RETHINKING "CONTEXTUALIZATION"

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Recent theology missiology have argued that the Christian religion must not only be lived in each cultural situation, but its theology must also be rethought in each such situation. This goes beyond the dimension of application and moves to Christian doctrine. Thus for example, the meaning of the Gospel in each new cultural context must be rethought by drawing up local catechisms and doing theology from out of that particular context.

In a forthcoming book, Richard Mouw of Fuller Theological Seminary notes that both Charles Hodge and Sojourner Truth were raised within an "Amsterdam Christianity," one a man of considerable prominence in 19th Century America, the other a woman and slave. While both of them drew on Amsterdam theology as a resource, they did so from very different economic, cultural, social, and gender locations. The resulting theologies were related but different.

In particular, Sojourner Truth, as a woman and former slave, intuitively and reflectively connected not only with Christ's suffering on the Cross as a penalty for sin but also with the sufferings and humiliations that Christ endured throughout his life. She could see the meaning of her sufferings in the sufferings of her Incarnate Lord. In contrast, Hodge focused on suffering primarily in the context of the Atonement.

I take it that Mouw's comments represent the contemporary theological consensus—not only in the Evangelical world but in the mainline world as well—on two points. First, theology must be contextualized. And second, as contextualized theologies emerge, they produce their own insights, with an excellent illustration being the creative appropriation and transformation of suffering by non-Western Christians and by Christians in marginalized social locations in Western communities.

Three Related Questions:

This raises for me three interconnected questions. First in what sense does theology remain catholic if it is thoroughly contextualized? Second, where does the demand for contextualization come from? I am speaking at the level of doctrine, as distinct from application to practical areas of pastoral counseling and church organization. And third, can we find a better alternative to the category of contextualization?

Reflections from 35 years of Asian experience:

To start answering these three questions, let me share two incidents out of my personal experience in Asia. The first took place in 1979 and 1981 when I traveled from Japan to a variety of Asian countries. As a personal aside to my main purposes, I took the time to visit both an evangelical and a mainline seminary in each country, to ask this question "What need do you see for an indigenous theological education and for a local restatement of the

Christian faith?" My findings were published in the *Japan Christian Quarterly* in 1982, as "A Busman's Holiday."

Everyone I interviewed agreed on the urgent need for a contextualized education in practical theology: that is, in ethics, social issues, counseling, homiletics, etc. Each culture had its own urgent issues: in other words, just as the Japanese have the Emperor System, other groups must deal with ancestor veneration, polygamy, and the like.

The mainline seminaries wanted a contextualized dogma, but they recognized that they had a long way to go. The Evangelicals felt no need for contextualized dogma, though neither did they have any objections to local scholars writing books of doctrinal theology (which at that time was rare among Evangelicals), and they certainly wanted to translate the classic theological texts into their own languages. As Lamin Senneh later pointed out, such acts of translation have, in their own right, tremendously subversive and liberating implications for affirming the validity of local cultures. But my investigations made it clear that these seminaries and churches, while somewhat open to contextualized doctrinal formulations, did not place a high priority on producing them. This was especially true of the Evangelicals.

I might add that in my experience not much has changed in the thirty-plus years since I took those trips. Just a few years ago, Brian Gerrish, retired professor of theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, commented that the only Protestant seminary remaining in North Korea used Hodge's *Systematic Theology* for its doctrine course(s). Whether that is an urban legend or not, I cannot say. And it may no longer be true, if it ever was. But if true, it certainly indicates that a strongly contextualized restatement of the Christian faith may not be a priority for this North Korean school nor its affiliated churches.

The second illustration comes from my teaching at Tokyo Christian University. We have a program in which students from Africa, from non-Japanese Asia, North America and Europe come for a four year liberal arts education with a major in theology and a strong focus on East Asian Culture. All the African and Asian students are deeply concerned that the church be effective and flourish in their home cultures. But they want to learn traditional theology—usually expressed somewhat naively as a desire to learn *the* biblical theology. There is a clear division between (a) the American and European students and (b) the Asian and African students: the Westerners instinctively understand contextualization, whereas I seldom hear requests from the Africans and Asians for resources with which to contextualize the theological creeds, affirmations of faith, or catechisms back home. Of course, interest in contextualize theology grows as they take courses in "contextualization" and study the history of church doctrine.

