Contextualization may be defined as the process by which the gospel takes root in a specific socio-cultural context. A fuller definition is provided by Darrell Whiteman (1997, 2):

Contextualization attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed to establish the church in ways that make sense to people within their local cultural context, presenting Christianity in such a way that it meets people's deepest needs and penetrates their worldview, thus allowing them to follow Christ and remain within their culture.

But while contextualization as a term is now ubiquitous in missiology and theology, it is nonetheless a relatively recent term, and poses unique challenges. What exactly does healthy contextualization look like? And how is it to be distinguished from unhealthy syncretism?

I. EARLY HISTORY OF CONTEXTUALIZATION DISCUSSIONS

Missionaries, of course, have always had to adjust their ministries to local languages and cultures, but self-conscious reflection on what that adjustment should entail has been relatively recent. By the late nineteenth century, mission leaders were calling for "indigenous" churches, but missiological reflection on what such "indigeneity" required primarily focused on "who" exercised leadership, "who" paid the bills, and "who" did the evangelism. That is, indigeneity had a sociological focus, rather than a cultural one. Issues related to cultural variability—to such things as puberty rites or musical instruments, for example—and to missionary
ethnocentrism, were not central to indigeneity discussions. By the 1950s and 1960s missiologically-oriented evangelical anthropologists (such as Eugene Nida, William Smalley, Jacob Loewen, and Alan Tippett) began to press the issue of cultural variability to the foreground of missiological reflection (Priest 2008), but it was not these anthropologists that introduced the term "contextualization."

The term contextualization first emerged in the early 1970s from discussions related to the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches (Bosch 1991, 420; Hesselgrave 2005, 250). These discussions focused on appropriate leadership training in relationship to indigenous cultures, religions, and socio-economic contexts. Because those who initiated the discussion of "contextualization" were often not concerned with the authority of Scripture, there were immediate concerns by many evangelicals with whether the very concept of "contextualization" was incompatible with a high view of Scripture (e.g., Fleming 1980).

The 1974 Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization started expressing its concern about an uncritical contextualization (Buswell 1976, 87; Moreau 2005, 323). A Lausanne Consultation on Gospel and Culture, which met in Willowbank, Bermuda in 1978, attempted to define contextualization positively, but in light of evangelical convictions (Hesselgrave 1994, 72; 2005, 252). However, controversial debates over culture and biblical authority among evangelicals continued to simmer.

Initially, the most ambitious effort to address contextualization from an evangelical perspective came from Charles H. Kraft, professor of anthropology at the Fuller School of World Mission, who addressed the topic in a series of articles in the late 1970s and culminating in his 1979 book *Christianity in culture: A study of dynamic biblical theologizing in cross-cultural perspective.* His primary concern was to discover the meaning of equivalence and cross-cultural communication through the use of cultural forms in order to create local contextual understanding. He proposed a dynamic-equivalence transculturation through which the essential messages of God could be transculturated into the receptors' cultural setting (276). Kraft’s positive assessment of indigenous cultural forms and stingly critical assessments of how theological work was traditionally carried out by evangelicals evoked strong reactions from evangelical theologians and missiologists (McQuilkin 1977; 1980; Gross 1985; Larkin 1988), with Carl Henry (1980) writing an influential and blistering critique of Kraft’s book in the first issue of the *Trinity Journal.* This was in the aftermath of the "battle for the Bible," and these critics clearly perceived Kraft’s approach as an attack on the authority of Scripture which required a new battle over functional biblical authority. Not surprisingly, given this critical response, Kraft’s approach to contextualization did not achieve wide acceptance in theologically conservative evangelical circles.
II. PAUL HIEBERT'S APPROACH TO CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

It was soon after this that Hiebert wrote his first article on "critical contextualization" (1984) where he provided an alternative approach to the relationship between the authority of Scripture and cultural practices, an article which he repeatedly revised and republished (1987a; 1994). It was selected by Christianity Today for republication in their "Best in Theology" series (Hiebert 1987b), and arguably became the most widely respected and influential approach to contextualization among evangelicals.

The following provides a brief summary of his argument, an argument couched in terms of the history of missions in India. He framed the question as one of "how the missionaries responded to the traditional beliefs and practices of new converts—in other words, to the 'old' culture" (1994, 75).

