

Contextualizing Theology in Christian Mission and Evangelism: Opportunities and Risks

Adrian PICU

*PhD(c), University of Bucharest, Romania, Doctoral School of Religious and Intercultural Studies
adrian.picu@s.unibuc.ro*

Abstract: Theology represented both the text and the context of God's presence in human history, evangelization and mission being the two forms of manifestation of divine love, described in the already-not-yet paradigm, manifested towards the stranger near, who has alienated himself from Him, but also the stranger far away, who has not heard about Him. The contextualization was reflected in understanding the particular values of different cultures and being open to a dialogue that would allow culture to shape and challenge the understanding of what mission and evangelization mean. The home and the church are the places where the two begin, with Christian ministry expressing itself through the power of example, though not to the detriment of the family, which holds precedence over any social or religious commitment. Through a thorough analysis of the factors that determine the evangelistic process, this paper argues that, in addition to missionary zeal, there is also a need for a thorough theological, anthropological and psychological preparation of the ministers.

Keywords: Contextualization, Mission, Theology, Evangelism, Risks, Opportunities

Introduction

The transplantation of Western Christianity in different contexts and cultures imposed new forms of civilization, humanity and morality. However, this process has also exported a secularized culture with its ideological agendas and cultural relativism, generating tensions and conflicts, and engaging in proselytizing actions to gain influence and domination. Practical theology has identified new textual forms of manifestation of cultural contexts, taking up the challenge to interpret, interconnect and communicate, whereby individuals influence each other, helping to reformulate its strategies, taking a stand against the danger of conglomerating Christianity with the political, educational and entertainment influences presented by the misunderstood and promoted prosperity psychology of prosperity in many Christian environments. It has become clear that the issue extends beyond mere missionary zeal.

Defining contextualization

This paper opens with some clarifications regarding the definition of contextualizing theology. On the one hand, inductively, it is the application of an ecclesial doctrine to a particular circumstance, on the assumption that it defines a set of invariant values to be translated into different cultural contexts. On the other hand, deductively we have an obligation to bring the contexts of biblical writings and church tradition into interaction with the narrative of contemporary life, through a dialog that allows contemporary culture

to shape our understanding of the past, but also to be challenged by it (Ward, 2012, pp. 17-19). As Mudge and Poling (1987, p. 61) assert, "Theology must originate in and return to the locus of God's universal activity - the world. God in history, as co-constituted through human practice, is our primary text and context for doing theology."

The specific contextualization of Christian evangelism and mission is best observed in the ministry of Paul, whose preaching adapted to diverse cultural backgrounds and geographical areas. It can be seen throughout Acts how Paul is able to adapt his message to communicate with a variety of people: in Antioch, he spoke to Jews and Prozeelites who knew the scriptures (Acts 13:13-43); in Lystra, he addressed uneducated, polytheistic people (Acts 14: 6-16); in Athens, he argued with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (Acts 17:16-34); in Miletus, he conversed with the elders of the church (Acts 20:16-38); in Jerusalem, he defended his faith before a hostile Jewish audience (Acts 21:27-22:22); and in Caesarea, he addressed King Herod and Roman government officials (Acts 24-26). Timothy Keller concludes that there is no universal formulation of the Gospel, but its truths are discovered, argued and applied differently, depending on the interlocutors and the culture to which they belong (Keller, 2012, pp. 112-114).

Scholars have offered various perspectives on the nature of contextualization. David Wells believes that "contextualization is not merely a practical application of biblical doctrine, but a translation of that doctrine into a conceptuality that meshes with the reality of the social structures and life patterns dominant in our contemporary life" (Wells, 1984, p. 90). Similarly, Richard Lints asserts that it refers to "the way in which the expression of the biblical message is shaped in and through the native conceptuality of a given culture" (Lintz, 1991, p. 101). In academic discourse, the term contextualization has been assigned various technically meaningful forms such as translation, adaptation, praxis, indigenization to which distinct meanings have been given (Keller, 2012, p. 90), and as Moreau Scott Scott observes there is no consensus in academic debates on how these terms are defined, and we still use them in a synonymous relationship (Moreau, 2010, p. 172).