What Is the Source of the Demand for Contextualization: The New Churches or Cultural Developments in the West?

In this essay I want to ask if this demand to re-theologize the faith emanates from the "new" Christian communities themselves, or whether it is rooted in the developments in Western culture and theology over the last five hundred years? (It can, of course, be both.)

The Deep Pre-Western and Non-Western Roots of Contextualization (of a Sort):

At one level, this demand for contextualization—or at least for a sort of contextualization—has roots deeper than either the Western churches or the new churches. It is inherent in the Gospel itself with its focus on incarnation. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 settled for all time that the gentiles did not have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. The Eastern Orthodox churches have always insisted on vernacular liturgies (that is, the use of

such languages as Slavic, Bulgarian, Russian, and Syriac), and they have produced autonomously governed churches.

It is in the Protestant DNA to present the Gospel in the vernacular. Lamin Senneh in his many books has demonstrated how the translation into the vernacular can subvert traditional power relationships. It certainly valorizes the local language and thus its culture. One might argue—and I myself would in fact so argue—that the recent breakdown of the traditional patterns of authority in the Roman Catholic Church stem, in part, from the decision in Vatican II to use the local languages for the mass and its liturgy. The transition to the local languages de-mystified the Roman Catholic hierarchy and empowered the local people. It is no accident that the current Pope is slowly reauthorizing the Latin mass.

Catholicity as a Test for Contextualization in Doctrine and Creed:

I take it as a given, well attested in empirical fact, that as the Gospel moves into additional cultures or social locations, the new Christians will sometimes see lost or suppressed dimensions of the biblical truth and previously hidden implications in the structure of Christian doctrine. Surely Sojourner Truth understood certain elements in Scripture that Charles Hodge's privileged status in American society prevented him from noticing. And yet Hodge also was a Christian and in his university setting may have seen important issues, such as the relation of Christianity to science that did not occur to Sojourner Truth. But such insights are not the contextualization of doctrine, at least in my understanding. They are contributions to catholic doctrine that emerged out of specific cultural contexts and whose value are not limited to those contexts but can be tested by their corroboration in many other cultural contexts.[1]

It seems to me that one test for the validity of insights that emerge from new cultures or social locations is precisely their ability to translate into other cultures and locations. It is possible, for example, to analyze the Protestant Reformation in Germany as a case study of the indigenization of the church in a northern European, non-Latin culture. But the key insights of the Lutheran Reformation, such as Justification by Faith and the Three Solas, would have been merely local heresies if people in other cultures had not been able to appropriate them. John Calvin in France grasped and confirmed Luther's insights within the context of his French-speaking culture. Perhaps 16th Century France was not that different from 16th Century Germany, so it is crucial that Luther's fundamental re-affirmation of biblical doctrine, while generated in 16th Century Germany, continues to find confirmation among Christians in 21st Century Zimbabwe, Korea, and Panama. It originated in a highly specific context, but has proven to be catholic and thus genuinely Christian.

Or, to return to the example of Sojourner Truth, to be genuinely Christian, her understanding of suffering would have to find confirmation in other cultures and social locations. Her experience as a victim, as a slave, may have produced fresh appropriations and understandings of Christian doctrine, but that status by itself does not make those understandings catholic and therefore true. Only their acceptance by Christians in other

[1] To prevent any misunderstandings, please note the following: by "catholic," I am not referring to the Roman Catholic, Anglo-Catholic or any other Catholic" church with a "capital C." I am using "catholic" in its "small c" sense of that which is universal — in the sense of the Nicene Creed when it affirms that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." In this sense, to be Christian is to be catholic. Likewise, I use "orthodox" in the "small o" sense to refer to true or correct Christian doctrine and not to any of the Eastern Orthodox Churches, that is, to churches that are Orthodox with a "capital O." In this sense, to be Christian is to be not only catholic but also orthodox. I am a very "low-church" Evangelical who, at least in intension, is both catholic and orthodox.

contexts, including even those in contexts of authority and worldly power, would prove the catholicity of Sojourner's insights into suffering. (It may take a little longer for those in positions of responsibility to "get" Sojourner's theology, but they too are a part of the body of Christ.)

