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## Contextualization

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# Contextualization

Contemporary evangelism is taking seriously the task of evangelizing Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other religions/cultures with the good news of Jesus Christ. One of the most difficult religions to penetrate has been the Muslims. "The unprecedented trickles-and in a few cases, floods-of Muslims who have chosen to follow Christ in previously evangelistically arid lands undoubtedly constitute the "best of times." In the late 1960s, there was a major turning to Christ among the Javanese in Indonesia, following a conflict between Muslims and communists. We have seen similar movements in North Africa and South Asia, along with smaller ones elsewhere." (Woodberry, 2007, pp. 80-81)

A number of cultural and religious practices and concepts make effective communication in these cultures difficult to communicate and difficult for the hearers to understand. The question is how much should the message and the messenger change or adapt to make the meaning of the message understood and more acceptable without compromise? This chapter will attempt to introduce us to this complex and slippery topic. "Slippery" because there is the ever present danger of going too far in the effort to make the message meaningful, with the result that it becomes meaningless. Our task is to relate a foreign truth to an alien culture. "Culture... is generally seen as a society's folkways, mores, language, art and architecture, and political and economic structures; it is the expression of the society's worldview. Worldview has been described as the way a people looks upon itself and the universe, or the way it sees itself in relationship to all else" (Guthrie, 2000, p. 103)

## Three similar concepts to contextualization

Pocock distinguishes between contextualization and three similar but distinct terms: Indigenization, inculturation and transformation. The first term, **indigenization**, refers to the "translatability" of the universal Christian faith into the forms and symbols of any culture. This is similar to contextualization's focus but does not go as far as contextualization to include social, political and economic factors as well. The basis of the indigenous concept is self-propagation, self-governance, and self-financing, which is built on the independence or individualization concepts of Western philosophy, thus has come under some criticism.

The second, concept is **inculturation**, which likewise parallels contextualization, which is the reciprocal and critical interaction and assimilation between two cultures. Inculturation refers to "the correct way of living and sharing one's Christian faith in a particular context or culture."

The third similar concept is **transformationism**, which focus on the changes of a society into one that more "adequately reflects the kingdom of God." As individuals come to Christ they are encouraged to "transform their social networks" and eventually the whole of society. Others seek to transform society through legal and mass persuasion techniques, to demonstrate God's kingdom values in a needy world (Pocock, 2005, pp. 327-29).

## The definition of contextualization

A professor in seminary asked the class, "What did God inspire: the words or the meaning?" As we wrestled with this critical issue, debating semantics and philosophy, it became clear that God does everything He can (by how He has limited His actions for the maturing of His image bearers) to allow man's free will under the presence and work of the Spirit to understand Him and His will. We came to the conclusion that God inspired both the words and the meaning; in fact, the words became the vehicles for communicating the meaning He intended to convey to us. Without meaning words become merely noise. As we saw this principle of communication then, it would later become even clearer as I learned different languages in an attempt to communicate truth-meaning through different thought structures and word concepts.

In general "contextualize" means to communicate the gospel in understandable terms appropriate to the audience. All Christian communication is contextualized to some extent. Graded curriculum is created for each different age group by adapting the language, illustrations, metaphors, applications and assumed understanding. When attempting to communicate cross culturally it is even more important to understand their age appropriate language, expressions, cultural and religious implications of terms, worldview, and needs of our target audience.

"Contextualization" is a derivative of the word "context" which has its roots in *contextus* (Latin) meaning "weaving together." In literary pursuits, context is that which comes before and after a word, phrase, or statement, helping to fix its meaning or the circumstances in which an event occurs. Contextualization can be defined as making concepts and methods relevant to a historical situation.

...Missiologist contextualization can be viewed as enabling the message of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ to become alive as it addresses the vital issues of a sociocultural context and transforms its worldview, its values, and its goals (Terry, 1998, p. 318).

Hesselgrave wrote, "Anthropologists make much of how a culture uses linguistic symbols and assigns meaning and function to them. They believe that this tells them much about culture in general and specific cultures in particular. For example, how words function in ritual has something to say about world view" (Hesselgrave, 2005, p. 244). The key to contextualization is "What is meaningful to the receptor audience?" It is ours to discover how they think, then to explain truth in their way of thinking so that truth has meaning.

Missiologist Darrell Whiteman defines contextualization as more than just communicating the message in a new worldview context, but then how it becomes a part of their culture: "Attempts to communicate the Gospel in word and deed and 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 own culture" (Whiteman, 1997, p. 2).

To define contextualization is not an easy task since it describes a broad scale of meaning and adaptation from little adaptation to whole scale conformity to another culture and religion making it barely appear distinct from what they already believe (shades of syncretism). Stan Guthrie defines contextualization in this manner:

Contextualization simply means finding points of contact within other people's contexts and removing things from one's own context that might block

communication in order to gain a hearing for the gospel. It can be done verbally and nonverbally. ... Contextualization has been a hallmark of the modern missionary movement, too, from William Carey's translations of Hindu classics in India, to Hudson Taylor's decision to "go native" in China, to Bruce Olson's determination to become a member of the Motilone Indian tribe. It will continue to be a vital cross-cultural missionary approach in the 21st century, because continuing cultural differences in language, belief systems, and worldview will demand it (Guthrie, 2000, p. 102).

Perhaps no other topic has generated more recent interest and explosive encounters among missionaries than contextualizing the Christian faith in Islamic settings. It is one thing to discuss the translation of linguistic meanings into dynamic equivalents,<sup>1</sup> but another to agree on how much to contextualize the lifestyle in order to not become a personal obstacle to the communication of the gospel. Missionary say, "Let the cross be the offense, not my lifestyle." Scott Moreau (Wheaton Graduate School) and Mike O'Rear (Global Mapping International) in an article "Contextualizing Ministry among Muslims" said,

There has been strong debate over how far we can go in contextualizing ministry among Muslims before it becomes syncretism. Much of that debate has played out in journal articles of the major evangelical mission periodicals. The journal that has presented the greatest volume of material is the International Journal of Frontier Missions, which has had no less than five entire issues focused on Muslim evangelism—as well as numerous articles in other issues (Moreau, 2005).

What do some contextualized ministries to Muslims look like? Phil Parshall, SIM missionary to Muslims in the Philippines, describes a Javan ministry with the following characteristics:

- Leaders are called "imams"
- Festivals similar to that of Islam were observed
- They collect a *zakat* (offerings)
- Church buildings were called mosques. No crosses were displayed.
- They used a drum to call people to worship as did the Muslims.
- Cows were prayed over at the time of their slaughter in Islamic fashion.
- The following creed was recited in their churches: "I believe that god is one. There is no God but God. Jesus Christ is the Spirit of god, whose power is over everything. There is no God but God. Jesus Christ is the Spirit of God." This was chanted in a *dhikr* (recitation) style with intense emotion, which was purported to lead to some sort of mystical union between God and devotee.
- Believers called themselves "Christians." (Parshall, 2004, p. 289)

Later you'll be able to identify this description as one of six contextualization levels that are practiced today by different ministries in Muslim countries and comparable contextual levels in Hindu cultures. Controversies abound concerning the legitimacy of contextualized lifestyle practices.

### **The objective of contextualization**

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<sup>1</sup> A dynamic equivalent conveys the same meaning but uses different terminology: "white as snow" (in a desert or jungle culture snow is unknown) can become "white as \_\_\_\_" (anything that conveys the meaning of whiteness).

H. L. Richard is an independent researcher specializing in Hindu studies writes, “The fundamental stumbling block for most Hindus when facing Christianity remains that Christianity is a foreign religion, and all the evidence shows that this Hindu perception is true. Clearer thinking about Hinduism should lead to a deeper commitment to radically incarnational (contextual) approaches to the Hindu world, so that Hindus might see and feel that Christ and His good news are vitally relevant within their civilizational heritage. Without such shifts of paradigm and approach, there is little reason to hope that present and future Hindus will heed the biblical message any more than their forefathers have” (Richard, 2003, p. 8).

Although contextualization can apply to any attempt to adapt the message of God to all cultures and worldviews, the theme has been especially focused on the Muslim and Hindu worlds. The same concepts have been applied to the Roman Catholic evangelism, Buddhist, Animist and other religious contexts where conversion to biblical Christianity is the focus. The main emphasis is relevant communication and continued influence of converts on the community in which they were born. This was much the same problem that the early church faced with the conversion of gentiles into a very Jewish-Christian church.

