

The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization

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**THE GOSPEL IN HUMAN CONTEXTS:
Changing Perceptions of Contextualization**
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As humans we live in particular contexts: our family, our neighborhood, our town, our country. We seldom give specific thought to them, but these contexts affect what we see, feel and value, and what we believe without question is true, right, and proper. These beliefs are so obvious to us that they seem to be universal. They simply 'are' the way things truly are. We assume that others see things the way we do. Houses have bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens and living rooms. Cars drive on the right side of the road, and stop at stop signs. We must put post stamps on letters before dropping them in the mail box. We fail to recognize that many of the assumptions and values that underlie our culture are not Biblical

Many of us, particularly in our childhood, are 'monocultural.' Only when things go wrong, or change rapidly, or when our views of reality come in conflict with the assumptions from another culture, do we question them. Such experiences make us aware that we live in contexts and force us to start thinking about them—their structure and givens.

Others of us have grown up or live in multi-cultural contexts—missionaries, missionary kids, immigrants, business people, diplomats, and African American slaves in the houses of white masters. These are aware of cultural differences, and have learned to negotiate between two worlds in daily living, but even they often do not stop to consciously examine these contexts and how they shape their thinking, or the deep differences between them. These people are, to some extent, 'bicultural,' but would find it hard to explain to others what this means.

In a rapidly globalizing world, it is important that all of us give thought to human contexts, and how these shape others and ourselves. We need to learn how to live in a multi-

VIEWS OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Our conscious awareness of cultural contexts, including our own, often goes through changing perceptions as we encounter Others and Otherness. It is important to keep in mind that everyone does not go through them in a linear fashion, and that those who grow up in multi-cultural settings develop at least some awareness of social and cultural differences, and therefore of cultures and societies themselves. The changing perceptions outlined below are a model— a way of looking at our growing awareness of others and otherness -- in cross-cultural ministries. It is not a descriptor of the phases all persons go through in their encounters with other cultures. Rather, it is a tool to help us understand ourselves, and the history of the modern mission movement in which missionaries from Europe and North America went to the ends of the earth, and to learn from past experiences.

Both personal and corporate views of contextualize change as we encounter other cultures and face the questions raised by ‘otherness.’ These changes are not necessarily linear, and may overlap.

VIEW ONE: *Non-Contextualization*

Most monocultural people are largely unaware of the contexts in which they live, or the depth to which these contexts shape how and what they think and do. For them the contextualization of the Gospel is not an issue.

Noncontextualization

“Just go and preach the Gospel. Why waste time going to college and seminary?” my boss said when he learned I wanted to be a missionary, and wanted first to complete college, seminary and graduate studies. His is a widespread attitude commonly found in the church.

eliminate feelings and morals from the rational/empirical processes used to ascertain truth because they introduce subjectivity.

Theological positivism holds that our central concern is truth, and that our theology corresponds one-to-one to Scripture. Other theologies and religions are false and must be attacked. We are concerned with truth and define it in rational terms. We divorce it from feelings and values, because these undermine the objectivity of the truth. Our concern is that people believe the Gospel truth, because that determines whether or not they are saved. We defined the truth in propositional terms, and seek to transmit it unchanged. We see ourselves as God's lawyers, and put our trust in experts who have studied Scripture deeply.

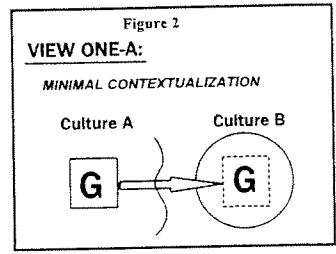
Finally, we see the Gospel as acultural and ahistorical. It is unchanging and universal, can be codified in abstract rational terms, and communicated in all languages without loss of meaning. Neither the sociocultural contexts of the listeners nor the messengers need be taken into account.

Most missionaries, when they enter another culture, move quickly to phase two, but some remain in phase one all their lives. They work through translators, and control the converts and churches. They make certain that new Christians conform to the cultural norms introduced by the missionary. They must wear clothes, learn to read, and have only one wife. They cannot do theological reflection on their own. They must learn theology from the missionary.

Minimal Contextualization

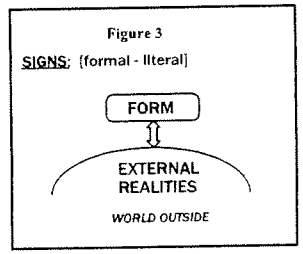
When we enter another culture, we soon encounter deep differences. We experience culture shock: the feeling of disorientation that arises when all our familiar cultural ways no longer hold. We experience language shock: the inability to communicate even the simplest

Gospel, and so it must be done minimally (figure 2). We realize that we must speak and translate the Bible in the people’s language, and organize their services and churches in ways the people understand, but we equate Christianity with our beliefs and practices.