Franklin's Hypothesis:

With that background in place, I will propose a hypothesis: The insistence on contextualization at the level of doctrine stems, at least in large part, from the imperatives of Western cultural developments in the last few centuries. Contextualization is Western rooted. What I have in mind by contextualization is the claim that each cultural context may (must?) re-think the Christian faith from its own unique position. Each church must decide what is true for its and its situation and what is not. The truth of Christian doctrine, thus, is correlative to the context in which it is stated. The stronger the claim for contextualization, the more strongly the truth of Christian doctrine becomes tied to a specific context.

I wish to note that there is a counter-claim that seems closely associated with contextualization: namely, that certain social locations, such as the marginalized, have a preferred standing in the production of doctrine. And thus those Christians who have positions of privilege and power, or whose cultures have positions of privilege and power, must respectfully sit and quietly listen and neither judge nor critique those new statements of doctrine but meekly accept them. I have already made my position clear on this second point. It is wrong. It is one thing to say that all Christians, especially those whose voices have previously been suppressed, deserve respect. But it is quite another to say that any one culture or social location can define catholic doctrine.

However, my hypothesis, if correct, has yet another implication. To restate the hypothesis: the primary impetus for contextualization can be found in local developments in Western culture. If that is true, then we must not assume that contextualization is a proper part of catholic Christianity simply because it "works" for Westerners. Rather we must test the demand for contextualization by the criterion of catholicity, namely, by whether other Christians in other cultures and social locations will affirm it. Western culture must not assume that it is a preferred location for doing theology.

Let me repeat that I am not talking about contextualization in language, music, church governance, worship style, or pastoral care. I am talking of contextualization as a claim that the validity of Christian doctrine is connected to the culture in which that doctrine is stated and that Christians in other cultures cannot really "understand" and therefore cannot critique those theological insights. The more complete the restriction, the more complete the contextualization, and the more it stands in tension with Christian catholicity.

Diversity, Tolerance, and Contextualization

As a hint that the hypothesis might be correct, I point to the strong and now legally privileged requirement for diversity in North American contexts. Such an affirmation of diversity may well be essential for life in countries that thrive through immigration. But I sometimes hear Americans and Europeans criticize Japan for its lack of diversity. Japanese enjoy having foreign guests, but they make it very difficult for foreigners to participate fully in Japanese culture. Immigration is not valued here. Of course, this is an overgeneralization; nonetheless, the lack of concern for diversity rings true more often than not as a description of Japan. But is this lack of diversity really a flaw in Japanese culture? Who said that the Japanese should

be more diverse? Not the Japanese! It is almost always a criticism by outsiders. And the category of insider/outsider, that is, of *uchi/soto,* runs very, very deep into the roots of Japanese history and remains a key category for understanding this culture. Is it not possible that the demand for Japanese to be more diverse might be the imposition of the values of contemporary Western culture on an ancient and strong East Asian culture?

The theological stress on contextualization, it seems to me, is not that far from the cultural demand for diversity. Both make sense within a society that has lost a sense of catholic values and universal truth, is uncertain of its own particular values, and is left only with particular social locations and diverse cultural patterns within that society, if indeed we can still talk about "a" society. The only possible way for such a society to survive is to affirm that each world view and each truth is correct in its own terms, or at least that no one from the outside is in a position to critique that world view and that truth. In such a situation, the only true universal is a "tolerance" that forbids anyone to say his neighbor is wrong. And because such tolerance is crucial to the survival of what remains of the society, challenges to this "tolerance" provoke very intolerant reactions. This fits current Western society. And yet, quite ironically and inconsistently, it is often precisely we Westerners who stress that other societies should be diverse just as we are and that they should do their own contextualization of creed and catechism just as the different groups and individuals are doing in our society.

