Revisiting Contextualization: Missiological Parallelism as an Alternative

A. K. Amberg and Michael T. Cooper

Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, January 2026

Abstract

When Shoki Coe introduced the term "contextualization" in 1972, his intent was to take the sociocultural realities of those receiving the gospel message more seriously. For many, however, the word has lost its original focus. Years of Western missionaries eager to defend locally developed theologies against heresy have attached a colonial connotation to the term, as some theologies were deemed "contextual," in juxtaposition to Western ideas. In contrast, missiologists such as David Bosch (2011, pp. 186) and Stephen B. Bevans (2018, pp. 1-3) have made the case that all theologies are influenced by their context. This article argues that new language is needed in order to support their conclusion. It briefly surveys the history and meaning of contextualization, before proposing polemical parallelism as an alternative. The article recasts polemical parallelism, originally coined by German theologian Adolph Deissmann in 1910, as missiological parallelism to better identify God's work within a culture, irenically introducing Jesus Christ as the best solution for human struggle.

Key Words: contextual theology, contextualization, missiological parallelism, missiological theology

Introduction

When the idea of polemical parallelism was first introduced in 1910 by German theologian Adolph Deissmann, it escaped the attention of most missiologists. Colin Hemer (1986) reintroduced the idea in his treatment of the seven churches in Revelation 2-3. Continuing with the idea in 1989, Paul Barnett applied its traditional understanding to the entire apocalypse of John. Simply stated, a polemical parallelism constitutes a rhetorical device where two ideas are juxtaposed with the implication that one is better than the other. In its application to NT apocalyptic literature, Jesus is viewed vis-a-vis Satan and the Roman Empire as not only the victor but the better way.

The rediscovery of polemical parallelism as a means to describe the ways in which biblical texts address cultural realities provides missiology an alternative to contextualization. The manner in which early Christians engaged culture irenically, while still holding Jesus over and against anything a respective culture offered, reorients missionary focus on the preeminence if not also omnipresence and omnioperatio of Christ in culture. In so doing, this study suggests that this rhetorical device may be a strategy still available to those missions practitioners today who wish to maintain biblical fidelity while engaging meaningfully with culture.

This article picks up the idea of polemical parallelism as a useful tool in cultural engagement yet with a missiological theology bent. Instead of a nomenclature which might feel confrontational, the article introduces a missiological parallelism that is inherently focused on juxtapositioning Jesus Christ as better than the offerings of culture, whether in the domains of politics, economics, academics, or religion, while asserting his ongoing work if not self-revelation in these domains. This study defines missiological parallelisms within both an OT and NT framework by highlighting several examples of their usage as a preferred means of missionary engagement.

Before moving to these examples, however, a brief discussion on the meaning and history of contextualization is in order.

Definition and History of Contextualization

Contextualization has been defined as "the process of learning to express genuine Christianity in socioculturally appropriate ways" (Kraft 1996, p. 376). However, this definition seems to imply a hermeneutical relativism that can lead others away from presumed objective biblical truth (Hesselgrave & Rommen 2000, p. 140). For this reason, Paul Hiebert suggested a critical approach to contextualization which "affirms what is good in each" culture "and condemns what is evil" (2001, p. 64).

The term "contextualization" was introduced by Shoki Coe in 1972 to illustrate his misgivings about the prevailing Protestant model of indigenization (1973, p. 238). In the Catholic Church, however, enculturation was proposed (Vatican Council II, 1965, pp. 26-28). The following years witnessed Protestant indigenization and Catholic enculturation fade in favor of the language of contextualization. Stephen Bevans surveyed its many theories and models:

> The "anthropological" model, which lays particular stress on listening to culture; the "translation" model, which lays stress on the message of the Gospel and the preservation of Church tradition; the "praxis" model which sees as a primary *locus theologicus* the phenomena of social change, particularly the change called for by a struggle for justice; the "synthetic" model which attempts to mediate the above three by employment of an "analogical imagination;" the "semiotic" model which attempts to listen to a culture by means of semiotic cultural analysis; the "transcendental" model, a meta-model which focuses not on theological content but on subjective authenticity within theological activity (Bevans, 1985, p. 186).

