

## CONTEXTUALIZING CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN MUSLIM CONTEXTS

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### ABSTRACT

Church-state relations in Central Asia have never been cozy, but they are now taking a turn for the worse as Islam flexes its political muscles. This article examines the possible consequences from two very different ways the Protestant community might handle this issue, both there and in other parts of the Muslim world. The first model examines the trend for Christians, both local and foreign, to push for legal protections based on Western concepts of human rights. The second one is drawn from the example of the ancient “Eastern Church Catholicos Timothy,” and is proposed as an exercise in contextualization.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Although there are various definitions, at its simplest, contextualization deals with the question of how Christians live out their faith in a way that is appropriate to their particular context. Contextualizing all aspects of Christian life is especially important when the context of a new mission field church is significantly different from that of the founding missionaries. Because of the increased influence of anthropology on mission training, most field workers in the Muslim world are trying to integrate at least some concepts of contextualization into their ministries. Therefore, today we see many missionaries and local leaders adapting church life and witness to reflect local realities in many areas such as music, material culture, even socioeconomics—and this is very good.

However there is one important sphere of life that I have seldom, if ever, heard a fellow missionary mention as having potential for contextualization—church-state relations. The premise of this article is that a young church’s sociopolitical context is an

important but often neglected area of life which needs to be addressed through contextualization, particularly in Muslim-majority states.

This article will begin by examining the young Protestant church's evolving relationship to political power in Central Asia, then explore how contextualization might shape this aspect of the church's life, both in Central Asia and other similar settings.

## II. HISTORIC RECAP

In 1991 the Soviet Union broke-up, and several new states emerged from the collapse of what had been strict colonial rule from Moscow. Although some of those in the upper echelons of Red Square saw it coming, it appears that most on the periphery did not. Therefore, the rulers of the newly independent states of Central Asia had to quickly find ways to survive a sociopolitical situation that were completely different from anything they had ever known. As a result, their focus in the early years of independence was on survival, this in turn allowed many other simmering problems to fall through the cracks so to speak—religion being one of those issues. This, combined with Atheism's loss of authority, allowed for a sudden surge in public religious activity.

The new state powers saw little problem in this because what they expected was what Rambo calls *intensification* “the revitalized commitment to a faith with which the convert has had previous affiliation, formal or informal” (1993; 13). This kind of religious change maintains the general shape of the status quo—with ethnic Russians returning to the Orthodox church and many Kyrgyz who had seldom soiled the carpet of a mosque starting to count Namaz. Authorities in Central Asia never suspected that the religious change sweeping the region would include bona fide religious conversion—but this politically upsetting idea is exactly what happened across Central Asia in the years that followed the end of Soviet rule.

Beginning in the mid 1990s, and continuing for several years thereafter, there was a surge of foreign missionary activity that played a role in bringing large numbers of Muslim

background people into the Protestant fold. Many of these people had been quite nominal in their natal faith, but the sudden confluence of spiritual vacuum and encounter with Christian witness made a deep impact. On the social, communal, and family level there was immediate reaction and often persecution, but for the most part the governments of Central Asia acted much less aggressively.

Despite the “Muslim” moniker, the vast majority of Central Asian bureaucrats began the era of independence more Soviet than Islamic, and certainly politicians first and foremost, therefore they were often very pragmatic in the way they dealt with missionary activity and the local church. Besides being overwhelmed with other more pressing matters, this neglect was also part of steep learning curve they faced as they adapted to a new geopolitical situation. Most of the Protestant missionary activity was being projected out of the same countries that were now their new financial benefactors in the West—EU member states and the U.S., as well as from the commercial/investment powerhouse called South Korea. Therefore, other than the occasional missionary expulsion or police harassment against local believers, a sense of détente with the governments settled-in as foreign missionaries and the local church operated in the gray zone where *de jure* religious freedom meets *de facto* anti-Christian hostility.