A Very Brief History of Western Culture in the Last 500 Years

Michael Allen Gillespie, in his book, *The Theological Origins of Modernity*,[2] argues that many of the iconic features of modern Western cultures can be traced back to the Nominalist movement at the end of the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Modern era, that is, to the late 14th through the early 16th Centuries. Before the Nominalist movement, Westerners from Parmenides (born ca. 515 B.C.) through Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274 A.D.) had mostly held that there was a universal truth that could be, at least partially, apprehended through reason. For Aquinas, this universal truth existed first in the mind of God; but then, because God created the world, that divine truth organized the structure of the world; and from thence, it also became internal to and present in the mind of man. Aquinas' key constructive device was the "form," of which there were many and which formed a system. This system of forms was present in God, a subset was in the world and constituted its order, and finally a still smaller group of these forms was present in the human mind. The same form could literally "be" at many places at once: in God, structuring nature, and informing the human mind and so understanding. Thus human reason could confidently know nature and could see at least a little way into the divine mind.

The Nominalists attacked the forms. The forms, they said, did not exist, except as mere names, thus the term nominalism. Only specific individuals exist, and we know them, at least those in "nature," when individual bodies produce some kind of response in our own bodily senses. There is no internal or necessary connection between the bodies in the world, between our sensations of those bodies, between the ideas in our mind, or in operations of the divine power insofar as humans can understand that divine power. Human reason cannot penetrate into God's mind; thus from a human point of view, God might be absolute omnipotence, and if omnipotent, then for all we can know, God might use that omnipotence in utterly arbitrary ways. There is nothing to prevent God, in the nominalist analysis, from creating some people

[2] Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

solely so that He can take a cruel joy in watching them wiggle like worms and scream in terror as the fires of hell consume them. And nature, as God's creation, might be a strictly arbitrary set of items operating in perfectly ways, for all that human reason can discern. And if there is an order to nature, imposed by God, the only way to find it is not by reason but through sense experience (this being one of the motivations for the emergence of empirical science in the modern sense).

This view of God of course was not acceptable to anyone at that time. (The nominalist view of nature, however, proved to be particularly fecund in the creation of modern, empirical science.) The Protestants accepted the notion of God as utterly free from human reason, but they could not stop there. They had to find a way to "tame" this God. Luther found a gentle God in the flesh of Christ, and Calvin in a God who bound himself to his covenant promises. Many Roman Catholics retreated back to Medieval scholasticism.

René Descartes, 1596 - 1650, tried to find security from the implications of nominalism in that act in which the self postulated itself—*I think, therefore I am*. Sir Francis Bacon, 1561 - 1626, reacted to his nominalist world by proposing a multi-generational effort to free human beings from their prejudices (his famous *Four Idols of the Mind)* and to form scientific societies which could promote an accurate and practical knowledge of the world. In the face of the nominalist critiques, many Europeans turned to a wholly mythological and superstitious belief in Hermeticism, which taught the existence of an ancient wisdom that had somehow peered beneath the surface of things and found the secret order of nature. Bacon, whose relation to Hermeticism is debated, certainly did believe in that secret order of causes, but he thought the way to find it was to run experiments, in more-or-less the modern sense, that would force those secrets into the open for human use. In a phrase coined by Bacon himself, "Knowledge is power!"

Thomas Hobbes, 1588 - 1679, accepted Calvinist and its nominalist theology and then transformed in two ways, both of which utterly destroyed its religious value. First:

> Hobbes accepts this doctrine of unconditional election, but he turns it on its head. If nothing we do on earth affects our salvation, then there is no sotriological reason to perform any earthly action. Properly understood, the nominalist doctrine of divine omnipotence and the Calvinist notion of election that follows from it thus undermine the authority of religion in secular affairs. Therefore, it is not the rejection of religion that produces modern natural and political science but the theological demonstration of religion's irrelevance for life in this world.[3]

Luther and Calvin, but especially Calvin, argued that divine providence extends to the smallest detail of existence. Nothing happens except by God's will. Hobbes, who accepted and extended the nominalist emphasis on individual bodies in the world, argued that everything that happens among those worldly objects is a form of "local motion." He also transformed Calvin's doctrine of providence into a belief in an unbreakable and absolute chain of "causality of local motions" extending to every detail and tiniest event.

