

Towards Contextualization from Within: Some Tools and Culture Themes

Introduction

It has been more than three decades since gospel and culture issues, now technically known as 'contextualization,' became a major concern for Two-Thirds World churches. The Willowbank Consultation on Gospel and Culture held in Bermuda in 1978 acknowledged that human beings are all creatures of their culture, and that everything we think, say and do is conditioned by it.¹ This means that we can not, strictly speaking, view the gospel as unconditioned by history and the cultures in which it had encrypted itself. There is no such thing as a 'pure gospel', if by this we mean that there is a free-floating Word somewhere which is not somehow incarnated in a human culture and language.

That the Word became flesh means that like Jesus, the gospel goes through a process of inculturation in particular cultures. This is what the Jew-Gentile social crisis of the first century church was about. All those narratives in the book of Acts regarding what to do with the Gentile churches, all those polemics in Galatians and Philippians against Judaizers, all those questions regarding food offered to idols and other such cultural issues, and that grand treatise in Romans about justification by faith and not by works of the law – all these are struggles of the early churches to understand the meaning of the cross in cultures other than that of the Jews. Then as now, the gospel was in search of new wineskins. The new wine brought by the person and work of Jesus could no longer be contained within the old Jewish wineskins. It had to break out, find new jars of clay in which the treasures of the gospel, hidden through the ages, could be revealed and sniffed as a new scent, a new fragrance among those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

Since the gospel broke out of its Jewish wineskins, contextualization had been happening, whether consciously or unconsciously. Both the sending culture and the recipient culture are participants in this process. The effort of translating Scripture and preaching it in the indigenous languages of receiving churches is by itself an attempt to make the Word at home in another context. A people's appropriation of this received message is likewise already an attempt to give it sense within the meaning system of the local culture. However imperfectly, there is a mutual adjustment, a mutual accommodation that is taking place.

This is so even even in the case of almost four centuries of Spanish Catholicism in this country. Those of us who are Protestants tend to dismiss the impact of Iberian Christianity on our culture. Quite rightly, we see it occurring on the level of surface structures -- a mere exchange of statues, for instance, where wooden images of dark-skinned anitos are replaced by plaster saints with Caucasian features. These are changes that have been mostly on the level of what anthropologists call 'surface structures,' artifacts of the culture whose appearances have changed but whose underlying worldview or meaning system remains the same.

Yet through time, it is also worth noting that the symbolic forms by which Spanish Christianity had expressed its faith -- like the Pasyon -- also became what the historian Reynaldo Ileto calls 'a grammar of dissent' for the restive masses that bore the brunt of resistance against Spain and, later, the American occupation of the country.² These were mostly members of millenarian movements round Mount Banahaw who sourced their piety and revolutionary inspiration from the teachings of Hermano Pule, a spiritual leader who, according to one account, had read the Bible while he was a sacristan doing service for a priest. ³ Whatever else we may want to make out of this, it is clear that some kind of cultural appropriation, some process that is now described as a 'theft of symbol,' was taking place.

This appropriation of the passion of Christ as a paradigm of the suffering masses may be a process similar to the way Jesus was presented by an anonymous group of Jewish believers who fled from Jerusalem and preached to Greeks for the first time. The title they used was not Messiah or the 'Anointed' or 'smeared one', which culturally was senseless to their audience of Antiochan Gentiles, but Kyrios or 'Lord,' which was used by devotees of East Mediterranean religions to refer to their cult divinities. It was, according to the missiologist and historian Andrew Walls, a daring piece of cross-cultural transaction. It opened the way to a truly Hellenistic understanding of Jesus. 4

The history of Christianity since then has been a story of peoples appropriating for themselves the manifold wisdom of God as revealed through the peculiarities of their customs and traditions. The themes surfaced by the western churches have for a time dominated the discourse on what the gospel is about. The rise of liberation theology, African native cults, millenarian movements, various kinds of primal and eastern religions, resurgent fundamentalisms and other such kinds of regional spiritualities has challenged and expanded the terms and parameters of the discourse. The shift of Christianity's center from its western homelands to the pluralistic environments of nonwestern cultures has occasioned critical reflections as well as new appropriations of what the gospel is about.