Table 1 below elaborates and slightly modifies these contextualization models:

Method	*Description*
Translation Model	The "translation" model is a model that places emphasis on Christian identity rather than cultural identity. It is concerned with translating the meaning of biblical doctrine into another culture using dynamic equivalence for cultural understanding (see Kraft, 1979).
Anthropological Model	The "anthropological" model is a model that places emphasis on the inherent goodness of humanity. Divine revelation is discovered in man who acts as the focal point for theology. Therefore, divine revelation is hidden in the cultural context of humanity (see Mbiti, 1970).
Praxis Model	The "praxis" model is a model that emphasizes the necessity of human action (praxis) in a cultural context in order to contextualize theology. Theology is contextualized

	by reflecting critically on praxis. Its aim is to liberate culture from social reality (see Gutierrez, 1970).
Synthetic Model	The "synthetic" model is a model that attempts to preserve the importance of the gospel message while interacting with cultural context(s). It attempts to synthesize the cultural context of the interpreter with that of the respondent in order to form a larger understanding of the gospel (see Tracy, 1981).
Transcendental Model	The "transcendental" model is a model that is anthropocentric in that it is the experience of the individual that determines the meaning of the gospel (see Longeran, 1972).
Countercultural Model	The "countercultural" model is a model that tends to regard context as a hindrance more than an inherent good. It seeks to challenge what causes pain within a culture by confronting it with the fact of scripture (see Hauerwas & Willimon, 2014).

Table 1: Six Models of Contextualization (adapted from Bevans, 2018, pp. 13-28)

Among evangelical missiologists in particular, dynamic equivalence (Kraft) and critical contextualization (Hiebert) emerged as leading methods. The seminal debate among evangelical missiologists over contextualization grew prominently in the late 1970s with Kraft's articulation of "dynamic equivalence" as a functional approach to gospel communication (Kraft, 1979). Although Kraft did not explicitly employ the term "contextualization" at the time, he was responding to the reductionism prevalent in missionary evangelism and advocated for a model that reinterpreted cultural forms with new, gospel-centered meanings. His approach, however, was critiqued for allegedly diminishing the authority of Scripture and neglecting the theological implications of cultural forms. Central to Kraft's model was the assertion that forms are value-neutral and may be imbued with new meaning, an assumption that opened the door to "over-contextualization," especially when those forms were adopted without critical scrutiny of their embedded cultural presuppositions (Brotherson, 2021, loc 993–1019).

As noted earlier, in contrast to Kraft's model, Hiebert introduced the paradigm of "critical contextualization," which rejected an uncritical equivalence between form and meaning. He argued that forms must be examined with respect to their functions and cultural meanings and then evaluated in light of biblical standards (Hiebert, 1984, p. 290). This approach acknowledges the indispensable role of a discerning interpreter. However, as William Dyrness cautions, the critical evaluator, presumably a missionary or other etic theological agent, must inevitably bring their own interpretive framework to bear on biblical interpretation, a process fraught with the risk of misapplying or misconstruing biblical authority (Dyrness, 2016, p. 22; cf. Brotherson, 2021, loc 1010–1064). Thus, the challenge is not only hermeneutical but epistemological: contextualization is mediated through human agents whose theological lenses shape the reception and application of

Scripture. Consequently, more reflection on the very terminology and methodology of contextualization itself is appropriate, given the interpretive role played by the critical evaluator.

A Nomenclature Challenge

Terms such as contextualization, contextual theology, reductionism, and syncretism function not merely as missiological nomenclatures but as powerful rhetorical instruments. When employed by Western theologians and missiologists, these terms often serve as so-called gatekeepers of orthodoxy, ostensibly safeguarding local theologies from perceived heretical deviation. In this sense, the role of the Western theologian or missiologist is perceived colonially as it imposes foreign paradigms on culture. For example, in relationship to contextual theology, Christopher Wright notes: "This term in itself betrayed the arrogant ethnocentricity of the West, for the assumption was that other places are contexts and they do their theology for those contexts; we, of course, have the real thing, the objective, contextless theology" (2006, p. 42).

