

Suburban Evangelical Individualism: Syncretism, (Harvie) Conn-textualization, or Something Else?

J. Nelson Jennings, PhD

Associate Professor of World Mission, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, USA

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Introduction.....	1
Inputs toward Conn’s view of “Syncretistic Evangelical Individualism”	2
<i>Categorization Problem: What is Syncretism?</i>	3
<i>Conn’s Religious Description of Evangelicals’ “Mythical” Picture of the City</i>	4
<i>Conn on Contextualization and Syncretism</i>	5
<i>Analysis of Contextualization and Syncretism</i>	7
<i>Conn’s Labeling Suburban Evangelical Individualism as Syncretistic</i>	9
Conclusion	9
Works Cited	11
Endnotes.....	13

Introduction

Towards the end of his 1994 book *The American City and the Evangelical Church: A Historical Overview*, Harvie Conn laments certain features of suburbanized evangelical Christianity in the United States, most especially what he sees as a permeating individualism. What is striking about the following block of quotations is the somewhat sudden—and from what I can tell somewhat unique among Conn’s writings—appearance (three times) of the term *syncretism*, in adverbial and adjectival forms, in reference to the bulk of contemporary U.S. evangelicalism:

People...are now creating their own urban centers out of the destination they can reach by car in a reasonable length of time.... In this decentralized world the church loses its grip on local geographical neighborhood and is transformed into a megachurch, twenty-five minutes away by car.... Is the megachurch ... a dangerous sample of modernity in which the evangelical *syncretistically* adopts patterns for the church that will eventually destroy it? [Furthermore,] is [the megachurch] so controlled by a desire to satisfy the felt needs of individual concerns that it is in danger of moving its members again to yet another outer limit of choices and ecclesiastical options? Will it leave behind once more the poor as part of its mono-social constituency? The individualism that has been characteristic of American culture from its beginnings will continue to impact the evangelical message for and about the city. Bible-believing pulpits will continue to understand persons, sin, the gospel, and redemption in individualistic terms.... The kingdom continuity of a shalom of wholeness and justice fulfilled in Christ will be reduced to the individual assurance of peace in some inward, spiritual sense. Among suburban white and Asian “model minority” churches, this *syncretized* message will be especially strong.... The history of the evangelical church in the American city has been liberally sprinkled with a cultural pessimism toward things urban. *Syncretistically*

borrowed from a predominantly middle-class white mentality, anti-urban sentiments have continually surfaced throughout the history recorded in this book (Conn 1994a, 191-194).

I sat up and took notice the first time I read these pages in Conn's book several years ago. Ever since then I've been mulling over what Conn meant by his use of such a poignant, missiological term as "syncretism," usually reserved for different types of settings than U.S. suburbs.

This brief and modest paper has two objectives that I hope will help achieve an overall goal. First, I hope to unravel just a bit Harvie Conn's understanding of "syncretism" and "contextualization." The second objective is to understand, within Conn's analysis, how suburban evangelical individualism can thus be described as "syncretistic." The main goal I have in mind is a sharpening of operative biblical notions of syncretism and of contextualization.

Inputs toward Conn's view of "Syncretistic Evangelical Individualism"

We need to take a few minutes to think about Dr. Harvie M. Conn himself, to see how he came to write the kind of things we have just heard. By way of personal recollections, no doubt many readers could give numerous anecdotes about a dear missiological father and brother who went to be with Christ back in August, 1999, in his mid-60s (Sibley). The first time I ever heard of Harvie Conn was in the early 1980s during a conversation between two recent graduates of Westminster Theological Seminary, where Conn taught for almost three decades, from 1972 to 1999. These two young pastors giggled as they remembered Professor Conn coming into the classroom with necktie off-center and otherwise having a somewhat disheveled appearance. Reportedly his lectures were not detached, logically arranged treatises as much as they were warm, passionate appeals to service. The first and only time I met Conn was a few years later, when he and I intersected at a church missions conference, he as the main speaker and I as a newly approved, itinerating missionary. Harvie didn't disappoint my expectations based on previous reports, either as a speaker or in personal conversations.