This brings me to the main concern of this paper, which is to attempt an answer to the question, 'How, precisely, do we contextualize?' I would like to think that we are now past the reactive phase, past taking to task the old western missionary movement and its imperialisms. We are at a stage where our resources as a church are enough to move us to a constructive phase. So then, how do we preach the gospel in such a way that it truly dwells among our people?

For a starter, let me suggest some tools for framing our local discourse.

Communicating in context: Some Tools

The late Virgilio Enriquez, speaking of cross-cultural psychology, once made a distinction between indigenization from without and indigenization from within. This distinction seems to me helpful when we are trying to ‘contextualize’ or ‘inculturate’ concepts from a Christianity that had been processed and articulated elsewhere.

Usually, when we speak of ‘contextualization,’ we mean ‘Christianity in local dress’ or some such metaphor, assuming that it is simply a matter of changing clothes. Nagpapalit lang ng damit. This implies an ‘outer part,’ which is changeable and purely formal, and an ‘inner part’ which is the ‘essence’ or the substance, which is quite fixed and unchanging. This is a habit of thought characteristic of all Greek-based thinking, which divides reality between an abstract ‘essence’ and a concrete ‘form.’

This is behind the process I call ‘contextualization from without,’ where a fixed gospel formulated from the outside is translated and reinterpreted into local context. This is mere adaptation. We translate gospel tracts and books, substitute rice for bread in communion, or use folk tunes for hymns, but do not think that the ‘gospel’ or our message itself may need changing.

Now it is true that there is a universality to the gospel of Christ. That ‘Jesus came and died and was buried and rose again and will one day come again to judge the living and the dead’ is a fairly universal statement of what the gospel is about. But this is of no use when speaking to people with centuries of Christian tradition, or those who are at least aware of this outline for having observed Christendom celebrate Christmas, Holy Week and Easter. For this universal gospel to make sense in a specific context, it needs to ‘come down’ as it were, become ‘flesh’ for a people.

Communication theory talks about a ladder of abstraction. There are levels of abstraction to the way we talk.

This tells us that the more general our statements, the more abstract they become. Conversely, the more specific our message, the more concrete it becomes.

This means that for the gospel to make sense in a given context, we need to go down the ladder of abstraction. The meaning of the gospel needs to be articulated in a culture-specific way to specific peoples. This is why we talk about 'people groups.' Our message, and not just our methodologies, must have culture-fit. We need specific texts that will engage the people in their context. This is what I mean by contextualization from within.

So how does this work ?

First, we look at a culture's system of meaning. This is usually embedded in language. Since Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf, we have been made aware that language is not just an instrument for expressing ideas. It shapes that very world of ideas. "The limits of my language are the limits of my world," says Langer.⁵ We see only what has been labeled for us.

The presence or absence of words in a culture already tells us what is important in that culture. We have no indigenous word for 'sin' for instance. The most that the Spanish missionaries could come up with was the word 'sala,' which literally means 'off the mark.' While this does carry one theological meaning of the word, which is 'missing the mark,' it is the most superficial. Centuries of usage does not seem to have lent seriousness to the word, like the sense that we have offended a righteous God whose law has been transgressed. We use the word casually, as with a friend who has been remiss in fulfilling some minor rituals of friendship: "Hoy, may kasalanan ka sa akin." Translated in English, this means "Hey, you have sinned

against me.” The English word ‘sin’ is just never used in this casual way. But in our language, *kasalanan* may mean any range of casual meanings, from ‘fault’ to ‘infraction’ to ‘mischief.’ *Nalihis lang ng landas*.

What this tells us is that we are dealing with a culture that has yet to have a sense of sin as transgression of an absolute moral law, of hard and fast rules that source their authority in a God whose character does not change and whose anger when roused can not be negotiated. There is about us a certain softness about the ‘law,’ a lack of hardness which is probably due to the fact that in our folklore, the high god is perceived as good but tolerant and so can be conveniently ignored. A Visayan story tells of Bathala getting increasingly depressed but not wrathful at the sight of humankind debasing themselves with all kinds of wickedness.⁶ This is a stark contrast to the picture of God in Puritan literature, as with Jonathan Edwards’ classic sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

Anger, it seems, is an emotion reserved to the *anitos* or lesser spirits, who can get spiteful or capricious. These, however, can be bribed or appeased by offerings. There is a sense of reciprocity in these exchanges. The *anitos* get the offerings due them, and the people wangle some kind of protection or at least non-disturbance from them. As with our relations with the spirit world, we get the sense that everything can be negotiated, including traffic rules and governance.