As Eugene Heideman astutely observes, such terminology frequently operates as a form of coded language subtly reinforcing control over the trajectory of indigenous theological development (1997, p. 41). Even when missionaries strive to honor cultural values, their theological frameworks, often internalized as universally normative, are imposed as though biblically prescriptive for all contexts. Consequently, what they label "contextualization" may, in practice, become a projection of their own enculturated theology. Meanwhile, when local believers adapt Christianity with reference to their own cultural categories, such adaptations are swiftly labeled "syncretism" as a veiled accusation of theological aberration. This asymmetry of theological authority highlights a broader power dynamic wherein the missionary's cultural expressions are privileged over those of the host context.

By contrast, missiological theology constructively and irenically engages these dynamics and proposes a humble posture: one that seeks to discern how God is already revealing Himself within a culture and to make those expressions explicit rather than overwritten by the etic instrument of contextualizing. In this sense, missiological theology employs a dialogical engagement with culture by recognizing missiological parallelisms as evidence of God's continued movement (*motus Dei*) of self-revelation to a culture or people (Cooper 2020, 2021). For instance, in the case of *ekklēsia*, missiological theology explores indigenous patterns of gathering, communal eating, teaching, and caregiving as legitimate parallel expressions of "church" rather than assuming Western forms as normative and contextualizing them with indigenous garb (Sunday worship, building-centrality, pastor led, etc.). Alternatively, missiological theology reframes the missionary task, not as one of importing ecclesial structures but of recognizing and clarifying the Spirit's activity already present in the culture.

In place of traditional contextualization with its tendency to mask the missionary's neo-colonial tendency, a model of missiological parallelism offers a constructive alternative for cultural engagement. This approach recognizes and engages existing cultural and religious narratives not as neutral forms but as veiled revelation indicating God's ongoing self-disclosure. These forms along with God's perceived activity in them are then placed in dialogue with the biblical narrative in ways that provoke theological clarity rather than syncretistic accommodation or reductionistic colonialism.

A closer examination of missiological parallelism should lead to further clarity.

Defining Missiological Parallelism

A missiological parallelism is a literary, rhetorical, and missiological device in which a cultural or religious form mirrors a biblical narrative, image, or idea that subsequently both clarifies what God is doing within a culture and confronts the spiritual distortions within the form. These parallels can be identified by such literary genre as allegory, typology, metaphor, and analogy as well as observed phenomenologically in the particularities of cultural actors expressed in religious, political, economic, and philosophical forms that juxtapose and clarify related or contrasted ideas and actions. This engagement follows what Cooper calls "missiological exegesis of culture through dialogue and observation, and missiological reflection that meaningfully expresses theological ideas developed in a hermeneutical community" (Cooper, 2020).

Rooted in the theological insight of Justin Martyr's *logos spermatikos* ("seed of the Word"), a missiological parallelism recognizes that elements of divine truth are often embedded in culture. However, this approach re-centers those fragments around the fullness revealed in Jesus Christ. In this manner, missiological parallelisms affirm that traces of divine truth exist across cultures and properly reorients them as the omnioperatio God self-revealing in Christ and His *ekklēsia*. As a tool of redemptive engagement, the missiological parallelism critiques veiled hopes while offering a clearer, truer vision of Jesus, not merely as an alternative, but as the fulfillment of every cultural longing. This approach allows the hermeneutical community to engage culture not through wholesale rejection, but through subversive reorientation as it always presses the questions: "What is God doing here?" And consequently, "Why is Jesus better?"

Seasoned missionaries know that when missiology ignores cultural forms it risks irrelevance. At the same time, a missiology that simply affirms culture uncritically risks syncretism. Missiological parallelisms thread the irrelevant-syncretistic needle. They allow missiologists and theologians to engage culture with both discernment and hope recognizing *logos spermatikos* while declaring that they now see with unveiled faces (2 Cor 3:18). These parallels are theologically and missiologically pregnant actions of the God who desires all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). In this sense, missiological parallelisms reframe familiar cultural narratives to make Christ known, not as one option among many, but as the very image of the invisible God and therefore the better option. These parallels are seen both in the Old and New Testaments.

Parallelisms in the New Testament

Considering the above definition of missiological parallelism, the New Testament exhibits clear examples of its use. Granted, the term is being applied anachronistically. Nevertheless, this study maintains that missiological parallelism provides a better missiological foundation for cultural engagement than contextualization. Some examples from the Gospel of John offer support.