### **III. THE CURRENT SITUATION**

Much has changed in the last 10 years across the former Soviet Union, some parts have seen much greater political liberalization and others experiencing a return to authoritarianism. In Central Asia, the détente between government and the Protestant church is over, governments across the region have decided that it is no longer in their national interests to allow Protestant growth to continue unchecked. The continued ingathering of various Muslim ethnicities—Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Azeris, etc—has taken place at the same time that Islam has been growing in political strength in the region. For example, in 2007 a local journalist noted that,

In an attempt to win public support, Kyrgyz officials are launching increasing numbers of initiatives that reflect Islamic influences – a trend which analysts warn could eventually lead to the erosion of the secular state. [Namatbaeva]

As we would expect, this growing Islamic influence on state actions eventually moved the problem of Muslim conversions to Christ from beyond the concerns of a few diehards at the mosque and into the political realm. This was further intensified by the fact that the identity of the states of this region are all built around Muslim ethnicities, therefore even very secular government bureaucrats began to see any conversion of members of the titular nationalities has having political dimensions.

A common sentiment heard across the region goes something like this, “to be Uzbek is to be Muslim,” and “to stop being Muslim means to stop being Uzbek.” Although we disagree with the reasoning, it is important that the mission community recognize the logic in play here. For even nominal Muslims in government positions, it is a natural conclusion that protecting Islam’s hold on the populace is the same as protecting the integrity of the state.

So, after several years of shadow existence and semi-tolerance, there is a disturbing trend in church-state relations in Central Asia, one for which there is both antidotal and documentable evidence. Forum 18 News Service keeps a close eye on developments concerning religious freedom in the region, and one news release, dated January 13, 2009, reports of the severe new restrictions facing the Protestant church in Kyrgyzstan:

Despite vigorous protests against it by local human rights defenders and many religious communities, [now former] President Kurmanbek Bakiev [of Kyrgyzstan] has signed the restrictive new Religion Law, the presidential website reported on 12 January. Tursunbek Akun, Kyrgyzstan's Human Rights Ombudsperson, condemned the move. "This Law is not in accord with international human rights standards [and] imposes a range of restrictions that will prevent small religious communities from developing.

[In a presidential announcement], concerns over the ban on spreading one's faith were brushed aside. It goes on to claim that the current "conditions" in Kyrgyzstan with "tense inter-confessional relations" in the last seven years over

burial of the dead and changing faith - "for example from Muslim to Baptist" – justify the ban on "proselytism"... The announcement stresses that the "leading religious confessions of the country" – which it identifies as the Muftiate and the Russian Orthodox Church – had called on President Bakiev to sign the Law.  
[Corley]

Although there are slight glimmers of hope for a return of religious tolerance in Kyrgyzstan after the April 2010 revolution, the crackdown against the Protestant church is regional in scope. An anonymous Protestant pastor in Uzbekistan, an ethnic Russian, told me he was warned by the state security services,

“You can keep having your church services as long as there are no Uzbeks that attend. But if we find that even one Uzbek has been here, we will shut down your church and put you in prison.” [Interviewed by author, May 2007]

This pastor’s testimony must be placed in context. His city, Samarqand, Uzbekistan has seen at least six churches closed in the last three years according to the Forum 18 News service [2010].

The news from Azerbaijan is no better. One news source lays out the general situation in 2009,

As in so many nations, the constitution formally protects religious liberty [in Azerbaijan]. But the situation has been deteriorating, with amendments adopted targeting evangelism. Warns [US department of] State, "religions considered non-traditional" are subject to monitoring and harassment, and believers can be jailed ... "There were reports of discrimination against worshippers based on their religious beliefs, largely conducted by local authorities who detained and questioned worshippers without any legal basis and confiscated religious material." [Bandow, 2009]

And the Voice of the Martyrs gives some of the details of what this new harassment looks like,

In December 2007, five church members and three visitors were imprisoned and fined for “meeting without state registration” following a police raid. Police officers also confiscated their books and other religious materials. On June 20,