> Hobbes maintained that everything happens as the result of God's predestining will, the same position that Luther and Calvin defended, but he supplemented this

[3] Gillespie, 210.

> theological assertion with the claim that this divine will operates in the world according to sheer mechanical causality.[4]

The Medieval Christians, such as Aquinas, had held God, creation, man, and reason in a balance. That, at least, was their goal. Human reason, though profoundly limited, could to some extent understand nature and, to a still lesser extent, grasp the ways of God. Thus neither God nor nature was completely arbitrary from a human or rational perspective, and human beings could and, at least in their own minds, did achieve a limited form of certainty about both God and nature. Nominalism shattered this synthesis. Like Humpty Dumpty, no one could put it back together again. The Reformation affirmed the nominalist commitment to God's absolute and sovereign power, but this affirmation came at a cost. The cost was an arbitrary and powerful God who so dominated both man and nature that this God increasingly became a problem for the integrity of both nature and man.

Descartes, Bacon, and Hobbes each tried to re-establish man and, through science, provide a foundation for a human knowledge of nature that would both enhance the quality of life and extend its length, and that would allow humans to govern themselves free from any arbitrary God. Their goal was a science of man and nature that would be universally true. In that sense, they were the heirs of the Western tradition.

The Enlightenment, that is, the heirs of men such as Descartes, Bacon, and Hobbes, continued the attempt to develop a universal science and a form of society that was universal, reasonable, tolerant, and harmonious. For 150 years, Europeans attempted to follow through on the grand vision of the generation of Descartes and Hobbes.

In the natural sciences, the Enlightenment thinkers and scientists were partially successful. The next four or five generations of Europeans saw dramatic improvements in navigation, astronomy, the development of the telescope and the invention of the microscope, biological taxonomy, geology, geography, accurate clocks, map making, and more. But in the end the Enlightenment failed.

Most Enlightenment thinkers could not affirm the Reformer's path to a merciful God through the Incarnation or by covenantal promises, but neither were they atheists. Rather they tried to tame the naked God of nominalism by moving towards Hobbes' form of deism. Such a Hobbesian God had only one role: to explain why things exist at all with their particular laws of motion that can be discovered by science. But a Hobbesian deity does not interact with the universe. Unfortunately, belief for such a God could not be sustained in the light of its utter inability to provide comfort in a time of trial, nor could it survive the increasingly vocal and skeptical assaults of atheistic and secular philosophers such as David Hume (1711 - 1776). Early modern science was intimately tied with that God—as best illustrated by Hobbes' transformation of Calvinist omnipotence, predestination, and providence into a gapless skein of physical causes governing motion. So when the god of deism started to fall, so did the classical sciences of early modernity which had been built on that view of God. Hume's attacks on the deistic God were powerful, but his attacks on science as pursued by Descartes, Bacon, Hobbes, Galileo, and Newton were even more convincing.

The collapse of the Enlightenment project coincides almost perfectly with the end of the 1700s and the start of the 1800s. The 19th Century scholars studied in detail the new cultures that explorers, traders, colonizers, and missionaries had found. The more they learned of these cultures, the more remote any notion of a universal human nature became. Values

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[4] Gillespie, 220.

differed widely among these diverse cultures, leading some scholars to postulate an ethical and cultural relativity. At first, these relativities seem restricted to human nature and culture and had nothing to do with science in the sense of Descartes, Galileo, and Newton. But even that bedrock of scientific certainty began to crumble. The 19th Century proved that many different geometries and algebras could and did in fact exist. By the beginning of the 20th Century, space and time, became relative. Newton had postulated an absolute space and time whose function was to be the location for the never ending skein of causality governing the motion of every object. Later, quantum mechanics directly challenged the early modern network of absolute causality. A certain randomness permeated the fabric of nature, making impossible the kinds of predictions that Calvinist notions of providence had encourage the 17th and 18th Century scientists to look for.