Born a Canadian in 1933, Conn served as a church-planter in New Jersey starting in 1957, right after he had completed his undergraduate studies at Calvin College and his MDiv at Westminster Seminary. It wasn't too long before Harvie went to Korea, where he preached in various churches, taught New Testament at the General Assembly Theological Seminary in Seoul, and ministered compassionately and evangelistically among red light districts. It is this ministry among prostitutes and pimps for which Conn's service in Korea is best known.

During his long tenure at Westminster Conn taught apologetics and missions, led mission trips to India and Uganda, edited the journal *Urban Mission*, founded what became the Center for Urban Theological Studies (CUTS), and wrote extensively. His combined evangelistic and justice-mercy zeal shines forth in the account once given to me by Rev. Edward Kasaija of Kampala, Uganda, of how Conn organized once a "garbage evangelism" activity of collecting piled-up Kampala street garbage while preaching the gospel to all bystanders. Conn was a reformed missiological pacesetter (which helps to explain my own interest in building on his work, given my reformed connections), including in how he insisted on taking an interdisciplinary approach to missiology. Perhaps his influential 1984 *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Dialogue* (Conn 1984) exhibits Conn's interdisciplinary instincts as well as any other publication. That book also shows his fearless interaction with important,

cutting-edge thinking, since, as Enoch Wan so ably points out, much of what Conn is wrestling with in that book is Charles Kraft's "dynamic equivalence" model of contextualization set forth in his still recently published book *Christianity in Culture* (Wan 1996, 128). Theologically Conn at times appeared somewhat enigmatic: while he was unquestionably evangelical and, moreover, situated at that J. Gresham Machen-founded bastion of conservative reformed theology, Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, some evangelicals saw him influenced too much by ecumenical or "liberal" theology, for example in how the notion of "contextualization" was to be defined (Hesselgrave and Rommen, 1989, 34).¹

Categorization Problem: What is Syncretism?

Throw in Conn's emphasis on urban matters of justice, and we indeed have much upon which to chew for our overall topic of contextualization and syncretism. In order to proceed effectively, next we need briefly to step away from direct consideration of Conn and look at the general notion of "syncretism." Conn's provocative use of that category, in reference to North American evangelicalism, was the starting point for this whole consideration. Aside from Conn, how do some selected others define "syncretism"?

We only have space here to cite a few representative examples. I will mention three general positions, moving along a scale from understanding syncretism in negative terms to seeing it as both normal and acceptable.

Evangelicals in general will resonate with the first more standard and instinctive notion of "syncretism," indicated by the very term itself as "bringing together creeds" or "mixing religions." In syncretism the Christian faith is distorted, skewed, obscured, fundamentally altered, or even obliterated by being unduly influenced by another religion, usually previously present within a particular setting. This negative view is the assumed and unstated definition in many studies (Arnold 1996, Shaw and Van Engen 2003, Hiebert, Shaw and Tiéno 1999).² Related is the understanding of syncretism as "the blending of Christian beliefs and practices with those of the dominant *culture* so that Christianity loses [sic] its distinctive nature and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture" (Emphasis mine. Van Rheenen 2004). While we are consciously setting aside for now looking at Conn's view of syncretism, we might suggest at this point that this notion of "the blending of Christian [faith with] culture" is at least close to what he might have meant in labeling suburban Christianity as syncretistic.

A slightly more nuanced, and somewhat less negative, view of syncretism is that expressed by André Droogers as "*contested* religious interpenetration" (Droogers 1989, 20-21). In part at least, Droogers suggests that syncretism is "in the eyes of the beholder." No group ever calls itself syncretistic, and in particular it is those in religious authority who make accusations of syncretism. This definition tries to avoid problems of both strictly subjectivistic and objectivistic notions of syncretism, and it seeks to incorporate the inherent controversial nature of syncretistic religious expressions.

In a way that seeks to avoid knee-jerk controversy and negativity with regards to syncretism, Robert Schreiter suggests viewing it as the necessary synthesis that occurs as part of religious identity formation. Understanding this process, which occurs most particularly in the midst of

cross-cultural interaction, in a way similar to how the social sciences and postcolonial writing treat syncretistic identify formation would help achieve at least a balance between viewing religious syncretism positively and negatively. Synthesis and syncretism can thus be understood as two sides of the same coin, or even overlapping grids for evaluating the same process (Schreiter 1998, 62-83). Per this view, syncretism is not only not negative, but it is an inherent aspect of religious faith within changing contexts.