If we extend the meaning of the contextualization of theology in the direction of Christian mission and evangelism towards non-Christian populations, then the situations are more complex because there are tendencies of linguistic transformation and assimilation that are intended to influence its message positively or negatively. Stephen Bevans is of the opinion that, since words carry not only neutral meanings but also emotional and cultural connotations, the deep structures of a language are more than mere equivalences of vocabulary and grammar, which formal correspondence translation cannot explain accurately, the contextual situation being the vehicle that carries the message, aiming always to remain faithful to the original (Bevans, 2002, II/4).

Karl Barth sees a distinction between the process of evangelization and that of mission in that the former refers to the Gentiles within the Church, who need to be reconverted to a new beginning through re-Christianization and revocation, and the latter refers to the stranger from afar who needs to be re-Christianized through conversion, the mission at home being delimited from the mission far away by a geographical space. The theologian conceptualizes the evangelistic missionary act in the already-not-yet paradigm, managing to encompass both those who are already Christians and have drifted away from the Church, and also non-Christians who have not yet experienced the transforming power of the Gospel (Barth, 1957, pp.100-126).

Hans Margull reinforces the distinction between evangelization and Christian mission by emphasizing the time in which the action of proclaiming the Gospel takes place, on the one hand, the action taking place among pagans in a pre-Christian environment, and on the other hand, among those who have left the Church and live in a post-Christian environment (Margull, 1962, pp. 275-277f). Evangelization includes physical presence among people, dialogue, interpretation, ministry and proclamation (Geijbels, 1978, pp. 73-82) with the aim

of liberation, peace, justice and human development (Walsh, 1982, p. 92). Mission adopts the totality of actions for the liberation of man from his own enslavement, not even limited to "forsaking God" (Moltmann, 1977, p. 10). "Mission is the church sent into the world, to love, to serve, to preach, to teach, to heal, to liberate" (Bosch, 1991/2011).

Forms of contextualizing theology in Christian mission and evangelization

It is a challenge for contemporary Christian missiology to uncover the complex challenges of new alternative approaches to the witness and development of Christianity in different environments and cultures globally. In transplanting Christianity from Western settings to different contexts and cultures, it has been observed that along with the transfer of redemptive theology has come indigenous enculturation through the imposition of different forms of morality, humanity, and civilization (Pears, 2010, pp. 9-10). Robert Schreiter challenges the way in which the expansion of the Christian mission in pagan countries was understood and practiced, with Christianization often understood as the export of Western culture and civilization rather than the proclamation of the Gospel, depriving these peoples and cultures of their own past, with the particularities that shaped them (Schreiter, 2007, pp. 75-76).

An alternative to enculturation and indigenization is the process of contextualizing the Christian message through communicating, translating and interpreting the Gospel (Pears, 2010, p. 23), with Latin America, Africa and Asia advocating for a Gospel that does not force their populations to choose the ideological agendas with which it comes bundled (Shenk, 2014, p. 57). Robert J. Priest notes the tension generated by the cultural relativism of two distinct and conflicting conceptual worlds promoted by secular anthropology in which the Christian missionary is blamed for the hazard produced by the articulation and conceptualization of sin in indigenous cultures. The author cites in this vein anthropologist Peter Silverwood-Cope's unwarranted comment about South American missionaries thus: "The only two Indo-European concepts that have penetrated here are sin and laziness" (Priest, 1983, pp. 105,111).

Roger Keesing promotes a virulent reductionism in his anthropology textbook in his indictment of evangelizing Pacific and tropical South American communities, imputing to missionaries an attitude of ethnocentrism and overcoming cultural barriers with a message that affirms moral judgment, expressing his contempt in the following way: 'A shroud of Protestant gloom hangs heavy over many Pacific and tropical South American communities that once throbbed with life, laughter and song. Variola and the concept of sin are two of the most damaging things we have exported' (Keesing. 1981, p. 40).