John presents Jesus in missiological parallel to the culture of Ephesus (Cooper, 2021). Whether it is clarifying the meaning of *logos* (1:1, 14) in juxtaposition to the philosophy of Heraclitus, or Jesus's connection with the Samaritan woman juxtaposed to the Ephesian courtesan (4:1-26), John's portrayal of Jesus unveils the faces of the readers so that they can genuinely see the glory of Christ as better than the cultural parallels. Perhaps most revealing are John's *ego eimi* statements. The Greek words from Moses's encounter with God (Ex 3:14, LXX) reveal both Jesus's nature ontologically—He is God—and His character functionally—His life emulates God. John uses *ego eimi* a total of 21 times. While not every reference can directly tie to Jesus as God, six make the emphatic ontological declaration that He is God (4:26; 6:20; 8:24-28; 13:19; 18:5),

and seven focus on His characteristics which demonstrate His ontological reality (Table 2). As missiological parallelisms to Ephesian culture, John juxtaposes Jesus to religion, philosophy, and politics. He is the better way (John 14:6).

Saying	*Cultural Parallel*	*Missiological Point*
"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35)	Ritual meals, Dionysus /Artemis feasts	Jesus, not civic religion, satisfies eternally
"I am the light of the world" (8:12)	Artemis as light-bringer; temple lampstands	Jesus is not a light, but the Light, moral and ontological clarity
"I am the door" (10:9)	Temple thresholds and sacred space	Access to God is not through the temple or cult, but through Christ
"I am the good shepherd" (10:11)	Imperial imagery of emperor as shepherd of the people	Jesus lays down His life, unlike political or mythic shepherds
"I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25)	Artemis as protector in childbirth and death	Jesus conquers death itself, not just preserves life
"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6)	Competing paths: Stoic logos, Epicurean truth, Artemisian ritual	Jesus is the exclusive and embodied path, not just a better idea, but a better reality
"I am the true vine" (15:1)	Dionysian cult of wine	True flourishing is found in union with Christ, not indulgence or ecstasy

Table 2: Missiological Parallelism in the "I am" Statements

John's Shepherd Motif

To further examine John's *ego eimi* statements, his shepherd motif provides a compelling example. The image of the shepherd has been variously described, with many Christian commentators commonly referring to the trade as lowly and poor (Tucker & Kueker, 2020, p. 11). That is, as Joel Green puts it, the shepherds were at the "opposite end of the social spectrum…representative of the peasantry" (1997, p. 61). Such emphasis on Jesus's presumed social marginality reflects a romanticized reading that casts Him primarily as an underdog figure, a kind of champion of the

oppressed rising from the lower classes to confront the elite. This portrayal risks reducing the incarnation to a socio-political statement rather than a theological act grounded in divine mission.

These inaccurate portrayals may comfort the marginalized, but they misrepresent the social status of the holy family. Joseph, a craftsman (*tektonos*), practiced a respected and skilled trade (Matt 13:55). As members of the family of King David, both Joseph and Mary likely held some degree of social standing among their peers (Matt 1:20). Furthermore, Mary's relation to a priest connected her to the religious elite (Luke 1:36). While stereotypes about Galileans, fishermen, and others certainly circulated, and continue to influence biblical interpretation today, the shepherding motif itself remained a powerful image. From Israel's second king, who was called from shepherding sheep (1 Sam 16:11), to the shepherding responsibilities assigned to church leaders (1 Pet 5:2), the metaphor carried deep theological and communal resonance.

The role of the shepherd also contributes to an understanding of the ideal Greek ruler who cares for people in Socrates's image of the just city. Socrates, in dialogue with Polemarchus, Cleitophon, and Thrasymachus about the expectations of a civic leader, uses the metaphor for those who hold responsibility to tend to the well-being of the citizens:

> But the skill of shepherding surely does not care for anything else apart from what it has been put in charge of, and how to provide what's best to this, since, as long as it does not fall short of being shepherding, whatever belongs to itself has, of course, already been provided to a sufficient extent, so that it can be best. Accordingly, I think we need to accept at this stage that all rule, insofar as it is rule, does not consider what's best for anything else, except what it rules over and tends upon … (Plato, Republic 1.345d).