Negative religious mixing; religious interpenetration that is either negative or not depending on the position of the one pronouncing judgment; necessary synthesis of religious identity: which of these categories might best encapsulate Harvie Conn's description of suburban evangelical individualism as syncretistic?

Without a doubt we can confirm the fact that Conn's categorization of suburban evangelical individualism as syncretistic is a negative criticism. Moreover, given Conn's basic evangelical commitments, we can see clear connections between Conn's framework and what we have termed here to be a standard and instinctive notion of syncretism as religious mixing. But lest we get our categorizing cart before our horse of genuinely understanding Conn's own notion of syncretism on its own terms, we need to hear him further speak for himself.

Conn's Religious Description of Evangelicals' "Mythical" Picture of the City

Of particular relevance to the entire matter at hand is Conn's description of what he calls U.S. evangelicals' *mythical*, negative picture of the city (Conn 1987, 15-34). Calling that image "mythical" is Conn's way of placing Christians' negative instincts about the city within a specifically *religious* realm:

Is the basic problem the failure of evangelicals to see the mythological character of their picture of the city? A myth is not a scientific creation, though it may be supported by the facts unearthed by science. It is rather a creation of the human heart designed to explain our cosmos and its relationship to God and our fellow human beings. It is intended as a rhetorical question asking, who are we, who is God, what is our world? (Conn 1987, 26-27)

Conn's explanation of myth here is further indication of just how explicit he wants to be in identifying U.S. evangelicals' view of the urban world as a *religious* view. He hardly could have been more straightforward in spelling out the five elements of what his reformed missiological predecessor, J. H. Bavinck, called "the continent of the universal religious consciousness" (Bavinck 1966, 35-106). Elsewhere Conn terms Bavinck's constellation the "five 'magnetic points'" of religion, and he practically uses the same language here in describing evangelicals' mythical vision of the city³ (Conn 1994b). The main point for us here is that Conn sees the evangelical anti-urban bias—which will connect with how he sees evangelical suburban individualism—as religious in character.

Conn lists four roadblocks to "demythologizing" evangelicals' anti-urban myth: "our cultural reading of the Bible," equating the American dream (and Christian ideals) with a "middle-class dream," "the privatization of our faith," and racism (Conn 1987, 28-32). Clearly the second and

third roadblocks relate directly to our objectives in this paper. What we can say with measured confidence at this point is that, given their co-conspirator status alongside an explicitly religious anti-urban mythology, evangelicals' middle-class ideology and privatization of faith, i.e., the main elements of suburban individualism, for Conn also are explicitly religious, mythological "creations of the human heart." That would explain Conn's view of syncretism—at least in terms of how he calls evangelical suburban individualism syncretistic—as the straightforward, instinctive understanding we listed as the first (and most negative) of three general views of what constitutes syncretism, namely the mixing of religions and corresponding distortion of true Christianity.

Conn on Contextualization and Syncretism

However, we should recall here that, in describing that instinctive view of syncretism, we noted the two-fold view of mixing religions and of mixing religion and culture. We also suggested that perhaps Conn's view of suburban individualism was more of the latter type. We have just seen, though, how he sees suburban individualism as religious myth, not just cultural preference. Were we just way off the mark earlier in suggesting where Conn might come down, or does this say more about the intricacy of his twin notions of syncretism and contextualization?

I believe we can begin to see more clearly here how nuanced and multi-faceted Conn's thinking is. This helps to explain as well how he has been somewhat of an enigma, whether at Westminster Seminary or within the Evangelical Missiological Society. Conn is difficult to classify neatly as a thinker, including in how he understood the notion of contextualization. It's not that Conn shifted around a great deal over the years. It's just that he wove together so many threads, and he did so in his own unique and fearless style.