The inspired revelation from God, and of God, was delivered to man within a context of culture and language with full meaning and significance. It is our task to discover first that meaning and significance without changing its author’s intended purpose to his hearers in that culture and time, then discern its meaning/application in our culture, language and time, finally make choices for how to communicate this truth-meaning/application for different cultures, worldviews and within the structure/meaning of different languages without losing its original meaning and intent. Quite a task!

Should the Muslim Background Believers (hence MBB) remain in the Mosque or separate to be with Christians? The pro camp points to early Christians continuing to worship in the synagogue. [Scott] Wood writes [in the 2003 EMQ 39(2):188-95]:

Paul came ... to preach Jesus...to the synagogue members. Most C5ers<sup>2</sup> come into the mosque and line up in the *shalat* line. They are perceived as Muslims. They have no distinguishing mark that says they are followers of Isa. Even if they pray to Isa, the perception is that they are Muslims. Paul was clearly received (at times) within the Jewish setting but acknowledged as a follower of the risen Messiah. Is this the same with our C5 [fifth level of contextualization] MBBs (Parshall, 2004, p. 291)?

There is general agreement that MBBs should remain in the mosque for a relatively short period of time following a personal conversion, if possible. The question is for how long? To what extent? How secret should he be?

### Three areas of contextualization

Contextualization has three different areas of adaptation that are separate but interconnected: communication, conversion adaptation, and messenger adaptation. The

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<sup>2</sup> C1 – C6 are different levels of Contextualization to be explained later. A C5 is a Muslim-looking Christian.

latter two create the most conflict among different participants in the process. How to blend the mandates to “become all things to all men” with “Come out from among them” is the core of the issue that may never be resolved, only wrestled with till Jesus returns.

### *Communication adaptation*

Early attempts at contextualizing came out of discussions or consultations concerning theologies and methodologies especially in Africa and Latin America. Many of these issues stemmed from the emphasis of the meaning of the biblical text over the words of the text. This came out of a method of allegorical interpretation or spiritualizing of the text to arrive at a “deeper” meaning, then a more contextual meaning, which could freely depart some distance from the original intent. This led to the acceptance of ideas which occurred to leaders in these new cultures which was totally apart from the previously revealed Word of God. Attempts to harmonize the spiritualized meanings of the Bible with the regional expressions often led to syncretistic notions creating a new (African or Latin) theology, church structure and patterns of ministry. Somewhere along this slippery slope contextualization changed to syncretism.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the risk, the message must be made relevant to the different people groups of the world. According to Guthrie, the cross-cultural contextualizer faces the process of declaring the truth, which involves a “thorough understanding of one's own culture, the biblical context in which God's word was given, and the culture of those one is evangelizing. The message must be tailored or contextualized in such a way as to remain faithful to the biblical text while understandable in and relevant to the receptor's context” (Guthrie, 2000, p. 104). Missiologist Hesselgrave describes the process as transmitting a neutral message without cultural overtones by dissecting one's own culture from the communication process.

Decontextualization has to do with freeing a message (e.g., the gospel) as much as possible from elements of the contextualizer's culture, so that the intended meaning comes through with a minimum of interference. Contextualization and decontextualization are ...intimately connected in the translation, interpretation, exposition, and application of Scripture...[They are] aspects of all four of these operations in communicating God's special revelation” (Hesselgrave, 2005, p. 246) Contextualization is a scale of transition rather than a clear yes/no, or black/white issue. One is always blind to how one's own cultural aspects, since the terminology, thought patterns, values, prejudices, beliefs and communicating process all seem so right, logical and obvious, but all of these elements are different among cultures.

At Lausanne (1979), contextualization was initially perceived in two ways: as formal correspondence translation and as dynamic equivalence. Kato's paper (which called for contextualization of external forms, e.g., liturgy, dress, language) represents the first view. The report of the respondent group (which called for a deeper level of contextualization, e.g., of thought patterns, worldview) represents the second view. There was a third group, composed of Conn, Padilla and Escobar, however, who felt that it was necessary to go beyond the Willowbank Report and

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<sup>3</sup> Syncretism (“union of communities”) blends different points of view into a mixture of beliefs by ignoring distinctives and contradictions. Some religions encourage syncretism (Hinduism and Buddhism), while most oppose it.

strive for an even deeper involvement with the cultural context (Terry, 1998, p. 326).

This third perspective becomes radical to some perspectives as it requires considerable acceptance of different perspectives and forms of lifestyle.

### *Convert Adaptation*

How much do new converts have to become like us before they are accepted as genuine converts, not syncretistic nominal followers? Or should they remain as Muslim as possible, for as long as possible, with the hopes that they can spread sufficient curiosity and gospel awareness among their acquaintances before they inevitably separate or are ostracized. One of the issues at this level is how to interpret 1 Corinthians 7:20 where Paul wrote that "Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him." Does this mean that a MBB should remain a Muslim?

Scott Woods comments on the use of 1 Cor 7 to justify the practice of Muslim converts who seek to remain Muslim:

"The context in 1 Corinthians 7 is addressing the issues of marriage and singleness: believers married to unbelievers; circumcision and uncircumcision and finally slaves and free. this passage has nothing to do with dictating that people from a false religion should remain in their false religion so as not to upset the apple cart. C5 proponents could be accused of isogenesis here...This passage makes provision for believers remaining in their familial and social status where they were prior to knowing Christ, but it is not giving an allowance for believers to continue in their former religion." [in the 2003 EMQ 39(2):188-95]

Does the MBB continue to bear the name Muslim without any qualifier? Parshall described an interview with Ramsay Harris, a long-term missionary among Arabs: "Most of those I have led to Christ do NOT identify themselves as Muslims anymore, but some do. I do not push them either way... For most people the word Muslim means 'an adherent of the religion of Muhammad'...But there is one principle which must be universal: one must always identify himself with the person of Jesus Christ (Mt 10:33 and 1 Peter 4:16)" (Parshall, 2004, p. 290).

Should the MBB remain in the Mosque? The pro camp points to early Christians continuing to worship in the synagogue. Scott Wood writes: Paul came ... to preach Jesus...to the synagogue members. Most C5ers come into the mosque and line up in the "*shalat*" line. They are perceived as Muslims. They have no distinguishing mark that says they are followers of Isa. Even if they pray to Isa, the perception is that they are Muslims. Paul was clearly received (at times) within the Jewish setting but acknowledged as a follower of the risen Messiah. Is this the same with our C5 MBBs?

What about the recitation of the Islamic Creed? Can the MBB continue to recite this foundation upon which all of Islam rests? It not only affirms the oneness of Allah, but also the centrality of Muhammad as a prophet or messenger of God. Parshall quotes a C5 missionary who said:

"I believe that an MBB can repeat the creed with conviction and integrity, without compromising or syncretizing his faith in Jesus... the recognition of Muhammad would be in his prophetic mission as a messenger proclaiming one god and submission to his will in the context of idolatrous seventh century Arabia, or, in the pagan pre-Islamic setting of any given people who have subsequently accepted

Islam. Although Muhammad's mission was chronologically A.D., we should not allow this to cloud the fact that the spiritual milieu to which he spoke was substantially B.C.... In a Jesus movement in Islam, Muhammad would be understood as an Old Testament-style messenger. For those Christians who may stumble at certain aspects of Muhammad's lifestyle, I urge them to study more objectively the lives of the Old Testament prophets where both holy war, in a form more violent than Islam calls for (genocide in the book of Joshua), and polygamy were quite common" (Parshall, 2004, p. 291).

Parshall takes disagreement with this C5er by showing that by affirming the prophet means affirming his prophecy and the Qur'an as the word of God. Also the deceit of pretending to be a Muslim implies a theology that is assumed by Muslim observers that, in fact, is not true.

The transformation of a MBBer to one that fully walks in the light is seldom ideal. The hurdles of culture, religion, mysticism, fear, ostracism, reason, and emotional responses are no dissolved in a moment. One view of this process is seen in Parshall's comments:

Conversions out of Islam are usually a process through any number of different beliefs in Islam (once a questioning spirit is begun) then into acceptance of various Christian views until a more orthodox view is understood and claimed. One missionary comments, "If we are so unfortunate to be the mission that plants a heresy, are those that adhere to it any worse off than before?" It is his view that such a "heresy" could be a future stepping-stone for those Muslims to come to full-blown faith in Christ (Parshall, 2004, p. 293).

