before we see our own, so they see our theological biases more clearly than we see them ourselves. Consequently, we need the local church to help correct our personal biases in interpreting the Scripture and to discern what God is saying to us in our particular contexts. The priesthood of believers is not a license for theological lonerism.

Extended to the church around the world, this community of faith helps us correct our cultural biases and safeguards us from cultural parochialisms. Christians in other cultures often see better than we do how our own culture has distorted our interpretation of Scripture. Ex-

tended to those in faith who have gone before us, the church as a hermeneutical community helps free us from our historical parochialism.

The fourth check is the product of this discussion, namely, a biblically based theology. There is a growing discussion among evangelical scholars from different cultures—and, one hopes, a growing consensus—on central theological issues such as Christology and the kingdom of God. Today, in the climate of religious pluralism in which the uniqueness of Christ and his salvation is being questioned, a clear answer that he alone is our savior must be given. And in a world that is increasingly lost, the hope of the kingdom, both here and in heaven, must be proclaimed.

Corporate hermeneutics requires that we speak the truth in love. On the one hand, we must declare truth as we see it. On the other hand, we must listen to what our brothers and sisters have to say to us. Our aim must not be to win arguments and to lose others. It is to search the Scripture together to find the truth.

Critical contextualization is an ongoing process. At first we bring our culturally loaded categories and questions to Scripture. As we seek answers, however, we begin to see the categories and questions found in Scripture itself. We start with our "felt needs" and, in the process, discover our real needs.

One example of this process of critical contextualization took place in an inner-city Los Angeles church. The young people faced the question of whether as Christians they should listen to rock music. Most of them were new converts from gangs and drugs, and they knew both the messages and the power of contemporary songs.

Many Christian parents reject rock music and become policemen. Their children end up listening to it at their friends' homes. Other parents allow their children to listen to it uncritically, accepting it as part of modern culture.

The youth leader in the church did neither. He had the young people bring their rock records to a Bible study. He discussed with them the place of music in Christian life, and then had them play and evaluate each record. They smashed those they decided Christians should not listen to and kept the rest. The following Sunday they triumphantly brought the records they had broken for Christ, their Lord, and presented these to the church. There was no need, thereafter, for their parents to police their listening habits. They had learned to apply critically the biblical message to their setting.

Critical contextualization does not equate the gospel with any culture. Nor does it allow theologies developed in different contexts to become islands to themselves. Rather, it calls individuals and churches to listen collectively to what God is saying to them and to the church. ■

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