

Christianity Between Adapting to Culture and Transforming It

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ABSTRACT: The religious beliefs and convictions of a person are fundamental components of life, serving as the foundation for the values they develop and contribute to society. Christianity has had a missionary focus from its beginnings, and its followers have tried to take the values of their faith to different places and cultures. Inevitably, these values came into competition or even conflict with the cultures in the lands where the Gospel message was being carried. From the moment this interaction took place, it was necessary to establish clearly which values were non-negotiable and which were those aspects of form that could be adapted from one culture to another. This process is called contextualization, and this article aims to explore this concept within Christianity in order to see how it can help to transmit values or alter them.

KEYWORDS: Christianity, religion, cultural transformation, contextualization

Introduction

Consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally, the practice of theology is invariably subject to the process of contextualization. This means that the way man interprets the truth of the Eternal Word (Rotaru 2005, 295-324) is influenced by the cultural context in which the interpretation takes place. The challenge for the theologian is to remain faithful to the principle of Sola Scriptura, without this entailing the transformation of all men into Jews (those to whom Scripture has been revealed), so that biblical truth is as authentic and prescriptive as it was in the first century.

This article will provide a brief overview of the contextualization process and how it should be viewed and adopted by evangelical churches in Romania. Following this, the advantages and dangers of contextualization will be briefly presented so that a correct approach to this process can be adopted, an approach through which biblical truth can shine at its true value.

The premises of contextualization

As in the past, today, the process of contextualization is as necessary as it is challenging. What does contextualization actually mean? Where should it be applied? And last but not least, what is the maximum acceptable limit of contextualization? In analyzing this process, we will bear in mind what the apostle Paul said to the Corinthian Church: "For though I am a slave to all, I have made myself a servant of all, that I might win the many. With the Jews, I made myself a Jew, that I might win the Jews; with those who are under the law, I made myself as though I were under the law (at least I am not under the law), that I might win those who are under the law; with those who are without the law, I made myself as though I were without the law (at least I am not without a law of God, but am under the law of Christ), that I might win the lawless. I was weak with the weak, that I might win the weak. I made myself all things, that I might save some of them anyway. I do all things for the gospel, that I may share in it" (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

It follows that this process of contextualization has nothing to do with trying to make people comfortable with Christian truth and faith, but with the burning desire of God's servants to help all people come to know the true God of this universe and, in this way, come to be saved.

The need for contextualization

While this topic has been explored by many in the past, it is crucial to reconsider it in the present context of Christianity. This examination will help us understand how the eternal Word of God can touch the hearts of people who have become alienated from Him in today's society. This endeavor is not a simple one because people, in general, have a great reluctance to what is outside their acceptability, and even more so when it comes to what is acceptable as a norm of faith. At the same time, this endeavor is all the more necessary as many believers proclaim a return to what was in the early church, casting a fairy halo over those times and urgency about returning to those times (Rotaru 2012a, 564).

This problem of contextualization starts from the way in which the Lord Jesus Christ's involvement in human culture is described. In his well-known book *Christ and Culture*, Niebhuur (2001,1) has identified five possible situations: Christ against culture, Christ the Christ of culture, Christ above culture, Christ and culture in paradox, and Christ transforming culture. In each of these hypostases the believer, in the author's view, has a certain attitude towards culture, an attitude that materializes in different actions towards culture, by culture is meant everything that human society has produced as a result of its own set of adopted beliefs, the opposite of everything that is natural.

Those who embark on the process of contextualization are those who have adopted the last attitude described by Niebhuur, namely, Christ transforming culture. According to this approach, the culture reflects the fallenness of the world, and Christ redeems the culture, which can be improved by the Christians' contribution. This model is a conversionist model in which man needs God as a person and as an absolute spiritual resource (Niebuhr 2001, 190-191). In this way, Christ can descend into any culture, interact with any culture and transform any culture, and this is because in the whole process, man's salvation from his lost state in sin is sought, and at the end of human history all men will be brought under the reign of God and all cultures will be replaced by the Kingdom of God (Rotaru 2023, 62-79).