The solutions are not easy, nor universal. Each situation must be given the liberty to transform into Christ's image as the Holy Spirit convicts and leads through exposure to good exegesis of the biblical texts. Massey describes this process as follows:

Many C4 MBBs spend years going back and forth between Christian and Muslim communities like a sociological chameleon, trying to maintain acceptance in two different worlds. C4 identity (being neither Christian nor Muslim) is a very difficult position for MBBs to maintain. The more they behave like Gentile Christians, the more they will be trusted by C1-3 believers but distrusted by Muslims. Unfortunately, the more they retain their Muslim culture (e.g., diet, dress, beard, language, liturgy, etc.), the more suspect they tend to be in Christian communities. Theoretically, C4 MBBs should not have to enter C1-3 communities at all. Practically, however, their paths tend to cross more often than C4 advocates would prefer, and so begins the process of Christianization which inevitably pulls Muslims "out" of their community and "into" some form of Christianity (Massey, 2004, p. 301).

### *Messenger Adaptation*

In order to communicate effectively, how much does a Western missionary have to adapt to the new culture? Does the messenger need to become a Muslim in order to win Muslims, if not in religion, then in culture, if they can be separated?

Guthrie reports that at the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization, Ralph Winter argued that 2.7 billion people cannot be won to Christ by "near-neighbor evangelism since they have no Christian neighbors." Winter called on evangelists to

“cross cultural, language, and geographical barriers, learn the languages and cultures of these unreached peoples, present the gospel to them, and plant culturally relevant churches among them.” Winter's emphasis on crossing cultural boundaries to reach other cultural groups laid the foundation for the Unreached Peoples Group (UPG) movement and the AD2000 and Beyond Movement. It also gave a powerful boost to contextualization as a missionary method (Guthrie, 2000, p. 104).

Being a credible witness is, of course, a precondition for even being able to enter into meaningful discussion about spiritual things. Christian background workers and Muslim converts involved in C4 (pre-) evangelism will need to maintain some essential outward identification with the culture while contributing socially in biblical ways.

- Maintain healthy respect for civil and religious authorities
- Practice generosity and compassion in dealings with the less fortunate
- Maintain dietary habits consistent with Muslim neighbors, including the fast
- Participate fully in neighborhood activities
- Present one's self as a spiritually active and mature member of the community

(Leffel, p. 8)

Guthrie describes this adaptation from an interview with Steve Cochraine where Cochraine defended the use of C5 contextualization saying that they were replicating the method of the 17th-century Jesuit priest Robert de Nobili,<sup>4</sup> who donned Hindu garb to win converts. Likewise a Youth With A Mission [YWAM] team in North India is working with an Indian Christian. The man wears traditional robes befitting a *sadhu*, or holy man (a Hindu monk). He and the team organize pilgrimages to Hindu religious sites for pilgrims. Along the way, he and the missionaries explain the gospel "in a totally contextualized way. As far as the pilgrims are concerned, he is a Hindu. He's a Brahmin *sadhu* (Guthrie, 2000, pp. 106-07).

Richard calls on the Christian messenger to make significant adaptations to a Hindu culture when he says, “The fundamental stumbling block for most Hindus when facing Christianity remains that Christianity is a foreign religion, and all the evidence shows that this Hindu perception is true. Clearer thinking about Hinduism should lead to a deeper commitment to radically incarnational (contextual) approaches to the Hindu world, so that Hindus might see and feel that Christ and His good news are vitally relevant within their civilizational heritage. Without such shifts of paradigm and approach, there is little reason to hope that present and future Hindus will heed the biblical message any more than their forefathers have” Richard, 2003, p. 8).

Recent surveys of individuals who have moved out of Islam to Christianity gave some of the following reasons for what most influenced them to consider Christianity. A North African former Sufi mystic noted with approval that there was no gap between the moral profession and the practice of Christians he saw. An Egyptian contrasted the love a Christian group at an American university with the unloving treatment of Muslim students and faculty he encountered at a university in Medina. An Omani woman explained that Christian treat women as equals. Others noted loving Christian marriages. Some poor people said the expatriate Christian workers they knew had adopted, contrary to their expectations, a simple lifestyle, wearing

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<sup>4</sup> Nobili was a Jesuit missionary to southern India who pioneered the concepts of “inculturation” adapting the Brahmin customs which he judged as not contrary to Christianity in order to gain a hearing. He wore the saffron robes and carried a *kamadalu* (a water jug) like brahmin monks.

local clothes and observing local customs of not eating pork, drinking alcohol, or touching those of the opposite sex (Woodberry, 2007, p. 82).

### **The problems of contextualization**

The challenges of getting a foreign, especially Western, culture out of the way so that the gospel becomes the real issue instead of the need to become like a Western Gentile Christian is not easy, especially when the Western missionary neither knows, nor is sensitive to, how Western his beliefs, lifestyle, vocabulary, liturgy, theology, and worldview effects his whole lifestyle. Separating tradition from exegesis is not always easy to do.

Joshua Massey contends that the major misunderstandings or false judgments of C5 contextualization stem from (1) Greco-Roman Gentile categories of orthodoxy, instead of a Jewish understanding of Christ's mandate; (2) a distance, rather than the experience of a personal relationships with C5 (fifth level of contextualization out of six) Muslim believers; and (3) church-centered focus rather than Christ-centered missiology Massey, 2004, pp. 296-297). The first has to do with vocabulary used in translations and communications; the second has to do with confidence of genuine conversions and the third, with a "proper" methodology to be used in evangelism and discipleship.

Gary Corwin, a missionary in Ghana, noted the development of "super-contextualization," which he defines as "a new willingness to push the envelope of cultural and religious accommodation way beyond current practice" (Corwin, 2004, p. 282).

There has been strong debate over how far we can go in contextualizing ministry among Muslims before it becomes syncretism. Much of that debate has played out in journal articles of the major evangelical mission periodicals. The journal that has presented the greatest volume of material is the International Journal of Frontier Missions, which has had no less than five entire issues focused on Muslim evangelism—as well as numerous articles in other issues (Moreau, 2005).

#### *Vocabulary problems*

Two of these problems are semantics or the vocabulary used in Christian translations and communications. In the Muslim context some vocabulary is offensive to Muslims (especially unconverted) and other vocabulary is offensive to Gentile Christian evangelists, but not so offensive to Muslims (unconverted or new believers). The term offensive to Muslims is "son of God" and the term offensive to some but not all Christians (Gentile and MBB) is the use of "Allah."

#### ***"Son of God"***

The first to be mentioned is whether "Son of God" should become "Isa-al-Masih," [Jesus the Messiah] or other phrases, which are much more palatable to Muslims or sensitive Muslim converts. "It is the use of this taboo term in translations of the Gospel that presents the greatest stumbling block to Muslims, because it makes them unreceptive to the Gospel and keeps many of them from ever hearing it and believing it" (Brown, 2007, p. 426)The words "Son of God" have always been repugnant to Muslims. They

can only understand this term in a sexual biological framework. For God to have an offspring is pure blasphemy. "Some current contextualists have opted for radical surgery followed by a linguistic transplant: just remove 'Son of God' and insert 'Isa-al-Masih,'" according to Parshall.

Rick Brown, mission strategist and writer, gives the reasons that Muslims are generally respectful of the Christian perspective to a point:

The Qur'an asserts that Jesus is a unique individual, God's Word, whom God cast into the virgin Mary, who was born to be the Messiah and whose earthly life God brought to an end, raising Jesus to himself in heaven (Al 'Imaran 3:45-55). The Qur'an also commands Muslims to profess faith in the scriptures that God revealed to Jesus and the prophets (Al 'Imran 3:84; cf. Al-Baqara 2:285) and that those who reject the guidance and verses of the Torah and the Gospel will face the severest punishment (Al 'Imran 3:3-4). All of these things motivate Muslims to read the Gospel (Brown, 2007, p. 422).

But the breaks are hit when they are exposed unknowingly to the phrase "Son of God," which is considered a taboo term. They are desperately afraid that they will incur the wrath of God for seemingly consenting to this term, even unknowingly. Brown explains:

They regard the term to be an insult to God, and they fear that asserting it of Jesus or anyone else (cf. Al-Ma'ida 5:8) will bring upon them God's wrath and eternity in hell, no matter what the term means. In other words, the main problem with this term is not theological, as so many Christians suppose, and it is not simply a semantic difference, but rather it is an affective and cultural phenomenon: it is an utterly taboo term. The reason is that in most Muslim cultures, people are indoctrinated from childhood, on the basis of At-Tawba 9:30 in the Qur'an that God will damn and destroy anyone who says that Jesus is *ibnillah* ("a son of God"), regardless of what they mean by it. The Qur'an (Maryam 19:88-92) says this term is so insulting to the majesty of God that asserting it could cause the heavens to burst and the earth to split and the mountains to collapse! What the Muslim most fears...is that his or her own soul will be damned to hell forever" (Brown, 2007, p. 424).

