

OVERCOMING SYNCRETISM BY CONTEXTUALIZATION

Rick Wood, Editor, *Mission Frontiers*

Published in “Contextualization” of www.GlobalMissiology.org, January 2011

Originally published as “Editorial Comments” in *Mission Frontiers*.
September-October 2010:4-5

I. INTRODUCTION

What happens when missionaries teach that the only way of salvation is for a people to completely reject their own culture and accept the “Christian” culture of the missionary? What is the result of not understanding God’s love for all peoples and His plan for every tribe and tongue to worship and glorify God in all of their uniqueness? One answer is the disastrous history of the Native peoples of North America.

It is not possible to fully grasp the brutality and savagery inflicted upon Native Americans by the European immigrants to North America. Ranging from callous disregard to outright genocide, the history of Native Americans is a dark tale of racial/cultural hatred, betrayal and murder.

It is also not possible for non-Natives to fully understand the deep pain, trauma and alienation with which Native Americans can still suffer because of this history and the rejection of them and their culture by the very people who should have been their greatest defenders—the Church. Instead of standing with Native Americans in defending their God-given privilege to worship Jesus using their own cultural forms, the Church became an unofficial partner with political forces in the destruction of their cultures and communities.

The now-infamous Indian boarding schools, where every vestige of Native culture was replaced by a foreign culture, provide examples of this deliberate cultural destruction perpetrated by the Church. This has resulted in many of the social ills seen on Native reservations today. Their cultural dignity and self respect as a people have been taken from them, with predictable results. Is it any surprise that the great majority of Native Americans want nothing to do with the Church and “the white man’s religion?”

Unless the Church learns from the mistakes that were made with Native Americans, we will continue to repeat these mistakes around the world with potentially similar, tragic results.

The idea that a people must reject their own culture and join another’s in order to fully obey and follow Jesus is one of the most foundational errors in mission strategy, and it is still going on today. Some still promote the belief that Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists must reject all of their culture and join “ours” if they are to be true followers of Jesus.

At issue is the fundamental failure of the Church and some missionaries to separate their own culture from the gospel. This is not just a problem for people in the West. All cultures and peoples are prone to think that their culture's expression of the gospel is the correct one and should be the model for followers of Jesus all over the world. As various cultures get involved in missions, they must recognize this tendency and train their people to understand and avoid it. We must recognize that God's plan for history is that every tribe and tongue will worship Jesus out of their own cultural uniqueness, not by means of their conformity to some outside cultural standard.

II. Missionaries Using Bad Missiology

One of the earliest missionaries to Native Americans, John Eliot, made this same mistake when he started his work in 1644 among the Algonquin people. He did many things right by learning the language, translating Scripture and advocating on their behalf before the government. But he failed to respect the value of the Algonquin culture and how God could use it to glorify Himself. He believed, like some missionaries today, that his own culture was the standard to follow.

He turned them into good "Christian" colonial citizens who helped save the Massachusetts Bay Colony from utter destruction. When other "Indians" nearly wiped out the white settlers, Eliot's converts were the ones who helped tip the balance in the colonists' favor. The "Praying Indians," as they were called, were rewarded by having their towns burned and hundreds rounded up and imprisoned on a barren island in Boston Harbor. Eliot pleaded on their behalf, but to no avail. In the end, little fruit remained from his decades of work.

This was to be a repeating pattern in which sincere missionaries had their work destroyed by settlers looking only for prosperity on "Indian" land and a government that would not defend Native interests. The European settlers had no missionary vision for reaching the "Indians" in their midst. Instead of seeing the Natives as people needing to know Jesus, they saw them only as an obstacle to be overcome on the way towards wealth. How is the mission of the Church today harmed by people looking only for the good life here and caring not for the expansion of God's Kingdom in all the earth?

III. Making the Gospel Indigenous

Can we pick up the broken pieces of this wreckage and begin to see people movements to Christ among Native Americans? That is what this issue is all about. It is about those courageous cultural pioneers who are applying sound missionary strategies and contextualizing the gospel for Native Americans—something that should have been standard procedure from the beginning. Richard Twiss and others are leading a contextual revolution in ministry to Native Americans. See the articles starting on page 6.

Contextualization is the biblical approach used throughout the New Testament to communicate the gospel. It has been used by missionaries all over the world with great success, but it has been largely ignored by those ministering to Native Americans. The majority of Native American pastors and church leaders still hold to the missionary imposed belief that there is nothing of value in their Native heritage and culture. This is beginning to change, and we chronicle some of these efforts in this issue.

Contextualization is the process by which familiar cultural forms are adapted, redeemed and given new meaning in order to communicate the truths of Scripture to people on a deep heartfelt level. Cultural pioneers like Richard Twiss are making headway toward the goal of making the gospel “indigenous” to the Native American peoples.

The word “indigenous” means “normal or naturally existing.” Indigenization is a process that must take place in every people group on earth if the gospel is to flow naturally within each people so that each person may have access to faith in Christ. The gospel must look normal and natural to the people within a culture if it is to be accepted and spread as the Spirit leads. It cannot look like a foreign import, especially one that is imposed on a people by force. What looks foreign is generally rejected by the majority of people within a culture.

IV. Overcoming Syncretism by Contextualization

Syncretism is the most commonly expressed concern whenever we talk about contextualization. Syncretism has occurred throughout Church history and will continue to be present until Jesus returns. This is because syncretism, at its essence, is double-mindedness in which something other than Jesus and biblical authority has ownership of a person’s heart. What has a person’s heart? Is it Jesus and the truths of Scripture alone, or is it something else with Christian duties and practices just laying on the surface?

We like to look at the cultural expressions that people use, which are different from our own, and make judgments regarding their relationship with Christ. The reality is, however, that contextualization is the means by which you *avoid* syncretism, not *create* it, as long as the Scriptures are the foundation for all practices.

The vital thing is to communicate the gospel to people in ways that are meaningful to them so that Scriptural truth can change their lives. When foreign forms and practices are forced on people, you are likely to get syncretism because the foreign forms often have very little meaning to them, and they end up just “going through the motions.”

V. CONCLUSION

The gospel travels on the road of love and respect for the people and their culture. If we are to avoid the mistakes made with Native Americans and make Jesus known to every tribe and tongue, we must contextualize the gospel and make it indigenous to every people.