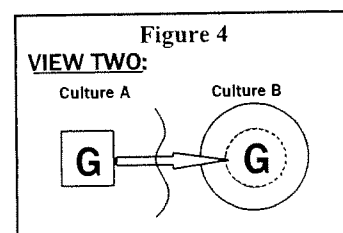
In this paradigm we link Christianity to Civilization. We see ourselves as ‘modern’ and others as ‘primitive’ and ‘backward’-- in need of development. Therefore, we do not need to study other cultures deeply, except to find the distortions they bring to the people’s understanding of the Gospel. We bring schools and hospitals to teach people the truths of science and civilize them. We see other cultures as primitive or evil, with little to contribute to our understanding of reality. There is little in the old culture worth preserving. The minds of the ‘natives’ are a *tabula rasa* on which we can write Christianity and science. To become Christian and civilized the people must become like us. As the Chinese used to say, “One more Christian, one less Chinese.”

The semiotic foundations for positivism are formal or literal signs (figure 3). Signs, such as words and mathematical formulas, are thought to correspond directly to empirical realities. The word “tree” refers to real trees, “cow” to real cows. This view assumes that all people live in essentially the same world, but simply attach different labels to realities. Their thought categories, logic, ways of ordering realities and worldview are essentially like our own. In communication and Bible translation, missionaries needed simply to find the corresponding words in another language, adjust the grammar, and the people would understand the message accurately.



realize the importance of understanding the world as the people they studied see it (*emic* perspectives).³ This led to a profound shift in the nature of anthropological and missiological theories, and to an ongoing exploration of the differences between cultures and their mutual intelligibility. Can we truly understand Others? Can we compare their cultures with our own, and, if so, on what basis? We start by studying the people we serve, but what starts as a study of other people ends with us studying ourselves and our own assumptions. Our tendency is to pull back from the analysis and to dogmatically reaffirm the rightness of our own world.

The growing awareness of anthropological insights into human contexts leads in missions to a growing awareness of the importance of radically contextualizing the Gospel in other contexts so that the people can understand the Gospel and become followers of Jesus Christ (figure 4).



This awareness was influenced by two paradigm shifts. The first was the emergence of Saussurian semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) raised the question of the relationship between forms and meanings in signs, and came to the conclusion that it was 'arbitrary'. He argued that signs do not refer to external realities, as formerly thought.⁴ Rather, they are mental

³Bronislaw Malinowski and British Structural Anthropology pioneered ethnographic fieldwork that stressed living with the people and learning to see the world the way they see it. This raised the question of whose perspectives are 'right', and, eventually, to the belief in cultural relativism.

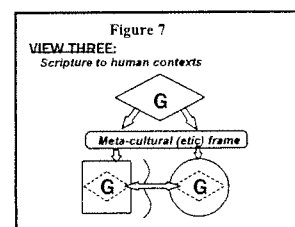
⁴ Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, took a diadic view of signs. They have outer experiencable "forms" and inner "meanings." He raised the question of the relationship between forms and meanings, and came to the conclusion that this is 'arbitrary'. In other words, there are no links between them other than the conventionality of human culture. If this is true, than an accurate literal translation from one culture to another does not guarantee the preservation of the meaning. Consequently, we must measure communication not by what is sent by the speaker, but what is understood by the listener. In other words, we must stress 'receptor oriented' communication.

they serve. Local people were encouraged to read the Scriptures for themselves, and to formulate their own theologies.

The second phase of this shift to radical contextualization occurred when missionaries, such as E. S. Jones and Leslie Newbigin, returned to their home countries. They began to look at these as mission fields, and were shocked at the uncritical contextualization of the gospel in western context (figure 6) It has become part of the culture, not an outside counterculture community. It has largely lost its prophetic voice. Out of their prophetic calls emerged the 'Gospel in Our Culture' movement.⁵

VIEW THREE:
Critical Contextualization

In recent years there has been a reaction to radical contextualization. The question arises, is the Gospel still the gospel when it is radically contextualized, or has it become captive to the cultural context? Does the most contextualized gospel lead to the most vital, biblical churches? Out of this has emerged a critical approach to contextualization (figure 7).



Central to this view is the fact that the Gospel cannot be equated with any contextual expression of it. As Andrew Walls notes,

No one ever meets universal Christianity in itself: we only ever meet Christianity in a local form and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man he became historically, cultural conditioned man in a

⁵ It is important to note that both Jones and Newbigin, in their encounters with Hinduism, moved well beyond an instrumentalist view and religious relativism, to affirming the truth of the Gospel and the need to bear bold witness to it—in this typology to stage three and four. In North America the Gospel in Our Culture Movement is led by George Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder (1996), inspired by the writings of Lesslie Newbigin (1986, 1989).

part, but their knowledge is not a photograph of reality with a one-to-one correspondence between theory and facts, but a map of reality. Maps must correspond to reality in what they claim to affirm, but they are mental images that are schematic, approximate, and, of necessity, limited and selective. A road map does not make truth claims about property boundaries or economic variables. Moreover, to be useful, it must be simple, not showing every bend in the road, or every pot hole or bridge. But it must get drivers to their intended destinations.

Given Peircian semiotics and a critical realist epistemology, it is possible to compare human belief systems and to test them against reality. To do so, we need to develop ‘meta-cultural grids’ that enables us to compare and evaluate between two worlds, to translate between them and to negotiate between them.⁷

In Bible translation, Peircian semiotics leads beyond dynamic equivalence to double translations in which the translators seek to communicate ideas accurately while preserving the forms in Scripture as much as possible, often by using footnotes or parenthetical clarifications.