Not every Muslim will react the same way. "A nominal Muslim might entertain such an idea, but pious Muslims are unwilling to doubt the eternal risk posed by this term until they have been born again through faith in Jesus Christ and have come to view the Qur'an in the light of the Bible" (Brown, 2007, p. 424). Brown has seen three reactions of Muslims who are exposed to this "son of God" terminology: (1) Suspicious Muslims are concerned about the taboo term but are cautiously receptive of the scriptural message since they are usually nominal Muslims already doubting the claims of the Qur'an. (2) Alienated Muslims are alarmed by the taboo term and are suspicious of the explanations, but continue to learn out of curiosity or politeness but from a distance. (3) Terrified Muslims<sup>5</sup> resent being "trapped" or surprised by being exposed to the term which could mean their damnation and either determine never to be exposed again or react violently to show God their hatred toward the term and its user, as they suppose is His hatred toward

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<sup>5</sup> Brown attempts to explain this affective connotation by a comparison in Christian concepts. Suppose "you were worried that God is displeased with you and wants to send you to hell and then someone asks you to blaspheme the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:29) or to say 'Jesus is accursed' (1 Cor 12:3). That is the kind of fear that Muslims have when asked to say that God has children." (Brown, 2007, p. 429)

the same. They hope that this reaction will convince God that they were tricked into seeing, hearing, reading or uttering this taboo term, and that God will forgive them (Brown, 2007, pp. 424-25).

It is important to note that the taboo is against asserting that someone is a "son of God;" however, there is no proscription against talking about the term. After all, Muslim missionaries, teachers and imams often talk about the term when they are criticizing Christianity. So Muslims feel free to read or discuss the meaning of the taboo term, as long as they do not read it being asserted or consent to hearing it asserted of someone. That is why Muslims are willing to read or hear an explanation of the taboo term in a footnote or glossary, even though they are reticent to read it or hear it asserted in the text itself (Brown, 2007, p. 427).

The new translation is being promoted in a number of languages throughout the Islamic world. Early feedback from Muslims and MBBs is positive. This offense of the word "son" is gone. Jesus as Messiah is retained and highlighted. The meaning of "Messiah" can be explained. This dynamic equivalent translation defense is that certain NT passages place Son of God and messiah together, thus proving the term's interchangeability (see Luke 4:41; Matt 16:16; and Matt 26:63-64) (Parshall, 2004, p. 292).

### **“Allah”**

The second term that becomes controversial, especially among missionaries, but not so much among Muslims, is the use of *Allah* to represent the title for God. "This debate doesn't exist for Arab Christians, who have continually translated *elohim* and *theos* (the primary terms for God in biblical Hebrew and Greek) as "Allah" from the earliest know Arabic Bible translations in the eighth century till today" (Massey, 2004, p. 284).

Joshua Massey, linguist, cultural anthropologist and missiologists, shows that those who argue for the use of Allah as a reference to God see the origins of the term in a common Semitic language. Most scholars agree that "Allah" is the Arabic cognate of the biblical Aramaic *elah* and Hebrew *eloah*, which is the singular of *elohim*, a generic word for God used throughout the Old Testament. He makes a good point that Allah is never used to refer to a false god or idol in Islamic thought. In fact, "it is nearly impossible for linguists to determine which of these three terms appeared first in the Ancient Near East, or if they all derived from a hypothesized proto-Semitic language" (Massey, 2004, p. 284). It can only be used to refer to the true God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Recently I was in a N. African country to interview a potential adjunct for our Arabic studies program. I asked this highly qualified professor how he came to Christ and what his perspective was over the issue of the use of *Allah* as a reference to God. He commented that at first he did not know there was a conflict, but was taught not to use *Allah* for God by an Arab missionary. After a few years this became so cumbersome, and no one in his country saw any conflict with the use of the term, that he has now found the use of *Allah* not a stumbling block to true gospel understanding.

Massey's analysis of the term led him to investigate the translations for "God" in other languages and he makes these comments:

It is ... easy to gloss over the sordid history of many non-Arabic terms Christians use for God. The English word "God," for example, comes from the pagan Germanic *Gott*, a proper name for the chief Teutonic deity *Odin*, who lives on top

of the world-tree and created the first humans with his wife Freya, a blond, blue-eyed goddess of love, fertility and beauty.

Should English speakers therefore discontinue addressing the Most High as "God"? In spite of its pagan origin and present use for both false deities and the Most High "God" (when capitalized) is generally understood by English-speakers as the God of the Bible... "*Allah*," in contrast, shares the same Semitic roots as biblical Hebrew and Aramaic, is not presently used for false deities, and is clearly understood by all Arab Christians and Muslims as the God of the Bible. "*Allah*" is therefore an acceptable term for Arabic-speaking Christians and Muslims (Massey, 2004, p. 285).

Christian advocates for using *Allah* amongst Muslims in non-Arabic-speaking lands counter that introducing foreign terms for God will create immense communication hurdles, perhaps even guaranteeing that a truly indigenous church planting movement will never occur. The task, they say, is not to discard such easily redeemable terms, but to fill them with biblical meaning. The more a Muslim's understanding of *Allah* is informed by the Scriptures, the more biblical his or her theology of God will become (Massey, 2004, p. 285).

### **Comprehensive Contextualization**

Scott Moreau, chairman of the Inter Cultural Studies Department at Wheaton College, describes the seven-fold dimensions for grasping the scope of contextualization, drawn from Ninian Smart's model for understanding religions, which include (1) doctrinal, (2) mystical, (3) ethical, (4) social, (5) ritual, (6) supernatural experience, and (7) artistic or material elements (Moreau, 2007).

1. The doctrinal dimension refers to beliefs expressed in religious form. It is the attempt to answer questions such as, "How did the world come to exist?" and "What powers rule the world?" These beliefs are found in the Bible, and can be organized in a way that makes sense to a particular audience, whether through books, hymns, sermons, Bible studies and so on. This approach can be focused on a particular goal (liberation theologies) or around a particular set of practices (Pentecostal theologies). It may have a subset in mind (black theologies, feminist theologies) or try to be universal (Western systematic theologies).
2. The second dimension is the mythic. In the broadest sense, myth refers to the stories of a culture that reflect how it thinks about the world. The way we are using the term should not be confused with the more popular idea of myths as stories that are untrue. Rather, myth in this sense is the power of the stories of a people to embody the things they cherish and value (as well as showing why some things are not valued). Typically, a society's myths express that society's ideals about several themes, including sacrifice, love, honor, power, wisdom and heroism.
3. While the doctrinal dimension focuses on what is true, the ethical dimension focuses on how people should live. This includes how we are to interact with other people and with the rest of God's creation, and how society regulates behavior to prevent or stop people from behaving inappropriately.
4. The social dimension is seen in the ways Christians organize themselves in light of scripture and local cultural values. It includes the sense of "togetherness" that

- comes from participating in Christian rituals together (e.g., communion) but also includes all of the institutions within the Church and how they are organized and run. For example it includes such obvious things as church governance. However, it goes beyond this to include:
- All forms of church association (formal and informal, from children’s clubs to women’s guilds to denominations)
  - The means they have to exchange goods and services (voluntary labor, offerings, church dinners)
  - The enforcement of their ethical standards (church or denominational discipline) \* how knowledge is passed on from generation to generation (from formal education to informal conversations with a youth leader).
5. The ritual includes not just what we formally think of as ritual, but any repeated symbolic actions done in relation to Christian faith. This can range from formal Christian rituals such as baptism, communion, marriages and funerals to non-formal ritualistic activities, such as sermons, committee meetings, evangelistic outreaches and prayer meetings.
  6. The dimension of supernatural experience takes into account the fact that in every society people encounter the supernatural, whether through dreams, visions, miraculous experiences, signs and wonders or other means. While many in the Western Church have followed the lead of Western culture and dismissed such encounters,<sup>6</sup> the Majority World Church pays careful attention to them and acknowledges them as real and needing to be addressed. This is a difficult area to contextualize, since they are less amenable to “control” than doctrine or rituals. Contextualization of this dimension should include at least three components:
    - Local Christians must study the scriptures and develop biblically-based perspectives on them.
    - Christians can then consider developing biblically-founded rituals that enable encounters with God through Christ (e.g., prayer services) as well as rituals that will help people who struggle with negative experiences (e.g., demonic expulsion).
    - Those who follow Christ need to be given the freedom—and the language—to talk about their experiences and find Bible-centered and culturally-sensitive ways to handle them.
  7. Christians around the world express their values and ideals through artistic and material means. From church architecture that values the sermon (seen by the elevated pulpit facing the congregation) to sculptures that portray Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf to clothing that indicates status and authority, Christians regularly create and use imaginative ways to express thoughts, feelings and attitudes about their faith. A comprehensive approach to contextualization recognizes this as an essential element of the faith of a local body of believers and finds ways to enable them to express their artistic giftedness in Christ-honoring ways (Moreau, 2007).