The evangelist and the missionary are in danger of becoming judges, not witnesses, of the process of conversion, the evaluation of their own work having serious consequences in dividing people into saved and lost. Rejection of the preached message is perceived as outright rejection of salvation, regardless of the purity and truthfulness of one's own witness. The proclamation of the message should not be aimed at proselytizing for the recovery of lost ecclesiastical influence or the numerical growth of one's own denomination, but should rather mediate a transcendental and eschatological salvation that begins in this life and is fulfilled in eternity (Bosch, 1991/2011).

David Wells draws attention to the fact that theology has the task of finding conceptualizations indigenous to the context of our age that express what God meant to say in and through Scripture, given the bipolar recognition of divine revelation as having a point of origin and a point of arrival, on the one hand, belonging to a particular cultural context in which it was given, and on the other hand, being intended to be understood in our own context, without being captive to the culture in which it originated or the culture in which it arrives, its content and intention being transcultural. The danger of the degradation of

information arises because of the distortion of the decontextualization process by which we understand its transcultural meaning and the recontextualization by which its content is merged with contemporary social patterns and cognitive assumptions fundamental to the formation of doctrine (Wells, 1997, pp. 175-199).

Deviation is concerned with the process of doctrinal construction that manifests itself in the historical captivity of the meaning of the text by an ecclesial magisterium or the domination of an academic magisterium over the meaning and significance of Christian beliefs, by possessing the knowledge necessary for the revelation of this history (Carson, 1983, pp. 119-146), on the one hand, losing continuity with the historical Christian faith, and on the other hand, granting magisterial authority to theologians in the interpretation of Scripture. Out of this context theological aberrations were born in a myriad of mystical, literary, and rational forms, which sought keys to decipher the real meaning of Scripture, the most common being the textual redaction criticism and footnotes that appeared in various translations, the danger arising over time when assumptions became opposable to sacred texts (Wells, 1997, pp. 175-199).

A major problem faced by text editors was the fear of losing the clientele that subsidized the various projects, and there was a fear of offending on topics such as egalitarian views on the place of women in congregational ministry, genocide, the institution of slavery, polygamy, and the civil rights movements. The contextualization also brings new challenges to practical theology and Christian mission, which concerns a set of contemporary issues that are more ethical and have no counterpart in Scripture or in the history of Christian thought, which are raising societal interest in technology, artificial intelligence, and certain branches of medical science that concern contraception, in vitro fertilization, genetics, and euthanasia (Marshall, 2004, I).

Newbigin (1989, p. 185). argues that in the mission of evangelization, the fundamental element of a culture is language. Just as Islam claims that the only language in which the divine message can be heard is Arabic, so throughout history the Roman Catholic Church has held that its liturgy can only be celebrated in Latin. Not of the same opinion were some pioneer Greek missionaries of the Eastern tradition, such as Methodius and Cyril, who understood that the Pentecost is the biblical argument and guarantee of God's acceptance of all languages for the transmission of eternal truth, translating Scripture and the liturgy of the church into the Slavonic language. The author substantiates his claim by the example of contextualizing Ronald Wynne's message in the indigenous language of an isolated community in Africa, who for eight years taught them the language, penetrating deeply into their culture by opening bridges of dialogue, sharing Old Testament stories similar to their lives and experiences, and later telling them about Jesus resulted in a profound transformation of the community. This mode contrasts with preaching an individual religion that rejects and condemns traditional cultures and results in a superficial Christianity (Newbigin, 1989, pp. 188-189).

Contextualization applies not only to the text but also to the cultural context to which it is addressed. Kevin Vanhoozer identifying the emergence of new textual forms in postmodern society that need to be interpreted as they accompany the main message, with the focus falling on fashion, hairstyles, perfumes. He argues that "textuality is indeed one of the recurrent notions that distinguish the contemporary postmodern condition from the modern era. Today, everything—from dreams to drill—is considered to be text. Not only words, but the clothes we wear and the cars we drive are 'signs' within a system of signs. From the semiotic point of view, a Ford Escort signals one's social status differently from a Porsche" (Vanhoozer, 2005, p. 35).