Perhaps the clearest and most concise⁴ single place to go to get Conn's nuanced view of contextualization is his 1978 *EMQ* article, "Contextualization: A New Dimension for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutic" (Conn 1978). It is important to note first the *timing* of this article. Contextualization discussions had become increasingly prominent since Shoki Coe's 1972 introduction of the term itself, and this particular issue of *EMQ* was devoted solely to that topic. Charles Kraft's 1979 *Christianity in Culture* was set to be published, and Conn in this article is already incorporating Kraft's monumental "dynamic equivalence" thesis (Conn 1978, 42, 46).⁵ It had been about six years since Conn had moved from Korea to Philadelphia to begin teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary (Sibley)—a period of time sufficient for fresh insights to have emerged and begun to crystallize within a new cultural setting.⁶ The article is thus on the cutting edge of wider discussions as well as coming out of Conn's own vibrant cross-cultural experience.

At the same time, Conn's synthesizing mind incorporates much more than simply the latest trends and his own personal interests. His reformed fabric utilizes Calvin's "covenant dimension of doing theology" that unites "thought and action, truth and practice." Conn's awareness of worldwide theological emphases frees him to examine "the theology of the North Atlantic" from a certain critical distance. Together with his appreciation of what the social sciences—especially including anthropology—must contribute to theological and missiological discussions (Conn 1984), these multi-faceted inputs make Conn's sense of contextualization that of "the covenant

conscientization of the whole people of God to the hermeneutical obligations of the gospel in their culture” (Conn 1978, 43). For Conn, “The new dimension of covenant contextualization adds [to the traditional evangelical hermeneutic’s stress on the normativity of Scripture the importance of] the concrete situation, [without which] the Christian faith runs the risk of losing itself in cultural irrelevancy or ethnocentricity” (Conn 1978, 44).⁷

Conn’s holistic, interdisciplinary, and covenantal notion of contextualization is mirrored in his broadened and redefined notion of syncretism:

Every culture, in its self-preserving and integrating capacity, carries its own ‘hidden’ methodologies to which man as culture bearer and covenant keeper is always liable. The danger of syncretism is always stronger when the ‘translator’ of biblical truth into the life of that culture is not aware of its pull, or thinks the possibility of its pull less likely in his situation. Our fullest freedom of covenant expression in culture remains in being bound by the hermeneutical methodology of God himself. The Reformation heritage of Scripture interpreting Scripture (*analogia fidei*) continues to provide the hermeneutical key for our struggle against cultural idols, against our repression of the divine questions, our response to contemporary answers (Conn 1978, 45).⁸

Conn here is challenging—whether explicitly or implicitly—two assumptions. First, so-called and allegedly pristine indigenous, non-Western cultures are not prone towards rebellion against God. Second, select other cultures, in particular those of Western heralds of so-called and allegedly pure biblical theology and ministry methods, also are not prone towards rebellion against God. The latter point emerges explicitly in Conn’s other writings as well, for example in this exhortation to practitioners of ethnographic research studies:

Always remember that you are prone to interpret out of an ethnocentric reality, a deep-lying assumption that your own culture is significantly superior to others. A great deal has been written about the dangers of ethnocentrism in interpretation because of the assumption that the scientific method is totally objective. However, ‘ethnocentric assumptions may unconsciously influence’ the research process itself (Conn and Ortiz 2001, 285).

Conn just as well could have said here that ethnographic researchers are prone to interpret out of a mythical, syncretistic assumption of ethnocentric, cultural superiority. Such a manner of expression helps us see how Conn’s understanding of syncretism, like his understanding of contextualization, was holistic, interdisciplinary, and covenantal—and an ongoing concern, not just a one-time event. To oversimplify the matter, but to emphasize Conn’s thinking in terms of the deep, personal, conscience-rooted submission or rebellion against God inherent in what is termed contextualization and syncretism, right contextualization is obedient “conscientization,” whereas wrong contextualization, or syncretism, is disobedient “conscientization.” For Conn the role of human beings’ ingrained religious conscience is pervasive in all areas of life, whether in so-called animistic religious beliefs and practices, so-called scientific methodologies, so-called suburbanite anti-urban mythological views, or so-called suburbanite individualistic life patterns. Insofar as any of those religious myths might combine with the Christian faith so as to alter or even nullify biblical teaching, such a resulting belief or practice should be labeled “syncretism.”