In contextualization, the new paradigm calls for critical contextualization, or doing missional theology (Tiénou and Hiebert 2006). The Bible is seen as divine revelation, not simply as humanly constructed beliefs. In contextualization the heart of the Gospel must be kept as it is

‘critical realism’ (see Hiebert 1999).

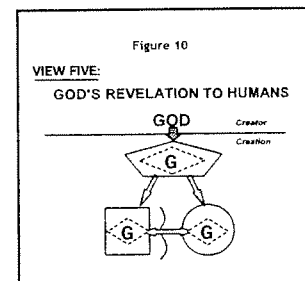
⁷ There is no one true metacultural grid. Rather, metacultural frames are created by people from different cultures gathering together and comparing the ways they translate between and compare cultures, something all transcultural people learn to do, even if they give little thought to it. Developing suitable metacultural and metatheological frames is the first step in building mutual understanding between people from different contexts, and for comparing and evaluating these contexts in the light of divine revelation.

(figure 9). This is obvious to Old and New Testament scholars, but often is overlooked by ordinary Christians. Differentiating between eternal truth and the particular contexts in which it was revealed is not an easy task, but is essential if we are to understand the heart of the Gospel which is for everyone.

VIEW FIVE:
Divine Revelation given in Human Contexts

A full view of the Gospel in human contexts must emphasize the fact that the Gospel is indeed divine revelation to humans, not human searches for the truth (figure 10). This revelation is given in the particularities of history and locality, but it is given by

God and reveals God's universal message to all humankind. It is easy, particularly in the academy, to ask what humans think about God. We must always remember, as Malik reminds us (1987) that the real question is what does God think about us. It is difficult in a



pluralist world to affirm with deep love that the Gospel is unique because it is, in fact, God speaking to us, not human theological reflections about ultimate realities. But, as E. Stanley Jones points out, we are called, not to be God's lawyers, but to bear bold witness to what we know—that Jesus Christ is the only way to God and his Kingdom. If we truly believe this is true, then to affirm other ways is to withhold from people knowledge of the way to eternal salvation.

GOSPEL AND HUMAN CONTEXTS

What then is the relationship between Gospel and human contexts, and how can we communicate the Gospel to humans in their contexts? Three principles can help us here.

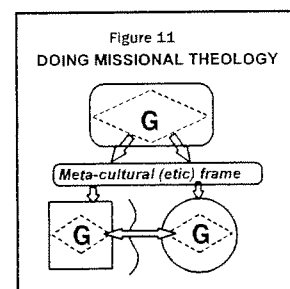
psychology, history and the humanities. These must be tested against biblical teachings, because these are human methods, just as the philosophical and historical methods we use in doing systematic and biblical theology are human methods.

In this step, leaders and missionaries should avoid criticism of the customary beliefs and practices because the people will not talk to them freely for fear of being condemned, and because we are in danger of making premature judgments based on an incomplete understanding of the situation. In either case, we will only drive the old ways underground. The result is split-level Christianity.

We must also study our own contexts to see how these have shaped our understandings of humans and of Scripture. This reflexivity is difficult to do, but essential to the process. Often Christian leaders from other contexts can see our biases better than we do, so we need to listen to them carefully.

Having studied our own contexts and those of the people we serve, we must develop a transcultural framework that enables us to translate between and compare different contexts (figure 11). The formation of this mental framework is critical in building bridges of understanding between cultures, and all parties to the conversation must

be heard in its formation. In it each must agree that their views have been truly understood by outsiders as best as can be done in outside terms. It is here that anthropology can help, because it has sought to develop transcultural frames for translating and comparing social and cultural systems around the world. Its frameworks are imperfect, and an ongoing dialogue between spokespersons for different cultures must continue in the construction of a transcultural frame of reference in which all their voices are accurately heard.



perspectives carefully, we can grow in our knowledge of and obedience to the Gospel.

Moreover, in the process of contextualizing the Gospel people may not always agree. The effort to find complete agreement before acting is meaningless. It is to forget the very purpose for which theological reflections must be done, namely, to make known the Gospel to humans in their contexts so that it can transform them.

What checks help us in this process to guard against syncretism? It is important to remember that all our Christian understandings and life are in human contexts, and therefore partial. This does not mean they are necessarily wrong, but we need to be humble in our stance and to seek unity in the church “so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might be made known . . .”(Eph. 3:10, 4:1-3). But there is always the danger when we put the Gospel in human contexts that the essence of the Gospel be so distorted that it loses its message. We must also keep in mind that God starts with us where we are, and reveals himself to us more fully as we grow in the knowledge of our Lord. In one sense syncretism is a message that has lost the heart of the Gospel. In another sense, it is moving in the wrong direction, away from a fuller knowledge of the Gospel.

The checks against both types of syncretisms lie in a meta-theology—theological reflections on the way we do our theologies. First, we need to take the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life. This may seem obvious, but we must constantly remind ourselves that biblical revelation is the standard against which our beliefs and practices must be measured. Second, we need to recognize the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believers open to God’s leading. Reason in its many forms is important, but it is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us through Scripture mysteries that transcend human knowledge. Third, we need the church to be a

The day of moral neutrality is over. It is important to remember that human contexts are both good and evil. The biblical terms for human contexts are *sarx, eon, archaeon*. Humans are created in the image of God and are the object of his great love. But they are also fallen, and the societies and cultures they build are affected by that fall. There is both personal and corporate sin, and personal and corporate dimensions to God's redemption.