Pluralism containing dogmatic forms of political correctness, in which concepts are relativized, is the philosophical current responsible for slowing down the spread of the Gospel by accepting tolerance for the diversity of cultures and religions, at a time when

New Age religion is taking hold through the revival of paganism and the emergence of religious syncretism. The emergence of egocentrism, with its two forms of ego-satisfaction, ascetic or hedonistic in nature, materialism and autophilia among evangelical Christians are forms of spiritual decline resulting from the dismantling and loss of values such as integrity, worth, kindness, courage, duty and honor (Carson, 2005, pp. 47-54).

Carson (2005, pp. 83-84) believes that contemporary forms of immigration, including cyber immigration, have led to the development of pluralism, the consequence of which has been globalization. As pluralism has generated a myriad of forms of rejection of Gospel concepts and truths, the opportunity has been created to articulate essential themes of missiology with a clarity that would not otherwise have been possible, eliminating many reductionist views of God. The modern possibilities of communication and interconnectedness, whereby people and nations influence one another, results in the construction of the perception of a global village, a reality that can help the Church to reformulate its evangelization strategies, Christian mission becoming an international activity, diminishing the infatuation and triumphalism of Western Christianity (Hiebert, 1991, pp. 263-281).

Schirrmacher (2006, p. 13) believes that when parents stop raising and educating their children in the spirit of God's Word, they stop influencing church, state and society. The Christian mission begins in the home and the church through the power of example, and Christian ministry is not allowed to develop at the expense of the family, which takes precedence over all other social or religious commitments. The phenomenon of globalization, best seen in cyberspace, is responsible for the shrinking space of established social groups by opening up new forms of global communication and information networks, with individuals becoming isolated and alienated from one another. The dereliction of the mandate to educate future generations may take on a religious or sociological aspect (Lash & Urry, 1994, pp. 54-59).

Emil Brunner draws attention to the fact that for the first time in history a culture is being deliberately and consciously constructed without spiritual presuppositions of a religious nature, technology replacing them with various forms of metaphysics (Brunner, 1948, p. 1-29). Technological society has destroyed the 'natural grouping' of the conjugal family, the place where members provide the context for the assimilation of life's perennial values, and in ethnic communities extending to the extended family and neighborhood. The migration to the urban area due to industrial development and the mobilities created have produced a gulf between the working life of the individual and the community, the motive for the transformations being defined by a psychology of prosperity, Christianity becoming a conglomerate with political, educational and entertainment influences, based on activities grounded in a doctrine derived from the moral norms of modern culture and technological ethics (Wells, 1997, pp. 175-199).

A less explored area of contextualization is given by the temperament and psychological profile of the person exposed to the message, some people being pragmatic, others intuitive, and others rational, the communicator having to accommodate these differences by taking into account language, vocabulary and emotional expressiveness (Keller, 2012, pp. 96,114). Bruce Nicholls invites reflection on the exaggerated contemporary contextualization in Christian congregations that pertains to the spirituality of the individual and leads to a form of cultural syncretism by replacing Christianity with welfare, with lifestyle marking more affinity with consumerism than with the reality of Scripture (Nicholls, 1979, p. 24).

Missionary Jones Stanley was the vector of the Christian movement after the Ashram model, a Hindu pattern of religious reflection and retreat for meditation, centered on the teachings of Jesus, which attracted many Buddhist and Hindu religious leaders by providing a context and environment friendly to their culture, always opening dialog by listening to

their spiritual experiences, and then encouraging Christians to explain their own experiences in Christ. The problems faced by missionaries in the more rigid and resistant to Christian witnessing multicultural religions of Asia, Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism, produce more complex and longer encounters due, on the one hand, to the rejection due to the indigenous cultural meaning networks of the indigenous, and, on the other hand, to their imitation of evangelistic missions (Sunquist, 2014, pp. 223-225).

The opportunities and risks of contextualization

In what follows we outline some of the opportunities and risks of contextualizing theology in relation to evangelism and Christian mission. One advantage of contextualization is reflected in understanding the particular values of different cultures and opening towards a dialogue that allows contemporary culture to shape and challenge our understanding of what mission and evangelism mean. It has been found that through contextualization, the Gospel reaches a greater diversity of people from different cultural backgrounds and geographical areas, its truths being discovered, argued and applied differently according to its interlocutors.