It should thus be no surprise to read Conn's statements about syncretistic suburban Christianity. What is surprising is that he did not write such statements more often.

Analysis of Contextualization and Syncretism

Having just focused on Conn's twin understandings of contextualization and syncretism, and thus having noted how and why he calls suburban evangelical individualism "syncretistic," we must move explicitly towards directing our thoughts towards the overall theme of sharpening notions of contextualization and syncretism by seeking to answer the question posed by the title of this paper: Is Harvie Conn right in calling suburban evangelical individualism syncretistic, or is this just an idiosyncratic view of Conn's that we might appreciate but should basically ignore in terms of how it affects our own views, or is so-called suburban evangelical individualism something altogether different in terms of how we might classify it?

My own up-front answer to this three-fold question is "for the most part," "a wee bit," and "no— with qualification." I must explain myself, of course, first by noting briefly the primary inputs into my own understanding of contextualization and syncretism. Personally and contextually, I grew up in the Southern United States, in a monolingual (English-speaking) Christian home. My neighborhood and local church were both suburban (although the church facility was located close to "downtown") and racially segregated, while the local public schools I attended through high school were racially integrated. After majoring in baseball, philosophy and mathematics at a primarily white, upper-middle-class private Southern-U.S. university, I embraced reformed theology (not necessarily to imply a causal connection) and sensed God's call into full-time gospel ministry. That led me to study at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, where, strangely enough, I now teach. Between 1986 and 1999 my family and I lived primarily in Japan, an extended sojourn that transformed us into bilingual and so-called third-culture people. Working on a PhD in non-Western Christianity, based in Edinburgh, Scotland, further exposed us to much of the rest of the world.

Intellectually and academically there of course have been several influences, including examples during my high school and college years of men and women who deeply respected and followed the Bible, even when that meant thinking and living differently than one's surroundings. More recently there have been two groups of important inputs for me. One is connected with Edinburgh, at least in terms of my interaction with them, namely Andrew Walls, Lamin Sanneh and Kwame Bediako. Walls' historical picture of the universal-particular character—or pilgrim-homing instincts—of Christianity, Sanneh's explanation of some of the implications of Christianity's translatability, and Bediako's pastoral courage in pursuing implications of vernacular Scriptures have formed what for me and others has been a guiding constellation shining in the night sky of multicultural displacement. Another set—an interesting pair, actually—would be ecclesiastically and self-consciously more of a reformed persuasion. One would have to be Conn himself, as an example of a missiologist who loves the Bible and is unafraid of encouraging multidisciplinary input into theological formulations. The other would be my former colleague at Tokyo Christian University, Hisakazu Inagaki. I was privileged to coauthor a book with Inagaki Sensei, consisting of my English translations of some of his Japanese material and some of my writings on Japanese theology associated with my doctoral research (Inagaki and Jennings, 2000). A Christian philosopher and Reformed Church in Japan

elder, Inagaki has a hybrid, Japanese-Dooyeweerdian outlook on the world and its component parts that has helped to give me an intellectual system for appreciating both the complexity and the interconnectedness of what happens throughout this sin-racked creation.

Knowing all of that should help you unravel a bit my appreciation of Conn in relation to my own understanding of Christian contextualization as the continual “particularization” of the universal⁹ Christian faith within particular, multi-faceted settings. Crucial to my own use of this Wallsian universal-particular scheme for understanding contextualization (both as particular manifestations of the Christian faith, as well as the ongoing processes of adjustment to particular situations) are at least three, interrelated qualifying elements: first, the dynamic relationship between a personal covenant Lord and his responsible subjects; second, the transcendent character of this covenant Lord coupled with his immanent involvement with his world; and third, the normative and fully authoritative character of the Lord’s word that, at the same time, speaks flexibly within each situation into which the Holy Spirit guides his word’s translation into that language and context.