In his view, Kevin Vanhoozer states that "the theologian must witness to the Word of God in the contemporary world," and to do this "he must understand both the Word and the World"(Carson, Woodbridge, Jorj, 2006, 15). This shows that the theologian embarks on a hermeneutical process of both God's Word and a hermeneutical process of culture. At this point, it may be recalled that among David's mighty men of valor, who are mentioned in 1 Chronicles, there was a category that was skilled in understanding the times and the ways of the times. In that place in Scripture it is said that "Of the sons of Issachar, who were wise in the understanding of the times, and knew what Israel ought to do, two hundred captains and all their brethren were put under their commandment." (1 Chronicles 12:32) Thus, evangelical leaders in contemporary society should in no way be inferior to these chief captains of Israel of the tribe of Issachar, so that the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest news that people could ever receive, may penetrate deeply into the lives and thinking of people today, in whatever geographical territory they may be. So this process of contextualization is provoked by at least two situations, the evolution of human society and the involvement of believers in the mission of saving people all over the globe, and it is most evident in two areas of the Church's activity (Rotaru 2017, 57-76), Bible translation and evangelization of non-Christian peoples, but not only.

The contextualization process

The acceptance and practice of contextualization has nothing to do with the idea of making the person who comes into contact with the Gospel feel comfortable or with the idea that the Gospel must be in line with the values of contemporary society, but, as Phil Parshall states, "the communicator's aim was to maximize the impact of the Gospel on the receiving community" (Parshall 2008, 33) in other words, the aim is to speak "in the language" of the listener so that he or she understands what is being said. When describing how Jesus approached to speak to those with whom he interacted during his time as a human body on earth, the same author states that "this does not mean that Jesus presented a partial Gospel. Nor was the message impoverished in content or syncretistic. Christ adopted a strategy that was context-bound and responded to felt needs" (Parshall 2008, 33). Also, in the attitude of the Lord Jesus we see this concern that man should be confronted "on his own ground" so that his message might win the heart of the interlocutor and lead him to a relationship of obedience to the heavenly Father.

However, the inclination towards contextualization is a relatively recent development in Christian circles. This is evident when analyzing the work of missionaries after the 19th century, whose work shows the tendency to implement a European-type Christianity in all aspects of the believer's life. Another apprehension about contextualization came as a result of the excessive contextualization that liberal theologians adopted, which resulted in an excessive dilution of the Christian faith.

Quoting Robert Douglas, Malancea (2018, 189) offers the following definition of contextualization: "contextualization is the communication of the Gospel through words and deeds, with the aim of establishing new churches in such a way that the Gospel becomes highly significant for the local context, presenting Christianity as an institution that comes to meet their deepest needs and, by understanding their concept of the world and life, encourages them to follow Christ, remaining in their culture." From this definition, it is clear that the intention of contextualization is to help people follow Christ without abandoning their own culture. Throughout the process of contextualization those things that contradict the law of Christ will be abandoned (Rotaru 2015, 318-322). Speaking about this, Wright (2016, 178), in his book *God's Mission*, understanding the biblical metanarrative, states that "the task of every missionary worker is to expose false gods," which shows that there are profound things that belong to their culture that new converts must give up and this is in order to "lead people back to recognizing the one true God" (Wright 2016, 178) which God Himself imperiously requires. Those who adopt the process of contextualization in the field of mission, in the sense of Malancea (2018, 190-192) who quotes Professor Douglas, need to keep in mind several implications as follows.

First of all, contextualization involves a theological issue, so the missionary must be very well acquainted with both the doctrines of Christianity and the culture of the people where he is to carry these doctrines.

Second, the contextualization implies a spiritual issue that suggests that the Christian minister is called to accept a special degree of humility, self-denial, and an unwavering trust in the Holy Spirit, the One under whose authority he ministers and who will work in the lives of those who obey him.

Third, contextualization implies a good strategy that involves preserving the fundamental elements of the culture while shedding light on the sinful elements of the culture, elements that must be renounced.

Fourth, contextualization is a never-ending process, an implication that is particularly challenging because, due to the missionary's impatience, the natives may be forced to adopt certain components of their own culture or, due to the missionary's weakness, end up with syncretism, which would be totally inappropriate.

Fifth, contextualization supports a variety of models, each model coming with its advantages but also its limitations. This will challenge the missionary to determine which model is appropriate for the context in which he finds himself.

In conclusion, following the example of the Lord Jesus (Rotaru 2012b, 5), those who want to be involved in the field of mission should lean towards this process of contextualization so that the ministry they do is carried out to its fullest capacity and the God they serve is glorified to the fullest level through the fruits of their ministry. Of course, this must be done with great care and attention lest the result of the contextualization process be the opposite.