As has been shown, language is a window to a people’s worldview. It can tell us a great deal about what a culture is about. This means that in doing analysis, we should pay careful attention to the words, their frequency or paucity in a given culture. This can give us a sense of the culture themes, the great concepts and belief systems that animate a culture and need addressing if we are to truly engage its deeper structures.

To contextualize from within means that we search for texts that will engage such culture themes. The message must be framed within the meaning system of the culture-bearers. The perspective is emic and not etic, from the perspective of those inside the culture and not those from the outside of the culture. We source our message from the categories by which the culture itself makes sense of the world.

This is especially important in a culture that makes a sharp distinction between the loob and the labas. We do not make a distinction between public and private; we have no indigenous word for privacy. We do not know the concept. But we draw a line when behaving towards those considered taga-loob and those who are taga-labas. Propriety demands that we treat the ibang tao with great hospitality and respect; our primary mode of behaving towards them is formal and accommodative. Those who are no longer outsiders, who are di ibang tao, we treat informally and we become confrontative. The loob is the place where the inmost being resides. Any call for a decision for Christ whose terms are outside this loob consigns itself to being merely a social invitation. What we get in response is not conversion but accommodation. The dynamic at work is the highly socialized instinct of a people whose passion for connectedness will make them adapt but not really convert.

This brings me to another key concept that is useful in contextualizing the gospel in this culture. This is to make a distinction between core values or core traits and surface values or traits. Core values are those that belong to the deep structures, the root metaphors that define a people and describe a culture and rarely change through time. The sense of connectedness, of group-centeredness, is a Filipino core value. It does not change through time or geography. Professionals in New York or domestic helpers in Hongkong respond to the same pull of communal life, whether a fiesta at times Square or a Sunday outing at Statue Square.

Surface values are usually maladaptions, surface traits acquired as coping mechanisms, survival techniques learned through centuries of colonial experience,

like the kanya-kanya syndrome or the so-called talangka mentality. We should be careful not to account to culture what are really accidents of history or a product of social arrangements. These, through time, tend to disappear once the social system returns to more normal function.

The core values and traits frame our meaning system. It is within this infraculture that the gospel has to make sense.

Contextual communication then is developing a message and communicating it within the thought forms of a culture. It is not merely adapting for the consumption of local people a formulation that has served its uses elsewhere. It is finding within both the Scripture as text and culture as context a 'gospel' that is fit for the needs of a specific people.

The following is an example of how this process of contextualization from within actually works.

Contextualization from Within: Some Core Themes

The book of Acts gives us examples of how Paul contextualized the gospel according to the conceptual framework of his hearers. To the Jews in Pisidian Antioch he spoke of Jesus as the son of David, the Messiah long promised to their ancestors. To the pagans at Lystra, he brought good news of the living God who made heaven and earth, and gives rain and fruitful seasons, satisfying their hearts with food and gladness. To the sophisticated Athenians, he spoke of the unknown God who does not live in shrines made by hands, but is so near that "in him we live and move and have our being" as their poets say.⁷ Paul did not have a highly generalized, generic gospel that he took from culture to culture. Instead, he identified themes that were significant to the culture and crafted a message of hope that connected with his hearers.

What is the good news to Filipinos ? What is that which to us would be really good news if only someone listened to us long enough to be able to tell us what we need to hear ?

Let me cite just one or two core themes.

The tagapamagitan

Deep in the culture is the concept of the tagapamagitan, the one who stands in our place and pleads for us if we are in need of a champion, or someone who delicately sets forth our case when negotiating, when something needs to be fixed, or when we are in need of some favor from the powers. We use the tagapamagitan for healing ruptures in relationships, for advancing our cause in courtship, or for expressing feelings that are sensitive and best sent indirectly.