Given that operative understanding of contextualization, syncretism then becomes the loss of universal, transcendent and normative traits of the Christian faith, due to a culture’s “pull” towards autonomy. Outside (etic) input becomes marginalized or even eliminated. Sins of omission, e.g., not loving one’s enemies, result from this failure to pay attention to God’s transcendent and normative commands; sins of commission, e.g., sexual perversions, flourish due to the lack of restraint that should be brought to bear on people’s lives by God’s transcendent and normative commands. There is a protection of the status quo against all critique, no matter what normative standards of justice and mercy might attempt to speak into the situation. Finally, what is genuinely local and flexible is reified into something allegedly universal and normative—which becomes problematic when other local situations are encountered.

Syncretism in this sense becomes more particular, more multifaceted, and more ongoing in its occurrences than in the instinctive “mixing of religions” sense. Because contextualization always involves a type of particular and multifaceted “mixing” of the universal-normative and the local-flexible, it would be problematic to understand syncretism only within that type of one-time religious “mixing” or “interpenetration” category—especially insofar as the Christian faith thus syncretized would be understood to enter a new situation containing a fixed and unchanging “essential core,” usually understood in a conceptual, theological sense. We can recall here as well the second type of syncretism mentioned earlier, wherein “contested” religious interpenetration becomes the distinctive trait. The problem there is the lack of normativity, for the emphasis lies primarily on power in human relationships. With the third type, that of a synthesis-syncretism couplet, to be sure there is a merely semantic dimension to the discussion, i.e., what one person calls synthesis is another person’s syncretism, and vice versa. Once again, however, the normative place of Scripture seems to become lost. What is needed, therefore, is a framework of understanding contextualization as the universal covenant Lord speaking into and within particular, multifaceted situations with universally unified intent and purpose, albeit using diverse languages and particular emphases and timing; syncretism in turn consists of particular perversions of these necessary processes and their outcomes.¹⁰

Conn's Labeling Suburban Evangelical Individualism as Syncretistic

Conn's categorization of suburban evangelical individualism as syncretistic is thus "for the most part" accurate, as I claimed above. For Conn, the anti-urban myth of suburban evangelicalism is not what the Bible teaches, nor is it in line with actual conditions in cities. One can thus see syncretistic traits of not receiving normative or etic input. Omitting duties of justice and mercy occurs; instead of those biblical values, don't many evangelicals have the same "American dream" values as anyone else: a good house (read increasing property value), a good job, and a good education? Reifying suburban lifestyles and values occurs insofar as evangelicals export their brand of the Christian faith to "less fortunate" city folks and majority-world peoples. Moreover, the individualistic Christianity Conn critiques also skews biblical teaching on community and on the importance of public truth, justice and mercy.

While I am thus in essential agreement with Conn, I would like to add a few qualifiers. For one, there are stirrings within much of U.S. evangelicalism towards directing energies "back to the city." Second, "urban" does not just mean "inner city"; entire metropolitan areas are urban areas, and the inner-city vs. suburb distinction may or may not be helpful or accurate. Third, what does proper contextualization of the Christian faith among suburbanites look like? Given the adaptability and infinite translatability of the Christian faith, so-called suburbs are also contexts within which the Christian faith will of course take on particular, local characteristics.

I also claimed earlier that Conn's view of suburban evangelical individualism is "a wee bit" idiosyncratic. By no means do I think that evangelicals should ignore Conn; on the contrary, we need to hear him thoroughly and carefully. At the same time, like anyone else Conn was in his own limited context (or set of contexts) and spoke from within it—as varied and interesting as his own life and context(s) were. Conn's active interaction with up-to-date trends of course influenced his ongoing emphases—as did his ministries in New Jersey, Korea, Philadelphia and elsewhere. While he had an amazingly wide field of vision and experience, Conn was still limited and thus local and particular in his approach to various matters, including contextualization and syncretism.