Knowledge is not simply information. It is a power used by the participants in the social, economic, political and cultural arenas of life. Knowledge of the Gospel makes us responsible to share its message of salvation and transformation with all people, to care for the poor, oppressed, sick, and bring the good news to the lost (Hauerwas and Willimon 1989).

In transformation we must start where the people are and help them to grow, just as God starts with us where we are but leads us into maturity and faithfulness. Conversion is to turn to follow Christ, as individuals and as churches. It is the first step in spiritual growth and obedience. This transformation must be both personal and corporate. As individuals we need to be 'born again' into a new life. As a church we need to model not the way of this world, but manifest the ways of the Kingdom, and challenge the evils in our societies and cultures.

In transformation we need to involve people in evaluating their own culture in the light of new truth draws on their strength. They know their old culture better than does the outsider, and are in a better position to critique it and live transformed lives, once they have biblical instruction. We can bring outside views that help them see their own cultural biases, but they are involved in making the decision, they grow spiritually through learning discernment and applying scriptural teachings to their own lives. The gospel is not simply information to be communicated. It is a message to which the people must respond. Moreover, it is not enough that leaders be

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Figure 1

VIEW ONE:

Non-contextualization

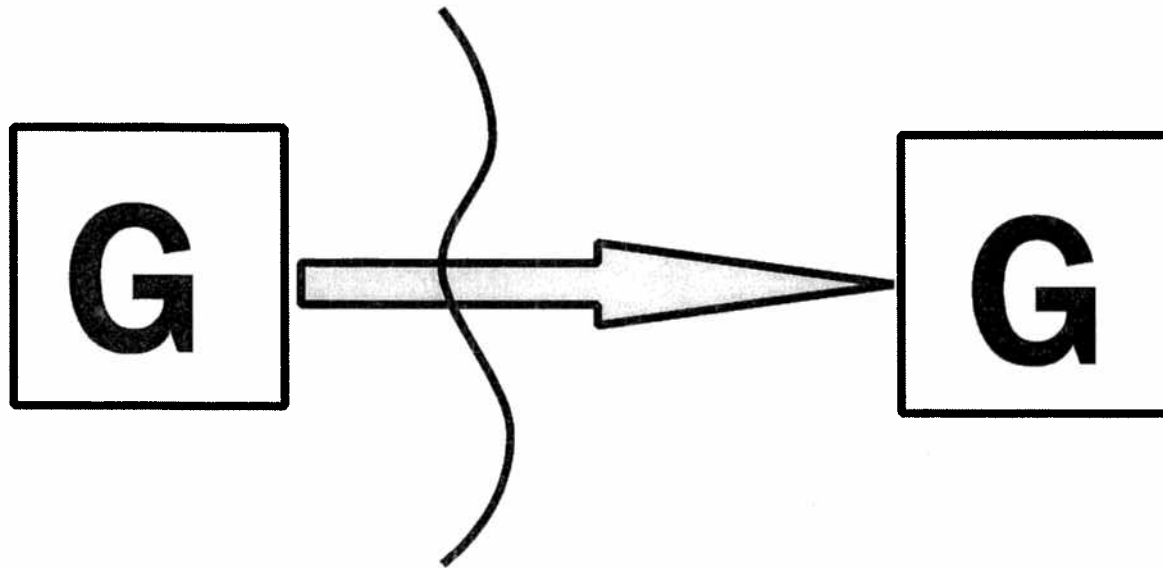


Figure 2

VIEW ONE-A:

MINIMAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Culture A

Culture B

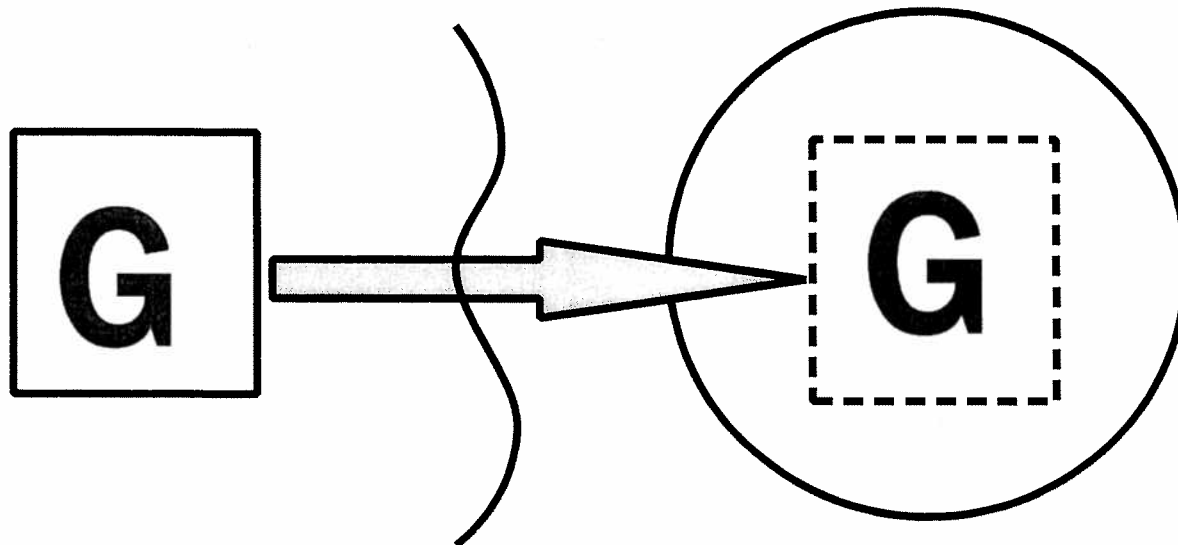


Figure 3

SIGNS: [formal - literal]

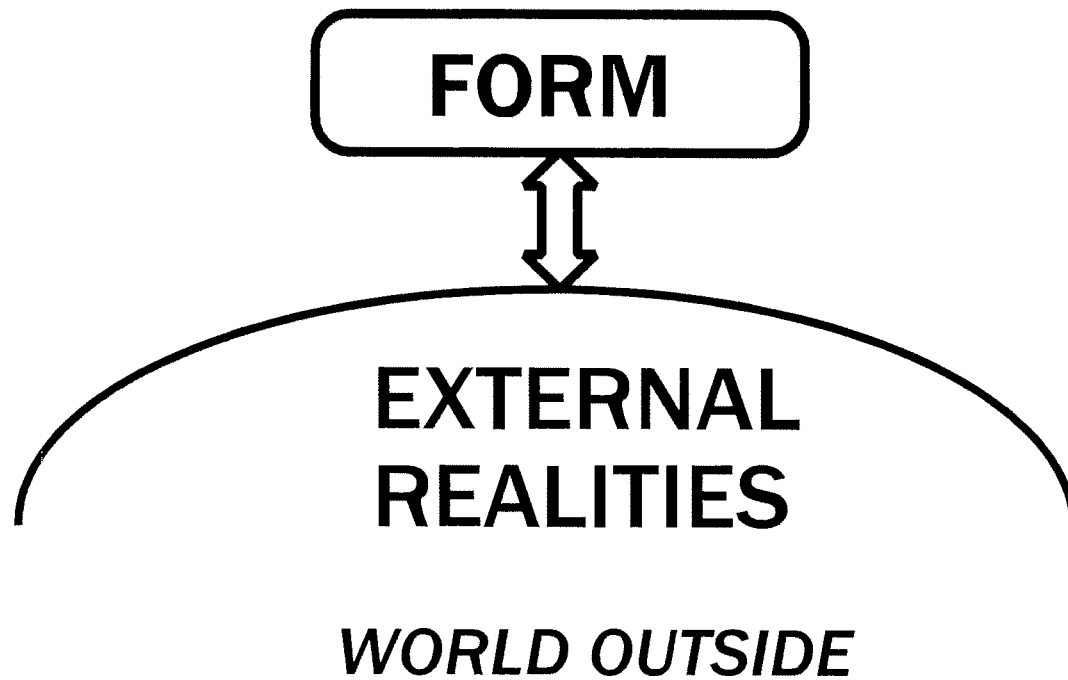


Figure 4

VIEW TWO:

Culture A

Culture B

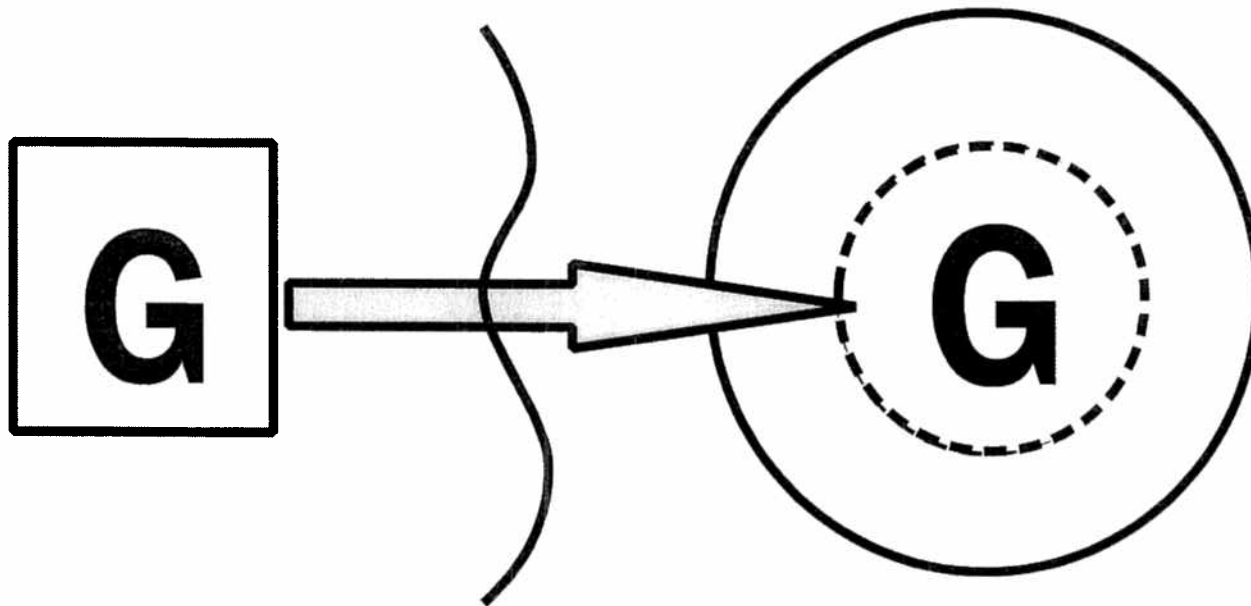


Figure 5

SIGNS: [de Saussure]