Two figures mark the end of the Enlightenment: Philosopher Immanual Kant (1724 - 1804) and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 - 1834). Kant thought of himself as the quintessential Enlightenment thinker, but in fact he undercut the Enlightenment with his view that sense experience does not give us neutral objective facts, but is itself, at least partially, a subjective world from which our own contribution can never be disentangled. In other words, the only world we have, including the world of nature, is a world as we have interpreted it. Sciences cannot appeal to a neutral experience of the world as the basis for their experiments. This helped doom Enlightenment optimism that through science we could get a true and certain knowledge of the world on which to build our cultures and our scientific enterprises. Schleiermacher helped drive the nail into the coffin of the Enlightenment through his insistence that all knowledge and especially all theological, cultural, artistic, and ethical knowledge is hermeneutical. In other words, humans do not just interpret reality, but the interpretations help create the reality that they interpret.

The 19th Century has been called the age of Romanticism in its rejection of catholic values and universal science in favor of that which is local, limited, unique, and time-bound, whether we are speaking of exotic cultures in all their particularities and otherness or our own cultures in all their idiosyncrasies and familiarity. In either case, it is different humans, it was thought, who make these different cultures and therefore each particular culture ought to be evaluated in its uniqueness and treasured for its uniqueness, reflecting the uniqueness of those humans who created them. Universal and certain truth, if it did exist, was to be rejected because of a preference for the local and specific. The catholic and universal disappeared into the particular, and reason, in the sense of something objective that applied everywhere, was made subordinate to the emotional, to the will, and to whatever is deeply felt precisely because such emotions connected with the concrete and particular.

The human being, as subject, as actor, as agent, as creator of his own world, was now central. The same applied to groups of human beings, each group was also seen as creating it own culture which was specific and local and therefore to be valued in its particularity. The emphasis on human beings as creators of and contributors to each local situation resulted in a *Culture of Interpretation.* A contemporary scholar, Roger Lundin, used this phrase as the title of his book, *Culture of Interpretation: The Christian Faith and the Postmodern World.*[5] This work of literary criticism, focusing on 19th Century America, claims that American literature increasingly celebrated the self-creating self and this led to the dominance of the category of interpretation for understanding anything. Interpretation became central precisely because, in the minds of the literary giants of 19th Century American, we human beings create the

[5] Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. in 1993.

worlds in which we live. A neutral uninterpreted world on which to build a universal science or a universal culture does not exist; or if it does, it is not available to us. This had been the point of Kant and Schleiermacher as well.

The result is that we all live in our own "worlds" as formed and shaped by each individual and each culture. Thus, we live in a world that has to be interpreted by anyone who wishes to enter into it. Truth, value, and the self are all wrapped in these humanly created self-identities and worlds. Notice the human centeredness in all this. In a later book, *The Promise of Hermeneutics,* Lundin makes the argument that: "…interpretation, like artistic creation, is a form of human action and is thus subject to the same vicissitudes and open to the same possibilities as all human actions."[6]

I create my world, not as Descartes thought, by an aboriginal act of self-postulation which reason can understand and on which reason can then built an objective truth, a universal science, and an enlightened culture. Rather in today's contemporary view, I create my new world by interpreting the world as given me and by interpreting my past world as I create a story to explain myself to myself. From this created and thus interpreted self-identity, I enter into the identities, the personal worlds, and the cultures that other people have made for themselves. I do so the only way I can: by interpreting these "others." And other people must interpret my identity and my worlds if they wish to understand and know me. The same process of creation and interpretation extends to the level of entire cultures, whole societies, and in some sense to complete civilizations. It is human "all the way up and all the way down," it is interpretation "worlds without end," and it is contextualization "inside and out."

Back to Theological Contextualization.

This is the postmodern world of the West. It is a world it which the contextualization of doctrine seems less an imperative and more a flat and perhaps trivial description of the inevitable. From this perspective, a non-contextualized and thus interpretation-free doctrine is literally unimaginable. In addition, from this perspective, the catholicity of doctrine is inherently suspect. From this position, catholic doctrine may be impossible because there are no truths that are universal and free from human creation and interpretation. In addition, for some contemporary Westerners, catholic doctrine is an illicit and, what is far worse, an "intolerant" attempt to impose one group's act of self-creation on another, thus denying the other the right to its own authentic voice and act of self-creation.