### **C-1 to C-6 Scope of Contextualism**

Many of the principles of contextualization are applied to Muslim evangelism, but similar applications can be made to Hindu contextualization as well. Obviously the

length of this chapter will not permit this thorough analysis. However, a comparison chart is included in the Appendix called the H-1 to H-7 chart.

John Travis, professor of World Missions and Indian Studies at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in 1988 published his perspective of the spectrum of MBBs found in the Islamic world. The “C” stands for Christ-centered communities. The number identification refer to comparison in three areas: language of worship, culture/religious forms used in public and worship lifestyle, and self-identity as a ‘Muslim’ or a ‘Christian.’ The scope ranges from C-1 which is a traditional gentile-looking Christian church to a C-6 MBB, often in a hostile environment while participating in a secrete or underground community, which may have little similitude to recognizable Christians. There is universal agreement that this level of contextualization is regrettable though an existing reality, which hopefully will disintegrate when freedom of expression is allowed. Travis states, "What is called "low" contextualization (C-1) may, in fact, not be contextualization at all, but an expression of ethnocentric extractionism. Further, what is called "high" contextualization may not be contextualization at all, but an expression of syncretism" (Tennent, 2006, p. 103).

To grasp the challenge of how to guide the contextualized effort Leffel gives an interesting insight. In some contexts C3 strategy may directly subvert the goal of birthing an indigenous people movement because,

"Each convert extracted from his own cultural situation reinforces in the minds of Hindus and Muslims the misunderstanding that Christians are opposed to their cultural traditions. In this sense, one could defend the thesis that each convert won from these faiths at present actually represents a setback to winning large numbers from these communities (Leffel, p. 5).

The following description of the different scope of Contextualization applies specifically to the Muslim context. See Appendix C for the H-scale of contextualization in the Hindu context of evangelism. In any culture the continued challenge for the expatriate missionary is: how can a fellowship of biblical believers grow and witness for Jesus yet remain authentic, active members of their secular or non-Christian culture? Something must be done in this regard because the overall historic failure of Christian witness among the Hindus and Muslims must indicate that some form of contextualization is needed as a strategic imperative. The following are the common definitions of the C-1 to C-6 scale of suggested contextualized ministries:

**C1 Model:** Traditional church using non-indigenous language

- Christian churches in Muslim countries that exist as islands, removed from the culture.
- Christians exist as an ethnic/religious minority.

**C2 Model:** Traditional church using indigenous language.

- Church uses indigenous language, but in all its cultural forms is far removed from the broader Islamic culture.

**C3 Model:** Contextualized Christ-centered communities using Muslim’s language and non-religiously indigenous cultural forms

- Their style of worship, dress, etc. are loosely from the indigenous culture. Local rituals and traditions, if used, are purged of religious elements.
- They may meet in a church or more religiously neutral location. Majority of congregation is of Muslim background and call themselves Christians.

**C4 Model:** Contextualized Christ-centered communities using Muslim's language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms.

- Similar to C3 except believers worship looks like Muslim worship, they keep the fast, avoid pork and alcohol, use Islamic terms and dress.
- Community is almost entirely of Muslim background. Though highly contextualized, believers are not seen as Muslims by the Muslim community.
- Believers call themselves "followers of *Isa Al-Misah*," [Jesus the Messiah]

**C5 Model:** Christ-centered communities of "Messianic Muslims" who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

- Believers remain legally and socially within Islamic community.<sup>6</sup>
- Aspects of Islam incompatible with the Bible are rejected or if possible, reinterpreted.
- Believers may remain active in the mosque. Unsaved Muslims may view C5 believers as deviant and may expel them from the Islamic community.
- If sufficient numbers permit, a C5 "Messianic mosque" may be established.

**C6 Model:** Small Christ-centered communities of secret/underground believers isolated by extreme hostility, usually individual believers but sometimes in small groups.

- Believers typically do not attempt to share their faith, others suffer imprisonment or martyrdom (Leffel, p. 3).

Leffel gives a broader explanation of the differences with some opinions about how effective each model ministry might be. C1 and C2 models represent little or no accommodation to Muslim culture, other than the C2 use of indigenous language. These appear much like the traditional Western culture in the Muslim context. This includes Western-style buildings, denominational affiliation openly on signs, and worship. "While we must respect the courage of the few Muslim converts to these churches, we consider the models inadequate for two reasons. **First**, imposing unnecessary cultural forms to the non-Western context inhibits long term efforts to found a truly indigenous people movement from taking root. The church will always be seen as a cultural outsider. **Second**, the distance from Islamic culture to these churches is an unbiblical constraint on conversion and Christian discipleship. In effect, it erects extra-biblical cultural roadblocks to the Gospel" (Leffel, p. 5).

C3 contextualization begins to accommodate some non-religious aspects of the indigenous culture. At the same time, there is a conscious attempt to break from all visible elements of Islam, such as observing Ramadan, dietary laws, association with the mosque and so forth. "This moderately contextualized model assumes that Islamic cultural forms cannot be purged of their religious meaning, and should be abandoned to avoid fostering syncretism. C3 is a form of contextualization that most Westerners are

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<sup>6</sup> Phil Parshall, *The Cross and the Crescent* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1989), p. 77, contends that because of the theology associated with the Muslim prayer, he strongly contends that remaining active in the mosque is either "compromise or deceit." (See also *Beyond the Mosque* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), p. 184.

comfortable supporting because it sharply contrasts Islam and Christianity. Conversion means parting from Islamic identity<sup>7</sup> and coming into a new one” (Leffel, p. 5).

In some contexts C3 strategy may directly subvert the goal of birthing an indigenous people movement because, “[e]ach convert extracted from his own cultural situation reinforces in the minds of Hindus and Muslims the misunderstanding that Christians are opposed to their cultural traditions. In this sense, one could defend the thesis that each convert won from these faiths at present actually represents a setback to winning large numbers from these communities (Leffel, p. 5)

The move from C3 to C4/5 models involves incorporating traditional Islamic religious forms into biblical faith and Christian community. However, significant qualitative differences also exist between C4 and C5 models... Converts from Islam are encouraged to express their new faith almost completely within the Muslim social and religious fold. They do not view themselves as Christians, since in context that refers to traitors against the community, Western materialism and other counterproductive baggage. Converts are encouraged to see themselves as "Muslim followers of Isa," or "completed Muslims," or "messianic Muslims." (Leffel, p. 6)

C6 is more of a survival strategy than a contextualization model. These believers are forced to choose between rejection from the community or martyrdom and complete anonymity. While it may be best in the short term for a convert to remain in a C6 position, it is certainly no long term plan. Building an indigenous church or igniting an indigenous people movement is virtually impossible under these conditions. This strategy may be necessary in some countries where conversion to biblical faith is illegal and an underground church is still in the making. (Leffel, p. 5)

Leffel declares that a number of things need to be carefully considered. It seems that the key essentials for salvation are present: "Jesus gave his life for me" and "Jesus is the only way of salvation." This is fantastic! Yet, the questions are somewhat ambiguous. What does "Jesus gave his life for me" mean? There is no survey data on belief in Jesus' crucifixion and bodily resurrection, necessary for biblical saving faith (1 Cor. 1:23; Rom. 10:9). “In light of the Muslim rejection of the doctrine of Christ's crucifixion and bodily resurrection, this would be vital information to have in formulating our conclusions. The high regard for the Koran, repetition of Koranic verses, and rejection of the trinity are also problematic. After 12 years we still see crucial aspects of syncretism and this, apparently, among the crucial players in the C5 movement” (Leffel, p. 7).