So-called suburban evangelical individualism is therefore not altogether different from other instances of syncretism—although qualification is needed. We have already seen good reasons for understanding some of its traits as syncretistic. At the same time, while religious allegiances may lie at the root of all cultural settings, there are other types of roots as well—for example social and economic—given the multi-dimensional nature of reality. Contextualization involves the Christian faith coming to terms with all spheres of a context. Hence some of the traits of suburban evangelical individualism carry a certain contextual appropriateness, one could argue. For example, Christian counseling programs dealing with individual, private hurts are entirely right. The particularities of how the Christian faith is fleshed out in each setting need to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

There is one Lord, one faith, and one baptism for the worldwide Christian Church. At the same time, the Church lives and serves in a multiplicity of contexts, into which the Christian faith must be pointedly translated. Even though there are trustworthy signposts, the path down which such

ongoing contextualization processes should go is not a straightforward, given matter. Nor is there any guarantee that syncretism, or contextualization gone awry, will not occur. The dynamic relationship between the covenant Lord and his people necessarily is fleshed out in particular settings, including so-called U.S. suburban settings. God's faithfulness and commitment to redeem his world—to carry out his world mission—is our bedrock of confidence in the midst of often confusing, but necessary and given, contextualized Christian living.

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Endnotes

¹ The breadth of input into Conn's thinking, as well as his enigmatic style, are also evident in his writing. Note, for example, Mark Walden's comments in his review of *The American City and the Evangelical Church*: "While the book betrays some difficulty in organizing its information, and the writing has an occasional pasted-together or off-the-top-of-Conn's head feel, there is nevertheless a wealth of information here, clearly presented" (Walden, n.d.).

² It is worthwhile to note that this last book at least offers a one-sentence definition: "combining elements of Christianity with folk beliefs and practices in such a way that the gospel loses its integrity and message." Interesting as well is Kraft's mention of how many scholars have equated "nativization" with syncretism (Kraft 1989, 132).

³ Those five points are "I and the cosmos," "I and the norm," "I and destiny," "I and salvation," and "I and the Supreme Being."

⁴ Conn's 1984 *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds* undoubtedly incorporates more material, due to having been written several years later and because it is a much larger book as opposed to a brief article. In the book, however, Conn's treatments of contextualization per se (as well as of syncretism) are relatively scattered, somewhat tangential, and offered more in reference to other issues.

⁵ As indicated, Conn quotes from a 1973 prepublication draft of Kraft's 1979 book.

⁶ At least this has been my experience in moving between three different continents over the past 20 years.

⁷ I would suggest that what Conn labels as "contextualization" is what Shaw and Van Engen lay out, in a much more thorough and precise way, as their "four-horizon hermeneutic"—which they claim "moves beyond contextualization." Just as with "syncretism" (cf. earlier note), Shaw and Van Engen seem to be assuming a default evangelical notion of "contextualization" (Shaw and Van Engen 2003, 212). As we shall see momentarily, Conn's expanded, redefined notion of contextualization carries over into a similarly expanded and redefined notion of syncretism.

⁸ As Conn indicates leading up to this quotation, as well as in 46n15, he is interacting here specifically with a summer, 1977 paper delivered by Charles Taber. There Taber suggests that, as Scripture holds sway over the total contextualizing process, indigenous [non-Western] theology can be freed not only from Western categories and methodologies, but from "considerations of methodology of any kind." Besides demonstrating once again how up-to-date Conn's thinking and writing was, Conn's taking issue with Taber shows his instinctive inclination to reshape default assumptions, in this case concerning the alleged neutral innocence of indigenous (and all) cultures.

⁹ Shaw and Van Engen use the intriguing term "panhuman" to point to what I call, following Walls, "universal" (Shaw and Van Engen 2003, 201 (and other instances)).

¹⁰ While they make a distinction between their four-horizon hermeneutic and contextualization as commonly understood (cf. Shaw and Van Engen 2003, 212), Shaw and Van Engen’s approach to understanding the communication of God’s word is essentially the same as the sense of contextualization I am advocating here (note Conn’s similar understanding, mentioned in note 7 above). Shaw and Van Engen’s four horizons are the Old Testament, the New Testament, the communicator, and the receiving context. The first two have a unique normative status, while there is interplay between all four. The notion of contextualization I am advocating does not give a prominent place to “the communicator,” who is an etic catalyst in the contextualizing – hermeneutical process. While I do advocate the continual need for etic input into any context, the prominent role outside communicators play in the initial stage of contextualization into a context will not continue, except in particular and exceptional instances throughout ongoing contextualization.