Similarly, the imagery of the ideal Roman ruler borrowed the Greek imagery in the shepherd motif. Suetonius writing about Tiberius, during whose reign John the Baptist receives a word from God (Luke 3:1-2), relates an account when governors were recommending more taxes be weighed on citizens. Tiberius' response was, "It is the part of a good shepherd to shear, not flay, his sheep" (Suetonius, *Tiberius Nero Caesar* 32). Indeed, Suetonius portrayed Tiberius as maintaining the public good during his rule, and the shepherd motif served to solidify an image of caring for the empire.

With such a backdrop of the positive image of the shepherd in both the Jewish and Graeco-Roman imagination, John introduces Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10:11). The good shepherd exhibits a number of important characteristics including protection of the flock with his life, intimately knowing them, seeking others to care for, and more. Jesus as the good shepherd is not simply on par with other shepherds, whether political or religious. Rather, he is better than any who might be called a shepherd. The functional distinction is critical for an effective missiological parallelism as it demonstrates God's missional movement to people.

Application of Missiological Parallelism

The ontological and functional aspects of Jesus Christ as God are not compromised in missiological parallelisms. Ontologically, Jesus has no comparison. However, functionally, Jesus provides a better way. In John's shepherd motif, he makes a functional claim regarding Jesus's character. He is the "good shepherd" in as much as he demonstrates the abilities corresponding to a cultural definition of shepherd (*poimēn*). In this sense, he is a better shepherd than what is understood by the equivalent term in the recipient culture. Similarly in the OT, God's provision of

a sacrifice in place of Abraham's son is a better way than the child-sacrifices of the Ancient Near East (Snaith 1966, 123-24). Just as Jesus is the better shepherd, he is also the better sacrifice.

While both shepherd and sacrifice reveal one facet of Jesus's ontological identity, the scriptures juxtapose them functionally in relationship to their cultural understanding. To safeguard from reductionism or syncretism which can occur due to the functional parallel, this study proposes six criteria for identifying and applying proper parallels: (1) cultural proximity, (2) functional analogy with ontological distinction, (3) Christological supremacy, (4) irenic engagement with prophetic clarity, (5) biblical and theological coherence, and (6) missional fruitfulness. Each criterion ensures that missiological parallelisms function not as abstract rhetorical devices but as missiologically and theologically sound as well as culturally rooted strategies for gospel engagement. These criteria flow directly from the theological witness of early Christianity and align with contemporary missiological reflection.

Each criterion needs its own explanation.

First, a valid missiological parallelism arises from the actual worldview, religious system, or social imagination of a particular culture. It reflects an embedded symbol, ritual, or concept that carries spiritual or existential significance. Effective parallels are not imposed from outside but emerge from within the cultural landscape, making the gospel both recognizable and personally resonant.

Second, parallels must share a functional similarity such as a redeemer figure, a provider, a judge, or a spiritual mediator while maintaining a clear ontological distinction. Jesus may function as a better ancestor, shepherd, or savior, but he is ontologically superior to any cultural counterpart. This distinction guards against syncretism while allowing meaningful engagement with cultural expectations.

Third, every missiological parallelism must present Jesus not simply as a relevant alternative but as the true and better fulfillment of the cultural concept. He is not one savior among many, but the Savior of all. The aim is not to affirm cultural truth claims on their own terms but to reveal how they find their ultimate expression in the person and work of Christ.

Fourth, missiological parallelisms should engage culture peacefully, not with hostility or dismissal, but must still confront spiritual error, idolatry, or false hope. This dual posture of respect and clarity reflects the tone of New Testament witness: honoring what is present while pointing beyond it to what is ultimate.

Fifth, parallelisms must arise from sound biblical exegesis as determined by the hermeneutical community and alignment with the theological arc of scripture. They are not clever rhetorical devices or pragmatic tools for persuasion, but they are deeply rooted in the redemptive story of God. Each parallel must be theologically faithful and contribute to a robust understanding of the gospel.

Finally, a missiological parallelism is validated by its impact: does it lead to greater gospel clarity, spiritual transformation, and the formation of faithful communities of disciples? If a parallel does not bear fruit in terms of deeper worship of Christ and faithfulness to His mission, it may obscure more than it reveals.