Jesus is like this, a reconciling God who makes peace with his blood and breaks down the dividing wall of hostility between us and those who have somehow been estranged from us. His blood is better than the blood of bulls and goats, or the entrails of chickens and pigs, for it is able to appease, not just the spirits, but the high god whose displeasure has made him distant from his own creation.

He is the go-between God, the one who is able to mediate the power and presence of God. This needs to be stressed in the light of the sense that the gods are distant and inaccessible. There is a deep longing in the culture for the gods to be present, even if only in the bullul or in the statues of numerous saints. It is unfortunate that when Protestants refer to 1 Timothy 2:5, the emphasis is on the one mediator, rather than there is one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all and wants all to be saved.

Likewise, the image in Hebrews of Jesus as a great high priest is important to a culture that turns to Mary precisely because she is human, an empathetic woman who understands us all and can well represent us to the Godhead. This man, we are told, is “not unable to sympathize with human weakness.” He is just like us, and yet by his death has broken through the curtain so that we may, with confidence, draw near to the throne of grace. 8

The God of Abraham

A core theme in our culture is the sense of connectedness, of being part of an intricate network of relationships. The metaphor used to describe this is the ‘multiple fried eggs.’ If you fry many eggs in one large pan, the whites are seamlessly connected to each other. While there are individual yolks, you don’t know where one egg begins and where it ends. This, they say, is the Filipino sense of self. It is always connected, always part of a larger sakop. It is this that gets roused when, in rare moments of solidarity, Filipinos stand together to bring down a dictatorship or a corrupt presidency.

This deep sense of interconnectedness extends to maintaining relationships with the ancestral dead. The dead are separated only by a curtain of invisibility. Otherwise, they continue to be part of human society.

The depth of this is seen in the profusion of ancient funerary rites, art objects, and other artifacts expressive of deep reverence for the dead and their continuing importance to the living. The almost baroque rituals connected to Todos los Santos, and the extended time of mourning signified by pasiyam, padasal, babang luksa and other such commemorative markers, speak of a people whose relational sense is unbroken by death and remains as a basis for the continuing claims of the dead upon the living.

Many of the festivities of upland communities are meant for their ancestral heroes, like Kabigat and Balitok among the Ikalahan. In these communities, the canao is, at its base, not so much a religious as a social rite, a way of affirming ties with the ancestral spirits who are invited to participate in the drinking, feasting and dancing. It is also, as Dr. Delbert Rice points out, a way of identifying who belongs to the community. It is a sign and a seal of the people's sense of identity together as a community.⁹

This sense of connectedness also explains the anxiety and concern even of Protestant converts in the Cordilleras that their dead should have a burial blanket that identifies them with the clan to which they belong. The practice serves as locus of identity, of who they are and what they shall be in the afterlife. To be without a blanket is to wander about like an outcast, not able to belong anywhere.

There is much soundness behind the proposition that our indigenous religion really ought to be called anitismo rather than animism.¹⁰ For it is not, technically speaking, preoccupied with the worship of spiritual life forces, but with the maintenance of harmonious ties with our ancestor anitos and all other spirit beings.

To a culture like this, it makes sense to talk of being surrounded by a 'great cloud of witnesses,' this assembly of great spirits who watch over us and wish us to win the race that is set before us. The Christian faith is continuous with the faith of our ancestral heroes, and its God is as much the god of our anitos as he was the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob. To other cultures, this formulaic introduction to God's self-disclosure may seem like a minor Jewish literary convention. But to us it is a major text, emphasizing the sense of continuity, of God's generational presence across the divide that separates the living from the dead.

Unfortunately, much of our evangelism is centered on the ruptures that must occur as proof of the genuineness of our conversion. While there are certainly elements in

the Christian faith that will necessarily disrupt cultures, the vast part of it is continuous with the primitive revelation that we find in all religions.

Our people's sensing that we are not alone, that we are part of a great community that stretches back through many generations, darkly prefigures the biblical idea of a 'communion of saints.' Our tribal cultures may know more of what this means than those of us who have been initiated into a religion that assumes we are all atomized individuals who live entirely in the present, without any notion that our lives have some connection to an invisible society of those who have gone before.