Contextualization results

The implementation of contextualization comes with some consequences that those who adopt it need to be aware of. These consequences can constitute some very important advantages in conveying the Gospel message, but they can also entail some obvious dangers for the lives of believers.

The benefits of contextualization

After 1970, many who are involved in mission work say that a contextualization approach is one of the most effective ways to take the Gospel into non-Christian lands. This method offers a number of advantages, which are described below.

In the first place, such an approach will help the natives to view the Christian faith with much less circumspection. Referring to this aspect, Professor Malancea (2018, 25) states that "by neglecting the criterion of contextualization, evangelization was understood by the natives rather as an imposition of a different culture and civilization than as the transmission of Good News." This is not surprising when one considers that missionaries usually arrived after the "conquering Christian armies" had come and conquered new territories for their country, thus missionaries were perceived as agents of imperialist power. In the same vein, Bevans argues that "due to the subtle or not-so-subtle mindset of colonialists and the narrowness of past theology and missionary vision, much of the richness of many local cultures has been ignored or oppressed" (Bevans 2002, 67) and it is quite obvious that such a mindset must be abandoned.

Second, contextualization can lead to less persecution because those who adhere to the "new faith" are in many ways no different from those who continue to practice the religion of the natives.

This can lead to a third advantage, namely 'anonymous' visibility with much stronger effects. This "anonymous" visibility has to do with the fact that new converts are no longer labeled as Christians, but are given a new title, knowing that in the Muslim world the mere name "Christian" creates a great deal of opposition. Addressing this kind of advantage, Parshall writes: "There are now many groups of Muslim Background Believers (MBB) in the Gaziville area. The total number of followers of Isa (the Muslim name for Jesus), easily passes five hundred, most of whom are adult males. This ministry continues and Muslims turn to Jesus" (Parshall 2008, 24). This after nearly 20 years of trying to do the mission the traditional way without any success. Which surely should lead to a pertinent examination of how evangelism is done.

A fourth advantage could be that fewer resources are needed to support a worker in such areas, and this is because they will have to make do with the resources available to other nationals, so from this point of view, there would no longer be material differences that could create real barriers between those who are supported and other nationals. Facilitating dialog could be another advantage. It would be much easier for a native

(especially a Muslim) to open up to a local believer than if the latter were identified with Christianity.

The dangers of contextualization

It is quite obvious that there is no ideal method that can be used in every place and that is why there is a need for openness and innovation in this area, while being very careful about the dangers that could be generated by contextualization.

All those who take up this question of contextualization point out that the greatest danger associated with this approach is Syncretism. By this, it means "a mixture of biblical and unbiblical principles, or even of things that are opposed to biblical principles; a mixture of revealed truth and error; a mixture of the works of God and the works of the evil one" (Malancea 2018, 192). This is a departure from Christian principles, which is totally unacceptable. At the same time, however, a clear demarcation has to be made between the principles of Christianity and its cultural aspects, which differ from one country to another, and this is because "For fear of syncretism, missionaries often view local culture with suspicion. Locals are encouraged to become like the missionary. But even this gives rise to syncretism." (Parshall 2008, 45). This is why it is very important to maintain a balance so that under no circumstances is the Gospel message diluted, nor the meaning of Christian concepts redefined in the process of contextualization, given new meanings. It is very important to know what meanings are put into these new concepts.

Another danger that Bevans points out is that "a theology that takes culture seriously can easily become a theology of culture" (Bevans 2002, 62), and then it is no longer the Word that prevails but culture that dictates hermeneutics. Another potential danger arises when the worker is expected to be self-supporting. In such cases, they may have less time for preaching than they would have had if they were externally supported, and the results could perhaps be poorer.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the following statements can be made about contextualization:

First of all, contextualization in the field of mission is not a recent invention, but it is the way both Jesus and the apostles saw fit to bring the Good News of reconciliation with God to the people, even if they did not define the method as contextualization. This was true both in Jesus' relationship with the Jews and in the apostles' relationship with the Jews and Gentiles.

Second, contextualization can be of great help when used wisely and in an attitude of dependence on the Spirit of God.

Thirdly, if there is not sufficient vigilance and firmness, syncretism can very easily lead to syncretism, which would be very dangerous and in total contradiction to the principles of the Word of God.

Last but not least, the process of contextualization is something that is constantly dynamic and will not end until the end of human history.

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