According to Hiebert, some early missionaries attempted to respectfully engage Indian culture(s), but from roughly 1850 to 1950 most Protestant missionaries simply rejected all old customs as pagan. This rejection of traditional cultures was motivated by several factors. It was the era of colonialism, and colonialism itself helped foster the idea that the culture of people in the West was superior. Paganism needed to be replaced with the three C's—(Western) civilization, commerce, and Christianity. Cultures did not need to be studied, since they were not to be adjusted to and built on, but only replaced. A second factor contributing to this disregard for traditional culture was the theory of cultural evolution, that all cultures were simply at different stages of development along a unilineal trajectory with Western culture at the pinnacle. Under this rubric other cultures were labeled "primitive," "animistic," and "uncivilized." Why adjust to cultures that in any case are, or ought to be, dying out as people become "civilized?" The third factor leading to the rejection of other cultures was the triumph of science. The scientific knowledge of the West was seen as objective, cumulative, and true in an ultimate sense. In contrast to this, "the knowledge of other cultures was thought to be subjective, piecemeal, and false" (1987a, 105).

According to Hiebert, this missionary rejection of traditional cultures resulted in a widespread perception that Christianity was a Western religion, with conversion being framed as requiring adherence to Western culture and Western interests. Furthermore, missionary rejection of traditional cultural patterns did not eliminate such cultural patterns, but only forced them underground. The fact that these cultural realities were not wisely and publically addressed meant that they continued to be practiced in private—often resulting in syncretism from below. Under this "rejection of culture" approach, ethnocentric missionaries often ended up playing the role of "policemen, enforcing on the people what they believed to be
Christian practices” (1994, 81), while actually articulating a gospel perceived by others as “foreign” and “Western.”

According to Hiebert, a strong reaction to the non-contextualization approach emerged in the mid-twentieth century, an approach stressing that other cultures needed to be understood and appreciated. He labels this approach as “uncritical contextualization,” although he does not provide details on who he considers to represent this approach.

Again there were factors supportive of this shift. First, postcolonial political shifts and criticisms of colonialism undercut the older forms of disregard for traditional cultures. Second, developments within anthropology itself fostered a growing interest in the inner coherence and functionality of traditional cultures, and a growing body of Christian anthropologists and other missiologists pressed the case for cultural appreciation and adjustment. Avoiding the older ethnocentrism, this new approach took “cultural differences seriously,” affirmed “the good in all cultures,” and “affirmed the right of Christians in every country to be institutionally and cognitively free from Western domination” (1994, 84).

But this approach, according to Hiebert, tended to deny biblical absolutes and failed to provide “checks against biblical and theological distortion” (1994, 85). It fostered syncretism in the church, and isolated the local church from the historical church and the churches of other cultures.

In contrast to the above two approaches, Hiebert espouses an approach he calls “critical contextualization,” an approach grounded in a “postrelativist” and “critical realist” epistemology. This process neither rejects nor accepts the old but critically evaluates cultural issues in relation to function and meaning in society and coherence with biblical norms. Hiebert sets out a series of steps for carrying out this approach when any cultural practice or belief seems to require assessment.

First, the missionary and church leaders engage in a phenomenological and “uncritical” effort to understand the cultural practices involved. At this stage any judgment is to be suspended. In a second stage the missionary and church leaders work to identify and help the church examine all relevant biblical passages and theological principles which appear to be germane to an assessment of the cultural practice at stake. The “third step is for the people corporately to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings and make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths.” Finally, people are led to rethink and reinvent old practices to bring them into line with Scripture while also retaining cultural and contextual dimensions to it. These new contextualized practices allow them to express Christian meaning within their own culture.
Hiebert's model of contextualization is firmly rooted in theological considerations with Scripture serving as the authoritative ground. His theological concerns relate to biblical orthopraxy. How do customs and traditions such as initiation ceremonies, baptismal rites, marriage practices, and forms of worship align with biblical principles? Hiebert's model also stresses the theological principle of the priesthood of all believers, each indwelt with the Holy Spirit. Critical contextualization is to be done ultimately by the church membership as an expression of the priesthood of believers. Critical contextualization requires that decisions which impact the cultural expression of faith should be made by all the believers and not just the leadership. "To deny young believers the right to be involved in decisions—even decisions regarding the interpretation of the Scriptures—is to deny that the same Holy Spirit who guides us in the truth is also leading them" (Hiebert 1984, 293).

The church in each culture and historical setting can cooperate to function as the hermeneutical community to interpret and apply Scripture to its own context. But Hiebert also rejects a monocultural approach which elevates a single culture, or the church within a single culture, to a superior status by which all others are compared. In addition, the pluralistic nature among divergent cultures does not obviate the existence of common qualities by which comparisons may be drawn between cultures. Critical contextualization "seeks to find metacultural and metatheological frameworks that enable people in one culture to understand messages and ritual practices from another culture with a minimum of distortion" (Hiebert 1987, 111). The significance of this method is that the local hermeneutical community may find ways to compare its theological insight within an "international hermeneutical community" (111). Hiebert stresses that theologizing done by Christians from diverse cultural communities in conversation with each other will bring consensus on core theological understandings.