2008 police arrested Pastor Hamid Shabanov on allegations of possessing an illegal weapon, despite the insistence of his family and congregation that authorities planted the gun they claimed to find while searching his home in Aliabad. The arrest was viewed by local believers as a direct attack on the pastor's Baptist church and an attempt to halt Christian activity in the area. [2010]

These are but a few examples of a growing trend across post-Soviet Central Asia—governments are moving to bring the young Protestant church to heel. In the past few years the governments of Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Kyrgyzstan have all passed new, much more restrictive laws concerning religion, and other countries in the region are in the process of debating similar ones. Large numbers of official and unofficial missionaries have been expelled, local pastors jailed, and church properties confiscated.

This raises very important questions about how Muslim background Christians in Central Asia and beyond, both locals and expatriates, should respond to these kinds of pressures. In other words, “What kind of relationship should Muslim background Christians have with the governments in Muslim-majority states?” Again turning to Central Asia for a backdrop, I propose that there are basically two trajectories that the response could take, leading in very different directions, and that each of these is based on radically different perceptions of the Church.

#### **IV. THE WESTERN HUMAN RIGHTS MODEL**

The first path, one that is currently being pursued by the Protestant community in Kyrgyzstan, is based on Western ideas of human rights. This means that the state is expected to provide a broad range of rights to individual persons, and by extension, to whatever legal organizations those persons chose to be part of. When this concept is appropriated by the church, it causes the Christian community, missionary and local leaders alike, to pressure national governments to up-hold their “human rights.” Because of the inherent hostility within Muslim-majority government bureaucracies which we noted earlier, this pressure is usually pursued through various international connections—embassies, NGOs, news organizations, etc.

The details of how this happens are not particularly relevant to our topic. What is vitally important for us to understand is that this model is specifically Western, based on our constructs of citizenship, civil liberties, and law. Furthermore, we must not allow the implications of this to escape us. When church leaders press a Muslim government to conform to these Western (i.e. foreign) concepts, it is broadcasting a clear message—that the Protestant church is for all purposes a Western concern, protected by powerful foreign patrons.

It is not hard to understand why this causes alarm among government officials, particularly those in Central Asia who due to Soviet tutelage are quite paranoid about Western intervention in their internal affairs. But it is not just the response of bureaucrats and policy makers that concerns us. What is perhaps more damaging is the impact this appeal to foreign powers has on Muslim friends and neighbors who otherwise were within reach of the gospel. When they read about these things in the newspaper or hear of it on government sponsored TV, such intervention corroborates the misperception that *Protestant* faith is an intrinsically *foreign* faith to the peoples of Central Asia.

There is, of course, historical precedence for mission field churches seeking the protection of powerful foreign governments—but not one that most missionaries would be comfortable with. Pressuring local rulers to conform to external rules and law was standard operating procedure for colonial powers dealing with their client states. Many missionaries turned to this approach whenever they or the local church faced opposition by local governments. Being under the shade of an imperial power might help put the church at ease, but when viewed objectively it should make us very uncomfortable to think about the resentment and anti-Christian sediment this kind of behavior generated, particularly toward the end of the colonial era. In places like Central Asia it seems that history is giving us an echo, and the result is that young Christian communities are seen as threats to the existing political order, not because of their loyalty to Christ but because they align themselves with outside powers and are seen as their agents. This leaves us asking, “Is there a better way?”

## V. THE CATHOLICOS TIMOTHY APPROACH

The other trajectory that churches under Muslim-majority governments could take is also rooted in a historical situation, but one that is much older than the Western human rights pattern. This model can be extrapolated from an encounter between the Eastern Church Catholicos Timothy and the Caliph Mahdi in the year 781, the earliest known debate between a Christian religious leader and a Muslim official [Samir & Nielson, 1994:110]. Timothy was the Christian Patriarch for all Christians in Mesopotamia and Persia, a man who ruled over approximately one quarter of the Christians world of his day (Jenkins 2008; 6). However, despite the enormous authority wielded by Timothy in his own community, the extant accounts of his debate with the Caliph demonstrate humility and at least publically he made no presumption to any kind of rights or privilege.