### **The danger of syncretism**

There has been strong debate over how far we can go in contextualizing ministry among Muslims before it becomes syncretism. Much of that debate has played out in journal articles of the major evangelical mission periodicals. “The journal that has presented the greatest volume of material is the International Journal of Frontier Missions, which has had no less than five entire issues focused on Muslim evangelism—as well as numerous articles in other issues” (Moreau, 2005).

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<sup>7</sup> See H. L. Richard, “Is extraction evangelism still the way to go?” reprinted in Mission Frontiers Bulletin, September-October, 1996, p. 15.

"What's the rule-of-thumb definition for the difference between contextualization and syncretism? Simple: it's contextualization when I do it, but syncretism when you do it!" Corwin, 2004, p. 282) Where is the line? If we say that syncretism is adapting any ideas or practices from another culture, then the church and almost everything known today as Christianity is syncretistic.

Syncretism, or the unbiblical blending of true religion with false, is an ever-present risk for the contextualizer. The key is to keep biblical elements that are non-negotiable and to discard unbiblical cultural or religious elements. Catholic missions in past centuries, in their zeal to bring masses of pagans into the church, sometimes failed this test, as the old gods were simply given new Christian names. In supposedly Catholic bastions from Mexico to the Philippines to Haiti to Brazil, animistic practices survive under a Christian veneer (Guthrie, 2000, p. 105).

The issue of syncretism has surfaced today over a strong debate of how far we can go in contextualizing ministry among Muslims before it becomes syncretism. Much of that debate has played out in journal articles of the major evangelical mission periodicals. The journal that has presented the greatest volume of material is the *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, which has had no less than five entire issues focused on Muslim evangelism—as well as numerous articles in other issues (Moreau, 2005).

Some critics have questioned the effectiveness of popular evangelism tools such as *Evangelism Explosion* when used apart from an adequate understanding of the culture and contextualization. Steffen argues that before the "Jesus" film is shown, the audience's worldview must be known, the presenters must earn the right to be heard, the film must be seen first by the community's information gatekeepers, the presenters must grasp how the community makes decisions and must know how to incorporate converts into healthy churches, and the audience must have a significant foundation for the gospel. Not to have these cultural prerequisites in place, he and others argue, is to invite nominalism or syncretism (Guthrie, 2000, p. 105).

Pocock quotes Moreau who gives the following guidelines to guard against syncretism:

Because of the convoluted nature of culture, the declaration of syncretism in a particular setting cannot be simply left in the hands of expatriate missionaries. The local community must be empowered to biblically evaluate their own practices and teachings. Missionaries must learn to trust that indigenous peoples are able to discern God's leading and trust God to develop and maintain biblically founded and culturally relevant faith and praxis in each local context. Finally, Christians of every culture must engage in genuine partnership with Christians of other cultures, since often the outsider's help is needed to enable local believers, blinded by culture and familiarity, to see that which contravenes scriptural adherence to the first commandment. (Pocock, 2005, pp. 331-32).

In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant, leaving others "including both Hindus and non-Hindus "whatever creed and worship practices suit them best.

A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange Gods, and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than objectionable. He tends to believe that the highest powers complement each other for the well-being

of the world and mankind. Few religious ideas are considered to be finally irreconcilable. The core religion does not even depend on the existence or non-existence of God or on whether there is one God or many. Since religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms.

Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and conglomerate of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization (Richard, 2003, pp. 4-5).

Some hold the theory that syncretism is a temporary or transitory state that many churches or individuals pass through, but eventually mature and come to the knowledge of the truth. Missiologists Ralph Winter states that perhaps a third of the 6,000 churches linked with the African Independent Church movement are messianic, meaning they have someone among their members known as a divine person. Winter believes the Spirit and the Word, without Western intervention, will lead many of these churches into orthodoxy. Guthrie considers this highly debatable (Guthrie, 1998, p. 222). Most hold that once a false doctrine is accepted as divine, it becomes very difficult to ever change it.

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### **The contemporary trends**

It is interesting to note that Jesus never asked any Gentile or Samaritan to convert to Judaism, rather just believe in Him and worship God in spirit and truth. Massey writes, "Christ-centeredness has less to do with religion, and everything to do with Jesus."

Advocates of C5 *insider* movements are equally concerned about the dangers of syncretism and lazy tolerance, but they are also more concerned about true Christ-centeredness than with conformity to Gentile Christian traditions and doctrinal codifications developed centuries after the apostolic era (Massey, 2004, p. 300).

It must be clear that salvation is a process in conversion. Evangelists need to emphasize what is required for an authentic decision resulting in salvation from a longer process of teaching and discipleship that transforms saving faith into biblical maturity. We expect complete understanding of biblical orthodoxy for salvation, this not supported by scriptural examples in conversion (Acts 8, 10, 16, 17). There are several truths that must be understood and accepted for salvation. These truths are alien to the Qur'an and require a shift from Islamic belief to a biblical faith.

At the 1974 Lausanne Congress on world Evangelization, Ralph Winter argued that 2.7 billion people cannot be won to Christ by near-neighbor evangelism since they have no Christian neighbors. Winter called on evangelists to cross cultural, language, and

geographical barriers, learn the languages and cultures of these unreached peoples, present the gospel to them, and plant culturally relevant churches among them. Winter's emphasis on crossing cultural boundaries to reach other cultural groups laid the foundation for the Unreached People Group (UPG) movement and the AD2000 and Beyond Movement. It also gave a powerful boost to contextualization as a missionary method (Guthrie, 2000, p. 104).

A new contextualization trend among missionaries is the use of indigenous music rather than imported Western words and styles. Drawing from the insights of ethnomusicology, missionaries are using local music forms to both strengthen new Christians in their faith and to reach out to unbelievers. The Summer Institute of Linguistics offers summer courses, an annual conference, and a library on the subject (Guthrie, 2000, p. 105).

Moreau concludes the concept of contextualization with this comprehensive definition, "The ultimate goal of contextualization is to make the entirety of the Christian faith, including both the message and the way Christians live their faith out in local settings, enfolded in a way that is understandable (and, insofar as it is possible, commendable) to the non-Christian people among whom that faith is lived out" (Moreau, 2007).

## Appendix A

This topic is a hot theme that is polemic especially between the field missionary and the “theoretical theologian” who usually has never planted a church in a hard-core foreign culture. This is not a simple concept that will go away. Every missionary will live with the tension of contextualization throughout his ministry, as long as he/she is working with people of a radically different culture. The following will give you some basic web sites that can be helpful for your personal research.

### General Resources

- MisLinks ([www.mislinks.org/topics/contxtheo.htm](http://www.mislinks.org/topics/contxtheo.htm)). These are divided into general resources and resources by continent.
- The Association of Professors of Mission ([www.asmweb.org/apm/syllabi/theology.htm](http://www.asmweb.org/apm/syllabi/theology.htm)) which give a number of syllabi on contextualization from a variety of schools.
- Annotated Contextualization Bibliography (ACB) ([www.wheaton.edu/intr/Moreau/courses/532/biblio/biblio.htm](http://www.wheaton.edu/intr/Moreau/courses/532/biblio/biblio.htm)). This bibliography is split by topics and area of contextualization and geographic regions.

### Repositories

- LookSmart ([www.looksmart.com](http://www.looksmart.com) – go to “articles” tab) holds 3.5 million articles from more than 700 publications. A search for “contextualization” yields 200 hits.
- Network for Strategic Missions KnowledgeBase (NSMKB) ([www.strategicnetwork.org/index.php?loc=kb&mode=b&sf=Y&fto=322](http://www.strategicnetwork.org/index.php?loc=kb&mode=b&sf=Y&fto=322)) with 190 articles and 8 sub-topics.
- Questia.com ([www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com)) a subscription-based Internet library service with 1,643 hits on “contextualization.” This site is not exclusively Christian so it needs to be limited like *contextualized theology*.