Authenticity as Context

Framing a message within the conceptual world of our hearers is one part of communicating in context. The other part is framing the message within a context of unity and authenticity.

The Word has to have a Body, a community that serves as a sign to the world that there is a new order of things. Jesus' prayer in John 17 ties the unity of believers to the plausibility of their witness. He prays that they may all be one, so that the world may believe that the Father has sent him. Francis Schaeffer calls this the 'final apologetic.'

The science of communication tells us that in a communication situation that involves people of the same culture, only 30 % of the communicating that is happening is mediated by words. Seventy percent is non-verbal. And when what is being said conflicts with what is being done, when the verbal is not consistent with the non-verbals, people tend to believe the non-verbal.

What this tells us is that what we manage to say is not as important as what people sense and see. Proclamation has to be backed up by authentic witness. Word and

deed, proclamation and presence must go together. Our story makes sense only within a visible context of authentic community.

This, to me, is what contextualization is all about. It pays attention to the entire context of what happens when we communicate. It wrestles with both the intellectual and ethical content of the gospel that we proclaim, even as it engages the cultural and social context of the people to whom we are sent.

Concluding Remarks

We live in a time when our people suffer a great deal of psychological discomposure. As we look at the prosperity of our neighbors in the region we feel a loss of self-esteem. We feel kulelat. Some of us get into fits of rage and ill temper – nawawalan ng bait, we call it. A lot of people are under great emotional and mental stress besides the usual financial distress. We are sick as a people.

In the old days, according to the historian Zeus Salazar, sickness was seen as caused by the kaluluwa wandering away from the body. As a way of healing, the katalonan would place herbal leaves on the forehead and pray and call on the kaluluwa to hover around and sit on the head since it is the person's seat of consciousness. The soul has to return for the person to recover and regain strength.

This concept of the soul returning is captured in the idea of pagbabalik-loob, the return to one's inmost being. It carries connotations of having lost one's way, of having made a wrong turn that caused us to wander away like a lost soul – galang kaluluwa, as they say.

It is possible that we are sick as a nation because we have lost our soul, we have forgotten who we are and have lost our way by listening too much to voices from the outside. We define ourselves by what they tell us.

But it is possible to find our way home again. We can return to the loob, to that place where we meet ourselves and meet with Christ. Magbalik-loob is our culture's equivalent of calling people to repentance. It is a much better paradigm and nearer to the biblical idea than the word the Spanish missionaries used, pagsisisi, which at best means 'regret' in Tagalog.

The loob is the place where we return for healing and the recovery of identity. It is where genuine conversion takes place, the stage upon which our own Damascus experience as a people happens. It is there that we truly turn from idols to the living God.

Magbalik-loob tayo, mga kapatid.

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Notes

1. John RW Stott, "Twenty Years after Lausanne: Some Personal Reflections," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol.19, No.2, April 1995, p.50.
2. See Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution, Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, Quezon City, 1979.
3. My informant for this is my friend, Sonia Zaide, from documents inherited from her father, the famous historian Gregorio F. Zaide.
4. Adrew F. Walls, "Old Athens and New Jerusalem: Some Signposts for Christian Scholarship in the Early History of Mission Studies," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Vol.21 No.4, October 1997, p.146.
5. Suzanne Langer, as quoted by Don F. Faule and Dennis C. Alexander, *Communication and Social Behavior: A Symbolic Interactive Perspective*, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Illinois, 1978, p.16.
6. Sylvia Palugod, *Filipino Religious Consciousness, Track 2 Report on the research, Conversion to Protestant Christianity Under Early American Rule, Vol.III, 1997-1998*, p.53.
7. See the various preaching contexts of Acts 13:13ff.; 14:8-18; 17:16ff.
8. Hebrews 4:14-16
9. Interview with Dr. Delbert Rice, Appendix D of the research Report, *Conversion to Protestant Christianity Under Early American Rule, Vol.II, 1996-1997*, pp.15-16.

10. Dr. Prospero Covar, "Filipino Religious Consciousness as Glimpsed from Studies of Religious Movements," Appendix D of the Report on the research, Conversion to Protestant Christianity Under Early American Rule, Vol.1, 1995-1996, pp.33-34.