For this reason, I return to my original question. Does the "demand" for contextualization, at least of doctrine, really emerge authentically out of the new churches, or is the "demand" simply an unreflective imposition of Western values on the new churches. It can of course be both, but is it?

The ancient Jerusalem council made it clear that the gentiles did not have to become Jewish in order to be members of the Body of Christ. The church in each local culture or nation should have the right, if it wishes, to use its own language, to govern itself, and to implement its own form of worship. It can certainly produce theological textbooks and catechisms that speak to the central issues in its local situation. All that is a gift to the local church from the Bible and the catholic church.

But what if some of the local churches are less interested in reformulating, recreating, or reinterpreting the actual content of Christian doctrine than in participating in the catholic and

[6] Published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. in 1999.

biblical heritage of the universal body of Christ? There is a comfort and security in orthodox doctrine. Maybe that is why the seminary in North Korea, facing unimaginable persecution, choose Hodge's *Systematic Theology* over newer and more "relevant" texts or even over creating its own. Hodge's goal was not to re-imagine Christian doctrine, but to re-present the one and only true Christian doctrine in the most objective and universal terms that he could.

Contextualization and the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

Earlier I suggested a criterion for evaluating doctrinal insights that emerge out of the needs of a particular cultural context: namely, do other churches, in other cultures, and in other eras affirm that new insight as authentically biblical and orthodox in their own cultural situations. The more an insight is universally accepted, the better its claim to be genuinely Christian.

If the theory and impetus for contextualization emerges out of the cultural dynamics of the West, as I think it does, then it will be authentically Christian only to the extent that other churches find it useful and obviously biblical and orthodox in their situations. Just because we Westerners, and those educated in Western-style seminaries and universities, are literally incapable of imagining a non-interpreted reality, we should not presume to know just how useful the category of contextualization will prove in non-Western churches.

A Better Way

In place of contextualization, I would like to propose a more catholic way of dealing with the interaction of Christianity with culture. The Bible and indeed all orthodox Christian teaching has three foci: creation, sin, and redemption. The doctrine of creation teaches the goodness of what God has created. It follows that if God is the ultimate creator of all cultures, then each particular culture must be good. The goodness of each culture is the primary assumption of contextualization. While many contemporary Westerners would affirm the goodness of each culture, they are less likely to do so because of God's creative act but out of a sense of tolerance for each human act of creation and interpretation. And as a Westerner, I personally would agree that cultures are human enterprises created through human means. But at the same time, as a Christian I would insist that behind each culture stands the Creator, and that means that each culture is good. Thus the gospel says "Yes!" to each culture in all the ways that Acts 15 affirms and the Reformation emphasized.

And yet the Christian faith also affirms the reality of sin. This sin extends to each person, but also to each group as a group, to each nation as a nation, and indeed to creation as a whole. Thus the Gospel also says a firm "No!" to each culture, tribe, nation, and civilization. It says 'No' to ethical practices such as widow burning or putting financial gain ahead of the good of our neighbor, no matter how deeply "cultural" those practices may be or how strongly affirmed as scientific.

It is always easier to see the speck in the other culture's eye than the log in one's own. The 'No' comes to the Western cultures and older churches as well as to the new and non-Western ones. I cannot deny, precisely as a Westerner who has been decisively shaped by the history of Western culture outlined above, that humans create their cultures through originative acts of interpretation. But it seems to me that the Gospel also says 'No' to some of our Western values that stem from that recognition, such as the denigration of the universal truth (and thus catholic doctrine). The Gospel also says a firm 'No' to our acceptance of "tolerance" as the primary value that determines all others, precisely because our modern,

Western form of "tolerance" masks our equally modern denial that other values can be universal and incumbent on all peoples, whether or not those values are a part of their culture.

The Gospel will say 'No' to non-Western cultures as well. Sometimes the church as it is rooted in another culture will take on some of the negative aspects of those cultures. Let me take the Japanese church as an example, both good and bad. In some ways, the Japanese church looks very Western, with pews in rows, a standard pulpit, and a piano or organ; and this occasionally surprises Western observers.[7] But as far as I can see, these are well accepted by both Christian and non-Christian Japanese and present no barrier to evangelism. But….this is *not* to say the church in Japan is Western! On the contrary, the church in Japan is deeply and authentically Japanese.