### Journal articles

- Bulletin for Contextual Theology ([www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/bct.htm](http://www.hs.unp.ac.za/theology/bct.htm) - which focuses on African theologies)
- Direction ([www.directionjournal.org/index/art-subject.html?Mission/International+Church](http://www.directionjournal.org/index/art-subject.html?Mission/International+Church)) This is a Mennonite Brethren sponsored journal.
- EMQ (Evangelical Missions Quarterly)([www.billygrahamcenter.org/emis/archives.htm](http://www.billygrahamcenter.org/emis/archives.htm)).
- International Journal of Frontier Missions ([www.ijfm.org/archives.htm](http://www.ijfm.org/archives.htm)) which is a Frontier Mission focus.
- Journal of Asian Mission ([www.aps.edu/jam/](http://www.aps.edu/jam/))
- Mission Frontiers Magazine ([www.missionfrontiers.org/archive.htm](http://www.missionfrontiers.org/archive.htm))
- To All Men All Things ([www.leppc.net/kearns/TAMAT.htm](http://www.leppc.net/kearns/TAMAT.htm)) with a Hindu focus

## Appendix B

H. L. Richard gives these 10 keys to evangelizing Hindus. Friendship evangelism is usually easy to initiate with Hindus. Most Hindus esteem religion in general and are free and open to speak about it. A sincere, non-judgmental interest in all aspects of Indian life will provide a good basis for friendship. Personal interaction with Hindus will lead to a more certain grasp of the essence of Hinduism than reading many books.

A consistently Christ-like life is the most important factor in sharing the gospel with Hindus. The suggestions that follow should help to break down misunderstandings and help to build a positive witness for Christ. But learning and applying these points can never be a substitute for a transparent life of peace and joy in discipleship to Jesus Christ.

**1. Do not criticize or condemn Hinduism.**

There is much that is good and much that is bad in the practice of both Christianity and Hinduism. Pointing out the worst aspects of Hinduism is hardly the way to win friends or show love. Criticising Hinduism can make us feel we have won an argument; it will not win Hindus to Jesus Christ.

**2. Avoid everything that hints of triumphalism and pride.**

We are not the greatest people with the greatest religion, but some Hindus are taught that we think of ourselves in this way. We do not have all knowledge of all truth; in fact we know very little (1Corinthians 8.1,2).

**3. Never allow a suggestion that separation from family and/or culture is necessary in becoming a disciple of Christ.**

To insist or even subtly encourage a Hindu to leave his home and way of life to join the 'Christian' way of life in terms of diet and culture, etc., is a denial of biblical teaching (1Corinthians 7.17-24).

**4. Do not speak quickly on hell, or on the fact that Jesus is the only way for salvation.**

Hindus hear these things as triumphalism and are offended unnecessarily. Speak of hell only with tears of compassion. Point to Jesus so that it is obvious he is the only way, but leave the Hindu to see and conclude this for himself.

**5. Never hurry.**

Any pushing for a decision or conversion will do great harm. God must work, and the Holy Spirit should be given freedom to move at his own pace. Even after a profession of Christ is made, do not force quick changes regarding pictures of gods, charms, etc. Be patient and let a person come to understanding and conviction themselves before taking action.

**6. Work traditional Hindu (and biblical) values into your life, like simplicity,**

renunciation, spirituality and humility, against which there is no law.

A life reflecting the reality of 'a still and quiet soul' (Psalm 131) will never be despised by Hindus.

**7. Know Hinduism, and each Hindu.**

It will take some study to get a grasp of Hinduism and patient listening will be required to understand where in the spectrum each Hindu stands. Both philosophical and devotional Hinduism should be studied with the aim of understanding what appeals to the Hindu heart.

Those who move seriously into work among Hindus need to become more knowledgeable in Hinduism than Hindus themselves are. Some study of the Sanskrit language will prove invaluable. Remember the biblical pattern from Acts 17 of introducing truth to the Hindu from his own tradition, and only secondarily from the Bible. For example, the biblical teaching on sin is repulsive to many modern Hindus, but their own Scriptures give an abundance of similar testimony. Bridge from Hindu Scripture to the Bible and Christ.

**8. Be quick to acknowledge failure.**

Defending wrong practices in the church and Western Christianity only indicates we are more concerned for our religion than we are for truth.

**9. Share your testimony, describing your personal experience of lostness and God's gracious forgiveness and peace.**

Don't claim to know God in his majesty and fullness, but share what you know in your life and experience. This is the supreme approach in presenting Christ to the Hindu, but care must be taken that our sharing is appropriate. To shout on a street corner, or share at every seeming opportunity is offensive. What God does in our lives is holy and private, only to be shared in intimacy to those who will respect the things of God and his work in our lives.

**10. Centre on Christ.**

He alone can win their hearts' total loyalty to himself. In your life and speech so centre on him that all see in your life that God alone is worth living for. Hinduism is often called 'God intoxicated', and the Hindu who lives at all in this frame of mind is put off by Christian emphases on so many details to the neglect of the 'one thing that is needed' (Luke 10.42). A Hindu who professes faith in Christ must be helped as far as possible to work out the meaning of that commitment in his own cultural context. Often a new follower of Christ is ready to adopt any and every practice of Western Christians, and needs to be taught what is essential and what is secondary in Christian life and worship. A new believer should be warned against making an abrupt announcement to his or her family, since that inflicts great pain and inevitably produces deep misunderstanding. Ideally, a Hindu will share each step of the pilgrimage to Christ with his or her family, so that there is no surprise at the end. An early stage of the communication, to be reaffirmed continually, would be the honest esteem for Indian/Hindu traditions in general that the disciple of Christ can and does maintain (Richard, 2001).

## Appendix C

### Hindu Contextual Scale

#### **H1 Traditional Christianity separates from everything "Hindu," including diet, dress, name, caste, ceremonies, etc.**

- Does it exist? Many Indian churches and missions have followed and continue this pattern, leading Hindus to consider Christianity a foreign religion.

#### **H2 Christians renounce Hinduism but are open to non-religious Hindu cultural practices.**

- Name and diet are not necessarily changed, although believers often alter diet even if it is not deemed essential for following Christ.
- Caste is renounced with other religious and seeming-religious practices, i.e., a woman wearing a red dot on her forehead.
- Some music is drawn from indigenous traditions, but most is of foreign origin or adapted from foreign sources.
- Cultural aspects of a few Hindu festivals might be celebrated.
- Often not concerned with receiving foreign funding for Christian work even though many Hindus consider it scandalous.
- Future leaders are training in Western-style seminaries and Bible colleges -- most have courses/discussions on contextualizing expressions of faith, but actions speak louder than words. These institutions are strongholds of Westernized Christianity in India.
- Does it exist? Most Indian churches are comfortable in H2, which has not affected the Hindu understanding of Christianity as a foreign religion.

#### **H3 Hinduism is renounced in favor of Christianity, but with efforts to adapt Hindu religious and cultural practices into biblical faith and practice.**

- Efforts to develop contextual Indian Christian theology--willingness to use terminologies from Hinduism that traditional Christians avoid.
- Women wearing red forehead dot is not problematic.
- Vegetarianism is often practiced
- Caste is recognized at least to a limited extent.
- Musical styles from Indian traditions are adopted but Western music is also used.
- Hindu festivals are sometimes celebrated (in varying degrees, often modified).
- Hindu temples are studiously avoided.
- Commitment to indigenous financing is due to the stigma of foreign funding of Christian work.
- does it exist? No historic Christian movements in India have effectively arrived at H3. The Christian "ashram" (spiritual retreat center) movement beginning in the 1920s was an attempt. Many individual Hindus converts experimented on these lines while within H1 or H2 churches.

#### **H4 Hindus who come to Christ maintain sociological identity as Hindus within their birth community.**

- Do not identify as "Christian."
- Do not develop contextual expressions of faith and discipleship.
- name, caste, diet and dress (including red dot) are not changed because they are aspects of community life.

- Positive adaption of Christ into Hindu values and methods is not attempted.
- Occasional study and fellowship gatherings are culturally neutral, appearing neither "Christian" nor "Hindu."
- Hindu festivals are celebrated.
- Hindu temples are visited for family-related ceremonies.
- Full-time workers funded from abroad are not involved.
- Does it exist? At least one fledging effort to develop ministry in H4.

**H5 Hindus who come to Christ maintain sociological identity as Hindus within birth-community.**

- Seek to develop Hindu patterns of discipleship in personal devotion, corporate worship, evangelism, etc., and to define their faith in contextual terms (contextual Indian theology).
- Often identify themselves as "*bhaktas*" (devotees) of Christ or *Jesus-bhaktas*-- Christian in India is a sociological term more than a theological tag.
- Initially viewed with skepticism by Hindus, due to traditional associations of Christ with radical cultural and community change.
- Minimal music from existing Christian traditions, perhaps except Christian music in traditional Indian styles.
- Corporate expressions of discipleship are often rare or non-existent due to practical considerations; but desire to follow biblical patterns of a corporate faith expression.
- Corporate development may be mono-caste for a time, but for practical rather than ideological reasons.
- Socially acceptable means of inter-caste fellowship will be developed. (No know current or historic case of Christ-followers has upheld total caste exclusiveness in teaching or practice).
- Hindu festivals are celebrated, sometimes modified.
- Hindu temples are sometimes reluctantly visited for family-related ceremonies.
- Indigenous funding is deemed essential.
- Does it exist? Small stirrings toward H5.