Through contextualization the doctrine is shaped and translated into concepts that combine the reality of contemporary life with social patterns and structures that serve to carry, influence and transform its message, in this context the danger of not always remaining faithful to it is removed. A major benefit is the construction of the evangelistic missionary act on the already-not-yet paradigm, which embraces both those at home, who have been alienated from the Gospel, and those far away, who have never known its transforming power, the mission being the Church sent into the world to love, serve, preach, teach, heal and liberate (Rotaru, 2017, pp. 57-76).

The contextualization of theology brought new alternative approaches to enculturation and indigenization, "transplanting" Christianity from the Western environment into different contexts and cultures imposing different forms of morality, humanity, and civilization, but equally this "Christianizing" action also exported Western secularized culture with its own ideological agendas and cultural relativism, generating tensions and conflicts, consequently reducing the Gospel to dogmas characterized by practices and lifestyles alien to its truths.

Without an adequate contextualization that expresses what God wanted to say in and through Scripture, the missionary or evangelist risks becoming a judge and not a witness of the process of conversion or, just as seriously, seeking to gain ecclesiastical influence and domination through proselytizing. Deviation concerns the process of doctrinal construction through the capture of the historical meaning of the text by an ecclesial magisterium or the domination of an academic magisterium of the meaning and significance of Christian beliefs, thus giving rise to theological aberrations in a myriad of mystical, literary and rational forms, the most common being editorial criticism and footnotes appearing as annotations to Scripture.

Publishers have been faced with the fear of losing "clientele" by offending on topics that arouse interest in society and demand a response from practical theologians. In this process there is the danger of degradation of "information" due to the action of decontextualization in order to understand its cross-cultural significance, as well as recontextualization by merging it with the social patterns and cognitive assumptions of contemporary society. As contextualization applies not only to the text but also to the cultural context to which it is addressed, other new 'textual' forms that need to be interpreted have been identified, such as clothing, cars, hairstyles, perfumes.

Pluralism with its dogmatic forms, the New Age religion (Rotaru, 2005, pp. 193-216) and the revival of paganism, the emergence of cultural and religious syncretism,

egocentrism with its ascetic and hedonistic forms, the loss of values among Christians are forms of spiritual decline, but also new challenges for missiology by articulating themes that were not previously articulated. The communication and interconnectedness through which individuals and nations influence each other is helping the church to reformulate its evangelization strategies, with the international work of Christian mission diminishing the infatuation and triumphalism of Western Christianity.

Conclusions

Contextualization also means a return to the values that have defined the family by importing them from cultures unaffected by secularism (Rotaru, 2006, pp. 251-266), from which Christianity has to learn what kindness, duty, integrity, loyalty and commitment mean. Post-modern society is no longer built on spiritual presuppositions of a religious nature but on technology, so the church needs to observe and take a stand against the danger of the conglomeration of Christianity due to political, educational and entertainment influences, but also against the misunderstood psychology of prosperity promoted by charismatic movements.

One area to be taken into account in the contextualization process is the psychology of the person, the communicator has to adapt to the rational, intuitive or pragmatic temperament of the interlocutor. A possible slippage here is the exaggerated interest in the person's well-being, marking a form of cultural syncretism contrary to Scripture.

The examples of the many missionaries who have adapted to the indigenous culture they have entered, penetrating deep into their fiber, opening bridges of dialogue by sharing their everyday stories, and providing a context and environment friendly to their culture are successful examples of the culturalization of the Gospel. In multi-cultural religions such as Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism, resistance to Christian witness is much greater, and thus, encounters are more complex and longer lasting, with rejection coming from indigenous cultural meaning networks and their imitation of Gospel missions (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 62-79). By contextualizing, missionaries and evangelists will remove the temptation to reproduce other successful mission models, taking into account the cultural specificity of each area.

This research highlights both the benefits and risks of contextualizing theology in contemporary society. While most Christian missions have sought to co-opt zealous missionaries to be sent to the various ethnic and cultural areas that have not been evangelized, a thorough analysis of the factors that determine the evangelistic process has revealed the need to train and prepare missionaries theologically, anthropologically and psychologically according to the Pauline model: "And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to reliable men who will be able to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

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