The Japanese church itself has heard the Gospel's 'No' to Japanese culture in certain key areas. For example, the Protestant church in Japan has done an extraordinary job of unmasking and then confronting some of the "great" obstacles to evangelism in this country, such as the emperor system and the concomitant danger, always lurking just beneath the surface, of a re-emergent militarism. In other ways, however, the Japanese church may not have heard the 'No' with enough clarity. I have in mind, as one example, the pattern of social relations between the members and their families and between the members and their pastors. It seems to me that all too often, these social relations have paralyzed Japanese Christians, making it socially awkward to "talk up" Christ outside the worship service itself. These relations have also produced a typically Japanese focus on the warm emotional bonds between the people in a little congregation, where these intimate bonds discourage the growth of that flock. A few extraordinary Japanese pastors have been able to break through these barriers, but they are rare. So I would suggest as a possibility that such human relations remain one of the central and most intractable barriers to evangelism in Japan. Therefore the Gospel must say "No" to some aspects of these relationships even though they stand close to the core of Japanese identity and even though changing them is both painful in the extreme and also a very slow process from any human point of view.[8]

In my opinion, this dialectic of Yes and No, of creation and sin, is more authentically Christian than theories of contextualization insofar as those theories are merely the by-product of some very dubious features of Western culture, features that, in my opinion, must stand under the No of the Gospel.

There is another dialectic that must also be affirmed, and that is the rhythm between the localism of the Jerusalem council and the catholicity of the church and its core teachings. One of the huge advantages of the recent movement of the church into non-Western cultures is that it can help us Western Christians to be more catholic. Some modern development in Western theology may not prove acceptable in the new churches. Thus those developments must be rejected, no matter how appropriate to the West, as a violation of the catholicity of the church.

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[7] In the Japanese case, the interesting and most powerful cultural conflict in the church is not between Western and Eastern, but generational, between the old and the young. The issue of church music as it divides the generations of Japanese would be perfectly and instantly recognizable by any active Evangelical churchgoer from America or Europe.

[8] For the best recent analysis of Japanese social relations, see Takie Sugiyama Lebra, *The Japanese Self in Cultural Logic* (Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press) 2004.

By “acceptance in the new churches,” I do not mean any quick or immediate reaction. There may be technical issues of science or philosophy that require an extensive education before their underlying structure becomes clear even to a Westerner or Japanese. Likewise, the initial rejection of some developments in Western theology by the new churches may be motivated by those aspects in the local culture to which the Gospel must say a loud “No.” I have in mind, for example, the widespread teachings of the “Prosperity Gospel” of which the more extreme versions, in my best judgment, are wrong in any cultural context. A non-Western church, dominated by the prosperity gospel, may well reject the deepening understanding of suffering that we see in some Western and some non-Western churches. Nonetheless, if some contemporary Evangelical theology in the West fails to find acceptance over time in the broad range of non-Western cultures, even by their most reflective members, then they must be abandoned as failing the mark of catholicity.

Thus, I would suggest that in the place of the category of contextualization, we return to the more classical themes of the Yes and No in Christ, of the Creation and the Fall, and of the dialogue between localism and the catholicity of the church. Whereas contextualization is a very comfortable category for Westerners, for all the reasons that I have shown in this essay, the more classical themes may prove profoundly uncomfortable for us Westerners. Already the African churches have provided significant criticism of our Western affirmation of the civil rights of homosexuality. To be catholic, the Western churches may find that they have to say ‘No’, in the name of Christ, to the most “enlightened and tolerant” values of their own societies.

Yes and No, creation and sin, catholicity and localism—all are brought to a head in the redemption offered in Jesus Christ. It is precisely because of the promise of redemption that each person, church, and culture can deal honestly with the ‘No’ that they may hear in the Gospel while at the same time, anticipating with hope and joy the pure ‘Yes’ of God’s kingdom. It is precisely because of the promise of redemption that each person, church, and culture—as purified and forgiven through the Cross—can anticipate and even now partially experience its contribution to the Kingdom of God in all of its Resurrection power and joy.

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