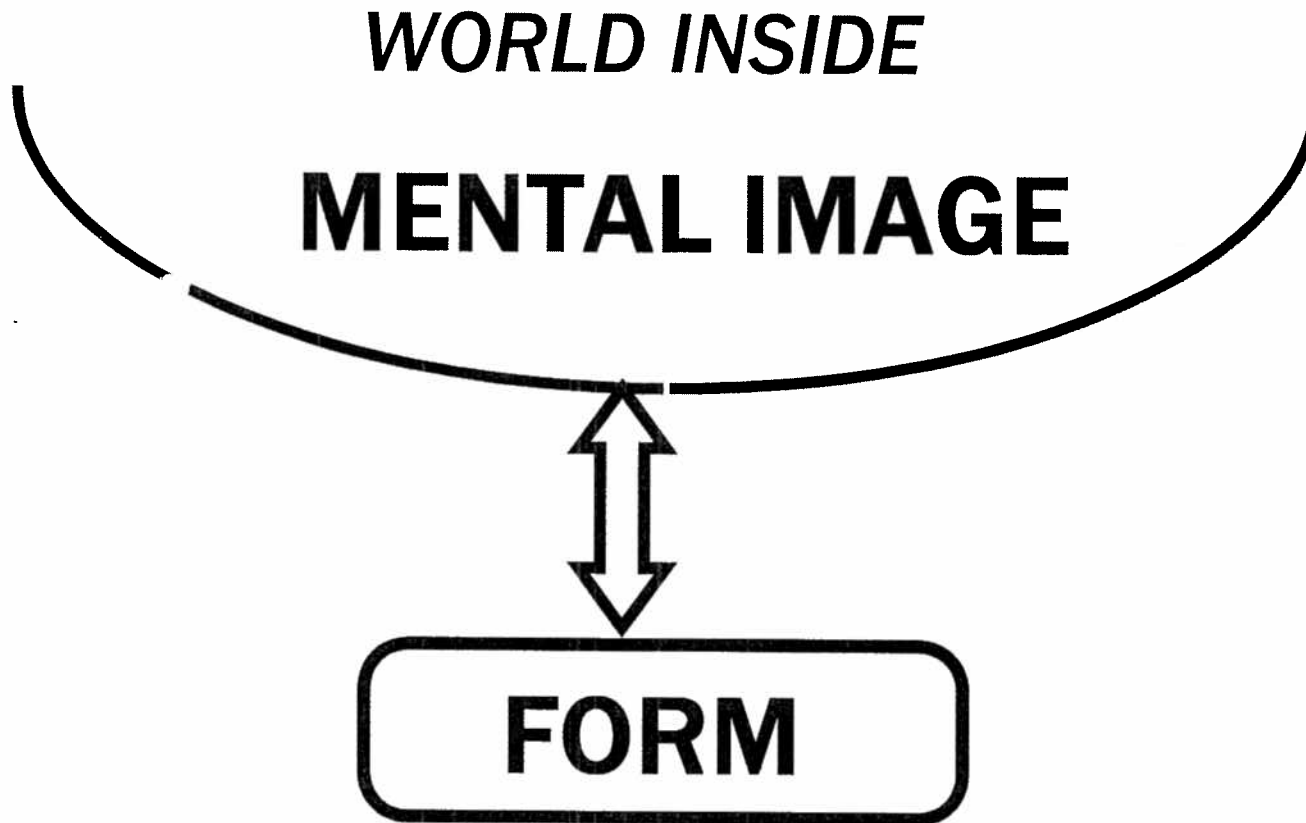


Figure 6

VIEW TWO-A:

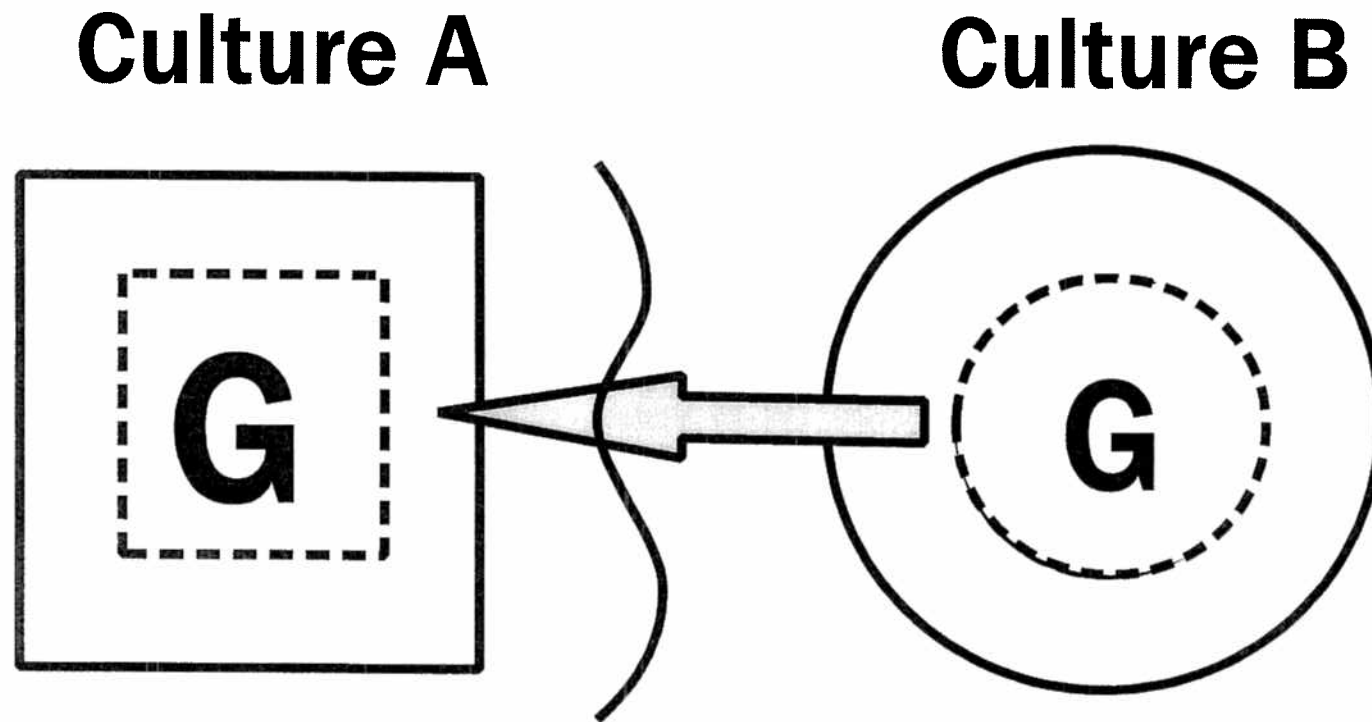


Figure 7

VIEW THREE:

Scripture to human contexts

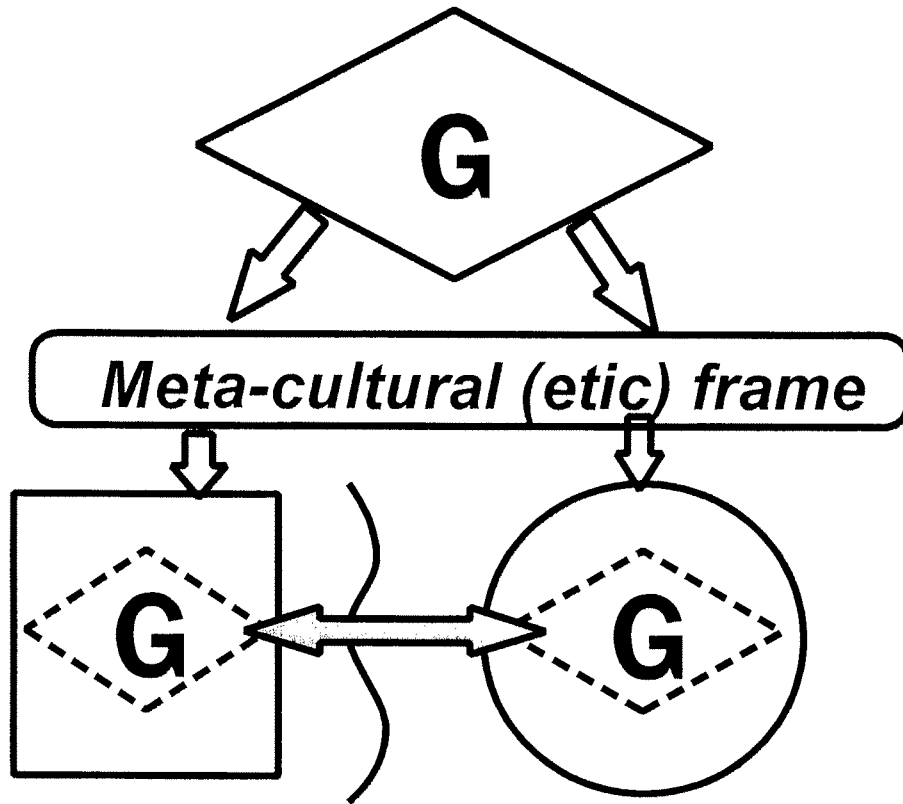


Figure 8

SIGNS: (Peirce)