Instead, Timothy honored the leader of the newly ascendant Islamic world without compromising Christian witness. He tactfully challenged the Caliph's understanding of the church and Christian doctrine, but at the same time his arguments were "Muslim sensitive" without being subservient, his defense of the Gospel clear [Norris, 2006]. Again, the exact details of the debate between the two is somewhat irrelevant to our discussion, what is important is that here we have a clear example of Christian leadership carefully and skillfully working within the Muslim system of governance and legal framework under which the Christian community lived.

Some might be quick to protest that the subsequent decline of Christian rights under the Caliphate makes this a poor choice for a model of church-state relations. And looking at the long view that did happen. However, we should remember that the Eastern Church enjoyed more than two centuries of fairly peaceful coexistence with their Islamic overlords after the time of Catholicos Timothy. So while it is true that in later centuries church-state relations took a serious turn for the worse, it is hardly fair to blame that on Timothy's approach to dealing with the Caliph.



## VI. APPLICATION

Either of the approaches encapsulated above could be argued from Scripture. It is possible to take the example of Paul using the power of his Roman citizenship as support for the “Human Rights” approach:

*“As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?” Acts 22:25<sup>1</sup>*

Or conversely, one could draw upon Paul’s defense before Agrippa and make a good case for the tactics of the Catholicos Timothy:

*“Then Agrippa said to Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself. So Paul motioned with his hand and began his defense: ‘King Agrippa, I consider myself fortunate to stand before you today as I make my defense against all the accusations of the Jews, and especially so because you are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies ...’” Acts 26:1-3*

However, we must be careful with our exegesis, Scriptural support for both of these is rather limited, and biblical examples are easily stretched out of shape when trying to make them correspond too closely to contemporary politics. Therefore, rather than attempt to untangle the question of which of these approaches is “more biblical,” I would like to focus on this issue from the perspective of contextualization—the process by which the gospel and the church become meaningful in a particular context.

Many missionaries immediately think of cultural when they hear contextualization, but Hiebert reminds us that contextualization done right encompasses *all* aspects of the human context, including the sociopolitical one [2009:146-8]. Therefore I suggest that it is appropriate and important to ask, “What approach to government best suits the context of churches under the power of Muslim-majority governments?” Or

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

more simply, “what might a contextualized approach to church-state relations look like in the Muslim world?”

As is probably clear by now, I consider the example of the Catholicos Timothy to be the superior model because it better fits the context of churches in the Muslim world. I argue this because I see a connection between example of Timothy and the current situation on a number of levels.

The first thing that strikes one about the Catholicos Timothy model is his attitude and approach to the power of the Caliph. He understood something that we seem to have forgotten, that the church does not have guaranteed rights in this world and that often finds herself *under* the authority of worldly rulers. Of course, this should not surprise us, Jesus himself said that his kingdom was not of this world [Jn 18:36]. But what is even more important is this situation did not seem to bother the Catholicos.

This is very different from attitude that underpins the Western “human rights” approach where Christians approach the state as if they are equals, because only equals can place demands of each other. Furthermore, in the case of foreign missionaries, I have personally heard many talk as if they consider themselves superior to local authorities and laws, seemingly viewing themselves as personal extensions of their own powerful governments back home.

Secondly, and slightly less obvious, is that Catholicos Timothy’s approach was based around a much more unified church. This strikes at one of the core issues in the current situation, the right for small religious groups, i.e. local churches, to exist as individual, highly autonomous entities. At this point in time, post-Soviet governments are not so much anti-Christian as they are looking for social stability. Right or wrongly, small, highly-independent groups are a source of concern to authoritarian governments, and the unstructured nature of the kind of Protestantism planted by most missionaries plays directly into the fear governments have about secretive, subversive elements in society. With this in mind, would there be anything wrong with the Protestant church in a

country formalizing their spiritual unity as a means of responding to their government's concerns? This could be done by Protestants grouping themselves into wide-based "associations" (to use a word Central Asian governments seems to like), as opposed to the current situation which emphasizes congregational independence.