**H6 Hindus in Christ remain in birth communities as Hindus.**

- Individualized discipleship to Jesus is without corporate expression, except perhaps attendance at occasional traditional Christian gatherings.
- Not secret, but known as Jesus-followers in their Hindu social circles.
- Hindu festivals are celebrated.
- Hindu temples are visited.
- The 'churchless Christians' -- a misnomer since they are not 'Christians' but Hindu disciples of Christ.
- Does it exist? A significant number in Tamil Nadu in South India. Smaller numbers elsewhere in India.

**H7 Hindus in Christ remain in birth communities.**

- Keep devotion to Jesus secret.
- Appear to participate fully in Hindu religious activity, but address all prayers to Christ or God through Christ.
- Does it exist? Some such people have always existed, but they are hard to identify and harder still to quantify (Richard, 2004, pp. 317-320).

## Appendix D

Excerpts from Todd Johnson's article on "Contextualization: a New-Old Idea" where he describes the pioneering and often radical views of Jesuit missionary Roberto de Nobili.

Unfortunately, the Reformation had little impact in the realm of missions; only a handful of Protestant missionaries went out in the 250 years following Luther's courageous act. The famous Baptist historian, Kenneth Scott Latourette, summarized the situation succinctly: "Between 1500 and 1750 the geographic spread of Christianity was mainly through Roman Catholics" (1953:924). This expansion was greatly facilitated through the founding of the Jesuits in 1534. In fact, the English word "mission," which is technically used today to mean foreign missions, actually originated from the fourth vow of the Jesuits (Johnson, 1987, p. 2).

From the inception of the Jesuits, cross-cultural outreach had a special place in the lives of its members. The next 200 years of mission history was to a large degree written by them. Bishop Stephen Neill writes, "Within the next hundred years Jesuits were to lay their bones in almost every country of the known world and on the shores of almost every sea" (1964:148). The great missionaries of the Church before Carey, Judson and Taylor were Jesuits like Xavier, Valignano, Ricci and Nobili. These early Jesuits often possessed amazing cross-cultural sensitivities, and this was especially true of Roberto de Nobili (Johnson, 1987, p. 2).

In a few weeks discovered the shocking truth: the Hindus had been watching the foreigners carefully to determine what caste they were from, and after repeatedly observing them eat meat and associate with low-caste people had labeled them "*Parangi*" or "those who have horses and guns," a term referring to low caste. The Portuguese, including the Jesuits, were happy to wear this label since they believed it to merely be a Tamil translation of the word "Portuguese." The Jesuits had made a further mistake by referring to their religion as that of the "*Parangi*." To the average Hindu this could mean only one thing: to become a Christian you had to renounce caste and eat meat. For this reason there were no caste Hindu converts in Madurai (Johnson, 1987, p. 2).

Nobili also noticed that several groups of Hindu men lived austere and harsh lives in devotion to their gods. They were from all castes but were highly respected by everyone because they had renounced their lives and practiced simplicity. These were called the *sannyasis*. After some time, Nobili decided to seek to become a *sannyasi* to reach all who could not bring themselves to forsake caste (Johnson, 1987, p. 3).

Nobili's innate courtesy and kindness made them feel at home. He spoke well, without any mixture of Portuguese, and he said things worth hearing. He listened too with close interest to what they had to say. When they narrated to him their *Puranic* stories he would never brush them aside with a contemptuous "Nonsense"... He was struck by their deep sense of religion. With them religion was not a cloak which they only occasionally put on. It was ingrained in their very life, in their thoughts, in their words and in every action (Johnson, 1987, p. 3).

Nobili's royal Italian heritage allowed him to present himself as a Roman "raja," a member of a ruling caste that Indians could understand....Nobili was no longer associated in Indian minds with a polluting *Parangi*. He continued scrupulously to observe the rules of the Raja caste. For a time nothing happened. Then men of the three highest castes--the best educated Madurai--began to come and speak to Nobili: at first only one or two, at rare intervals, then in groups. ... Thus Nobili entered a whole new perspective from which

he began to see India from the inside out. He soon became aware of the fact that his raja status separated him from the Brahmins whom he most wanted to reach. Another step would be necessary for him to get close to the Brahmins, and for this he had to seek the advice of Hindus. He returned to his desire to live the life of a *sannyasi*. He remembered that the *sannyasis* he admired were respected by all castes. Even as a raja, if Nobili forsook all and became a *sannyasi*, he would be able to share truth with Brahmins.... He therefore put on the garb of a Hindu *sannyasi*, the ochre-colored robe, the wooden slippers, the sandalwood paste on his forehead, in hand the staff and water jug customary among Hindu ascetics. He built a little hut for himself and lived there in utter seclusion, avoiding the company of Fernandes, the Feringhee missionary, and refusing to have anything to do with his Christians. He avoided eating meat and drinking alcohol, and secured the services of a Brahmin servant and cook. This fact made it clear to those who watched him that he was not an outcaste or pariah but a man of superior caste (Johnson, 1987, pp. 3-4).

As a *sannyasi* Nobili was expected to study hard and teach others the ways to the truth. Since he deeply desired to know the Hindu religion, this was precisely the break Nobili was looking for, and his disciplined study began to bear fruit.

The Father speaks the purest Tamil and pronounces it so well that even the most fastidious Brahmin scholars cannot improve on his diction. He has already read many books, and learned by heart the essential passages of their laws as well as many verses of their most famous poets, who are held among them in great honor. Many are the hymns he has learned by heart, and he sings them with such perfection and grace that all listen to him with pleasure and unconcealed admiration

A formidable obstacle still prevented Nobili from really understanding the Hindu mind. Most of the ancient texts were in Sanskrit, and it was forbidden for any non-Brahmin to study Sanskrit. Even as a *sannyasi*, Nobili was barred from possessing the key that would unlock the Hindu scriptures. By providence, Nobili found a scholar who would teach him Sanskrit, and even at the risk of his life this scholar gave Nobili a copy of the Vedas (Johnson, 1987, p. 4).

The more Nobili learned from the Vedas, the more he debated with Hindus, often using the very strengths of Hinduism to lead them to the cross. He also adapted the teachings of the church fathers and Western philosophers to give Hindus keys to some foundational propositions on which Christianity stood. And yet for all the debates he held and all the booklets he wrote, it was primarily his love and gentle spirit that touched the hearts of his hearers.

He was committed to spreading the Catholic faith, not a system of European philosophy. Nevertheless, to preserve the faith intact, it would be necessary to retain certain basic apprehensions (for example about the nature of divine love and of the soul) not normally perceived in India and, indeed, to communicate them. They comparatively easy task of becoming in all ways India was not open to Nobili. He must communicate those basic apprehensions not only, or even chiefly, by verbal arguments, but, under God, by a good life, for Indians expected of a guru not so much information as transformation of character. Grace in him must act out the truth of his apprehensions. Between Rome and Madurai he himself must become a bridge of love (Johnson, 1987, p. 5).

Nobili contextualized the gospel in three major ways:

1. He took on an identity that was genuine and one which the Indians could understand and respect. He placed himself within the caste system where he could gain a hearing.

2. He studied the religion of the people he was trying to reach and used his understanding of Hinduism to enhance his presentation of the gospel.

3. He did not alienate his converts from the church at large. He never spoke evil of the *Parangis* but rather allowed his converts to worship in the way that was natural to them and then made them understand that the *Parangis* were their brothers and sisters (Johnson, 1987, p. 8).

Nobili was by no means perfect in his contextualization. He used Latin for his first Easter mass, and some of his services differed little from those he had experienced in his native Italy. On the other hand, Nobili always seemed to be looking for a way in which Hindus, especially those from high castes, would be comfortable with the gospel and able to express their Christianity in the context of their culture. By devoting his life to this pursuit, this Italian Jesuit brought more advances to the Catholic church's understanding of what the indigenous church in India should look like than any other before or perhaps after him. He was indeed an incarnational missionary in the fullest sense (Johnson, 1987, p. 9).

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