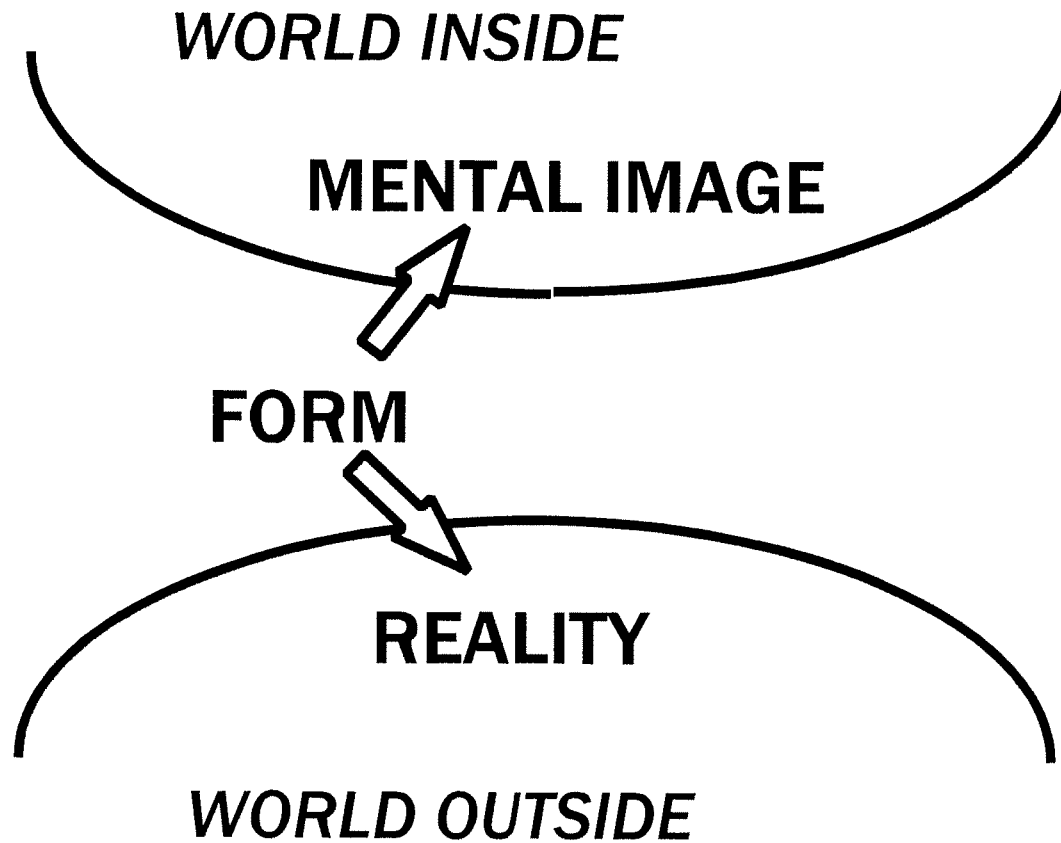


Figure 9

VIEW FOUR:

Scripture given in Human Contexts

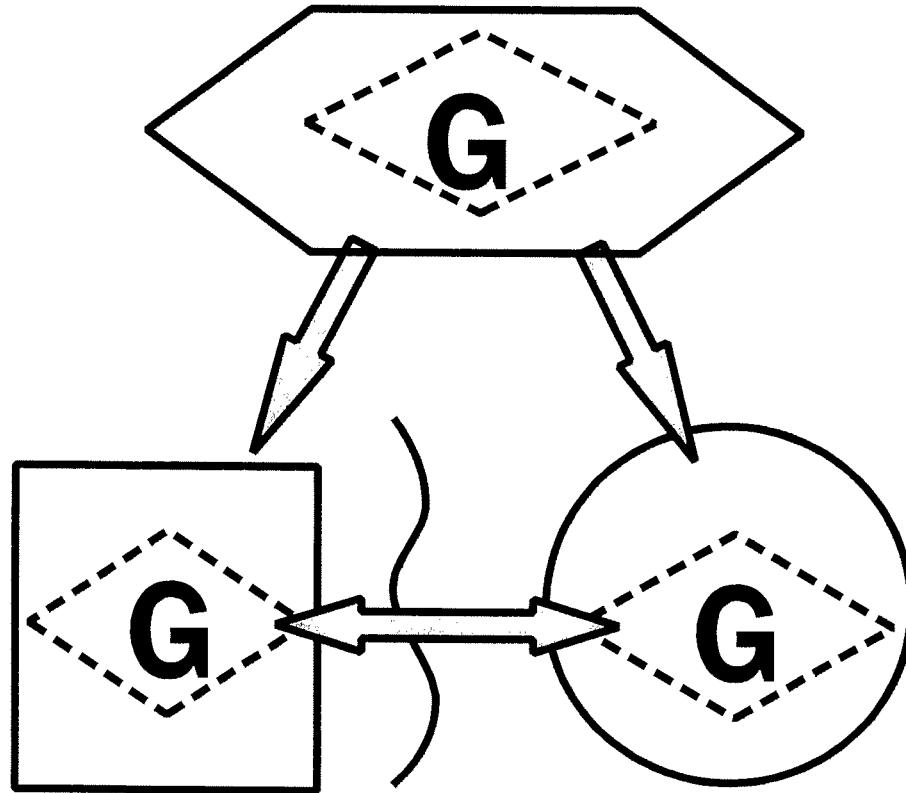


Figure 10

VIEW FIVE:

GOD'S REVELATION TO HUMANS