IV. ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF HIEBERT'S CRITICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Paul Hiebert's “Critical Contextualization" was a "landmark" work (Whiteman 1997, 4) which set the tone for much of the theological and missiological discussion of contextualization that followed. It provided theological parameters for the discussion and demonstrated that contextualization was compatible with an authoritative Scripture. This article became a classic within missiology, not simply for its theological base, but because of its

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1Hiebert acknowledges his indebtedness to Anabaptist theologian Norman Kraus for the concept of the discerning hermeneutical community (Kraus 1979).
hermeneutical methodology. A wide variety of missiological and theological scholars have summarized Hiebert's "critical contextualization" essay and have built on it positively in their own work (cf. eg., Bosch 1991, 427 ff.; Zahniser 1991; Hesselgrave 1994, 73-83; 1995; Shaw 1995; Yung 1997; Whiteman 1997; 2006; Frost and Hirsch 2003, 7-90; Osborne 2006, 430; Thompson 2006; Owusu 2007). Darrell Whiteman, long-time editor of Missiology and mentor to scores of missiological doctoral dissertations at Asbury Theological Seminary, says that Hiebert's "Critical Contextualization" approach has been "employed by students as a theoretical framework in more dissertations than any other" (Whiteman 2006, 55).

Part of the attraction of Hiebert's article is that it provides very specific practical steps for carrying out contextualization. Hiebert's approach was doubtless influential also because it was strongest at the very point where Kraft had been critiqued, that is, in prescribing a method which allowed Scripture to function normatively and correct the culture of recent converts. That is, many evangelicals were concerned that calls for contextualization involved a cultural relativism which allowed for and justified syncretism. Hiebert's approach to contextualization directly addressed this anxiety by articulating a procedure designed to guard against syncretism.

And indeed, it is the culture of recent converts, not the cultural baggage of missionaries, which Hiebert's four-step approach is intended to analyze systematically and evaluate critically. Those who use Hiebert's approach focus on potential problems within the culture of recent converts, problems with such things as female circumcision, polygamy, ancestor veneration, puberty rites, marriage practices, or traditional healing practices. While Hiebert's essay does point to problems caused by missionary cultural baggage during the non-contextualization era (1800-1950), and while some of his other works analyze such missionary baggage at length, nowhere within his four-step model do we find a systematic procedure prescribed for analyzing and critiquing patterns fostered by foreign missionaries, patterns which themselves might be the reason for poor contextualization. Kraft, by contrast, insisted that the cultural baggage of contemporary Western theologians and missionaries contributed to poor contextualization, and it was here that his criticism focused. In his view it was the attitudes of missionaries towards such things as drums and dance which blocked healthy contextualization in Africa. It was such problems on the part of missionaries which he felt must be critiqued and corrected as a necessary precondition for healthy contextualization.

Kraft focused much of his contextualization discussion on initial evangelism, on the missionary commendation of the gospel to non-believers, and expressed concern that missionaries' failure to contextualize their message at this initial stage hampers or distorts indigenous response to the gospel. In his view, churches founded by Western missionaries who imported their own normative patterns
and who failed to contextualize already had problems, which required an active critique of, and even resistance to, received patterns. By contrast, Hiebert’s article does not focus on initial evangelism and church-planting but presupposes the presence of an indigenous church, with the missionary simply a dialogue partner with an indigenous church doing the contextualization. In Hiebert’s prescription for contextualization, there is no procedure in place for identifying and critiquing inappropriate patterns introduced by foreign missionaries.

An additional reason why Hiebert’s article has been more positively accepted by the Western theological and mission establishment than Kraft’s is almost certainly that his approach does not invite substantive critique of the Western Christian establishment in quite the way Kraft’s did and is therefore not as threatening to that establishment.

But while there may well be additional dimensions to contextualization not adequately covered by Hiebert’s classic article (see Thompson 2006), at the end of the day his article clearly sets out core principles and procedures which have been nearly universally appreciated and affirmed by missiologists, theologians, and indigenous church leaders across a wide range of theological traditions.

V. CONCLUSION

“Critical Contextualization” has served as a tool for missionaries and national leaders as they have sought to express biblical meanings in cultural forms. Scholarly works listed above provide examples of how others have taken the principles of critical contextualization and applied them successfully in a variety of cultures. Hiebert integrated anthropology, theology, and missiology into a contextual methodology. His experiences as a missionary in India enabled him to combine anthropological principles with missionary practice in service to the church. He has provided educational understanding and practical enhancement for ministry to those who are engaged in the mission of the church. His analysis of contextualization helps us expand our awareness of other people and other cultures and learn the importance of understanding human contexts for the sake of missions. His “critical contextualization” has become a basic framework for doing theology and mission in a globalizing world.


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