This might accomplish three important objectives. First it would give the Protestant community a unified voice, much as it had in Timothy's time. I do not know if a single "Protestant voice" is too idealistic, but any steps toward unity would go a long ways toward a second important end, that is alleviating governments' fears that small groups of Christians represent dangerous "cells" whose agendas and teaching are a possible threat. And finally, greater organizational unity would give Protestants more weight when dealing with the authorities. A leader speaking on behalf of a few thousand believers has much more authority than one doing so as the voice of a handful.

The idea of Protestants dealing with the government from a position of unity as the church in a given country is very different from the clamor currently produced by appealing to various pressure points—the U.S. embassy, Human Rights Watch International, and various EU commissions—as in the Human Rights model. Furthermore, attempting to contextualize church-state relations in this way would give substance to what we claim about the intrinsic unity of the body of Christ—clarity of the Christian message is always the result of contextualization done properly.

Of course there would be many practical problems and interpersonal struggles involved in the kind of major Protestant restructuring I am suggesting. But this is simply part and parcel of true Christian leadership, and if handled rightly the process itself would work toward the maturing of the body [c.f. Ephesians 4:13-16]. With the possibility of such compelling benefits, perhaps the only thing that stops many from considering this option is a deeply entrenched Western approach to church life. Many missionaries smell "compromise" in this kind of suggestion, but we should admit that our independence has not always been a good thing, the divisiveness that seems to be intrinsic to many of our Protestant traditions is a not an honor to the name of Jesus.

## VII. CONCLUSION

There is deepening tension between the church and state in Central Asia, with the validity of small, independent Protestant groups becoming the focal point of government concern. This issue has the potential to have a huge negative impact on the whole Protestant movement in the region. Fundamentally this is a question of Contextualization verses Westernization, only in this case applied to a realm we do not always consider a candidate for such missiological reflection. Therefore, its significant reaches far beyond the borders of Central Asia and carries implications for missionaries and church leaders in other areas of the Islamic world, wherever young churches are emerging under quasi-secular, Muslim-majority governments.

Most church leaders, national and expatriate alike, have unconsciously defaulted to a very Western model for responding to the crisis. Although it has some positives, the human rights approach to church-state relations is fraught with dangers that few acknowledge. By taking a position that is rooted in Western values, the Protestant community portrays itself as a foreign entity with powerful foreign patrons. This raises the risk of a slow slide into an outright adversarial relationship between local believers and their own national governments—something that would portend disaster for both mission and the local church.

An alternative to this precarious trajectory might be found in the example of the ancient Catholicos Timothy as he dealt with the Caliph in the year 781 AD. Following this model would require a deliberate attempt at contextualizing an important sphere of church life, church-state relations. This course is not problem free, but would have significant long-term benefits. First, it would lessen the false impression that the church is a threat to the government, and so the church's legal standing would be strengthened. Second, it is quite probable that the public witness of the church would brighten as the intrinsic unity of the body of Christ took precedent over the typically minor doctrinal distinctions that divide the church.

Many years ago a Muslim background friend in Central Asia friend poignantly said to me, “These ‘churches’ are yours divisions. You brought them here and gave them to us. They are not ours. Our believing community is so small, how can we stand in the face of Islam if we are divided?” [Anonymous. Interviewed by author, September 2002]

### **VIII. QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

- 1) Is it valid to try to contextualize an issue such as church-state relations? Why or why not?
  
- 2) Could there be long-term benefits to the “Western human rights” model that the article neglected to point out?
  
- 3) Are there other models, drawn from history or theology, which would provide better ways to contextualize the church’s relationship to the state in Muslim countries?

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