Conclusion

This article has argued that a missiological parallelism is a missiological and theological device that mirrors cultural or religious narratives to both clarify God's activity within a culture and irenically engages its distortions. In light of this study, missiological parallelism emerges not merely as an exegetical curiosity or rhetorical tool but as a robust missionary posture, one that resists syncretism and reductionism so often latent in contemporary models of contextualization. Rather than accommodating the gospel to culture or extracting it from cultural situatedness, missiological parallelism reframes cultural narratives by orienting them in proximity to Christological fulfillment. Such an orientation models a more ancient and arguably more faithful method of engagement, one that does not neutralize cultural meaning but subverts and redirects it toward the *telos* of God's redemptive mission (Matt 24:14).

Indeed, early Christian writers like John and Justin, far from offering a systematic theology of culture, consistently employed the theological imagination of parallels to clarify who Jesus is in contrast to the religious, political, and philosophical icons of their day. Whether in the foreshadowing of Christ's sacrifice in the OT or the shepherding motif of John's Gospel, even Justin's *logos spermatikos*, the biblical witness demonstrates an intentional juxtaposition that honored the embedded truths of culture, just as it exposed their insufficiency apart from Christ. Such a model not only invites contemporary missiologists to return to a more biblical paradigm but also challenges us to rethink contextualization as a hermeneutic of encounter rather than translation.

In short, a missiological theology of missiological parallelism invites missionaries, theologians, and local church leaders alike to take seriously what God is doing in culture, not as an endorsement of every cultural form but as a summons to see culture as both mission field and missiological interlocutor. A disciplined attentiveness, a Spirit-guided discernment, and most of all, a Christological clarity that renders Jesus not as merely relevant but as preeminent will be required. In the end, the goal is not simply to contextualize the gospel, but to address every veiled hope with the singular and superior hope found in our God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

References

Bevans, S. B. (2018). *Essays in contextual theology*. Boston: Brill.

Bevans, S. B. (1985). Models of contextual theology. *Missiology: an international review*, *13*(2), pp. 185-202.

Bosch, D. (2011). *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in theology of mission*, 20th Anniversary ed. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis.

Coe, S. (1973). In search of renewal in theological education. *Theological education,* 9, summer.

Cooper, M. T. (2020). *Ephesiology: a study of the Ephesian movement*. Littleton: William Carey.

Cooper, M. T. (2021). John's missiological theology: the contribution of the fourth gospel to the first century movement in Roman Asia. In Warrick Farah (Ed.), *Motus dei: the movement of God to disciple the nations* (pp. 129-140). Littleton: William Carey.

Dyrness, W. (2016). *Insider Jesus: theological reflections on new Christian movements*. Downers Grove: IVP.

Green, J. B. (1997). *The gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Heideman, E. (1997). Syncretism, contextualization, orthodoxy, and heresy. *Missiology: An International Review*, 25, no. 1, pp. 37-49.

Kraft, C. H. (1979). *Christianity in culture: a study in dynamic biblical theologizing in cross-cultural perspective*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.

Kraft, C. H. (1996). *Anthropology for Christian witness*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books.

Hesselgrave, D. J. & Rommen, E. (2000). *Contextualization: meanings, methods, and models*. Littleton, CO: William Carey.

Hauerwas, S. & Willimon, W. H. (2014). *Resident aliens : life in the Christian colony*. Expanded 25th anniversary edition. Nashville, TN: Abingdon.

Hiebert, P. G. (2001). *Anthropological reflections on missiological issues*. 4th print. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker.

Hiebert, P. G. (1984). Critical contextualization. *Missiological: an international review*, *12*(3), pp. 287-296.

Snaith, N. H. (1966). The cult of Molech. *Vetus testamentum*, *16*(1).

Tucker, J. B. & Keucker, A. (2020). *T&T Clark social identity: commentary on the New Testament*. London: T&T Clark.

Vatican Council II, Hoffman, R., & Paul VI. (1965). *Decree on the missionary activity of the church: December 7, 1965*. Washington, D.C.: National Catholic Welfare Conference.

Wright, C. (2006). *The mission of God: unlocking the Bible's grand narrative*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity.