Understanding Contextualisation

Global Connections Conference 2009

Introduction

All that we do in evangelism, church planting and church perfecting is worship. Paul wrote about ***"The grace that was given me from God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles ministering as a priest the Gospel of God, that my offering of the Gentiles might become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit."*** [Rom. 15:15-16]

Since all we do is a form of worship, we need to be very careful what we are offering up to God. Remember Cain and Abel and the many careful and detailed instructions given to Moses in the construction and operation of the Tabernacle.

Paul's ministry was to contextualise the "Jewish" context of the Lord Jesus and the first century Palestinian world to the Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world of the Eastern Mediterranean. For example:

- The Lord Jesus spoke largely of "the Kingdom" (over 100 times in the Synoptic Gospels). The concept of "the Kingdom" was rooted in the Old Testament. Clearly the term would have been misunderstood in the Roman Empire.
- Paul chose to use the word "church" as a sort of dynamic equivalent. It was a Hellenistic word and most people in the Eastern Mediterranean would have had an understanding of the word 'ekklesia' as an assembly of called-out citizens.

A familiar contextualisation issue is deciding the best word to use for "God" in Bible translation. This is a hermeneutical, contextual and missiological decision and such decisions are **crucial**. In the early 1800s William Carey published the first Bengali Bible. Quite conscious of the consequences, he used a Hindu Bengali word for God. This resulted in an almost entirely Hindu-background church in Bengal (later West Bengal in India and Bangladesh).

In the late 1960s, a Muslim-friendly New Testament and then a whole Bible was printed using 'Allah' for the name of God and using Islamic background words for sin, grace etc. In the 1970s this began to produce a growing church in Bangladesh of those from a Muslim background. Sadly there is not much interaction between the Hindu and Muslim background churches in Bangladesh.

Fundamentally, contextualisation is relating the Gospel and the truths of the Bible to your particular focus group. But this must be done in a way that is faithful to Scripture.

How is the international church around the world going to deal with contextualisation? Here are some issues that need to be addressed:

1. We need an environment in missions where we can experiment with new methods and approaches including contextualisation issues. In the UK we have a sad history of being very critical of new approaches. You can think of the huge storm of negativity that was raised by the open-air preaching of John Wesley. Another example would be Hudson Taylor's cultural adaptation in China (the so-called pigtail debate). We need to be open not only to new approaches **we** develop, but also to those developed by the emerging churches.
2. We need an atmosphere of mutual accountability – constant, reflective evaluation of what others are doing as well as what we are doing. The Lord Jesus said, ***"Herein My Father is glorified in that you bear much fruit"***. We must constantly evaluate whether we can get 'more fruit'. Part of this evaluation is to make sure that the Gospel and the great truths of the Kingdom are not being relativised and weakened by a particular approach.
3. We need greater clarity about definitions relating to contextualisation. At the moment there is too much 'fuzziness'.
4. We need a clear line between legitimate contextualisation, which is to be encouraged, and syncretism where we need to challenge and rebuke each other.

In the Muslim World, the real issues are **not**:

- Should we face Mecca when we pray?
- Should we bow down to pray?
- When we meet should we sit on the floor or on chairs?

The issue at stake is to make 'the Gospel of the Kingdom' relevant to the local community in a way that is faithful to Scripture.

Finally, the Kingdom of God is alien and hostile **to all cultures**. The principalities and powers and forces of wickedness everywhere have influenced all cultures. So believers in **all** cultures need to repent and turn away from aspects in their/our cultures that have been demonised and polluted.

So the debate about the contextualisation issues is not just a communication issue. It is a spiritual battle. An over-emphasis on social anthropology tends to minimise the demonic control in all cultures.

The Problem

In David Bosch's book, **Transforming Mission**, the basic premise is that, *"The Kingdom of God has incarnated itself in different ways in different cultures over time"*. But during the last 200 years, western believers have assumed their theology was supra cultural and so was universally valid in all cultures. The result is that we have had 200 years of relatively poor communication and inadequate contextualisation.

Here are a few statements about mission work made by non-Christians of various religions:

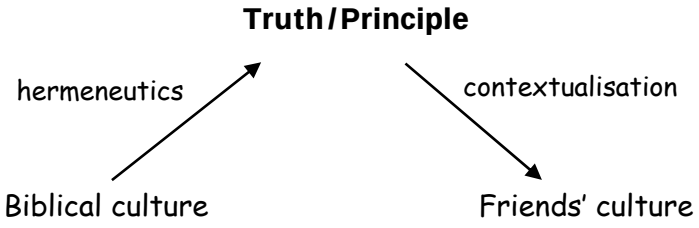
- "Missionaries are proselytising all over the world by use of:
    - Modern technology – radio, satellite TV, the Internet, etc.
    - An understanding of the psychology of marketing in order to allure the ignorant and weaker sections of the Muslim/Hindu/Buddhist/Animistic communities.

  They take **unlawful** advantage of the freedom of religion under the Article on Human Rights in the UN Charter."
- "Christianity is a foreign Western/European religion brought to us by traders, together with soldiers who marched into our country under the guise of colonisation. It flourished under the patronage of foreign rulers. Now that colonisation has gone this import called 'Christianity' deserves and needs to be rapidly deported."
- "Missionaries are a menace! Christian missionaries have pots of money. They were part of the old imperialism and are now introducing the worst facets of the new globalisation. Their interests are not for the welfare of the local people, but for their supporters in their home country."
- "Conversion only happens with US dollars. All mission activity is dollar directed. Everyone who embraces the Christian faith is snared by money. Foreign funded Christian institutions (hospitals, schools, colleges, orphanages etc.) are 'conversion shops' in camouflage. But for the foreign monetary crutch, Christianity in Asia and Africa would crumble away."
- Conversion and Social Action



- Christianity in Asia was built on social action. Welfare schemes of missions attracted the poor and needy and the emotionally vulnerable. The vast majority of converts to Christianity made their decision for non-spiritual reasons. All are "rice Christians."
- The charge is often made that Christianity pollutes and degrades great historical cultures. Ghandi gives an example in a book he wrote – **Experiment with Truth**: *"When I was a youth, I remember a Hindu having become a convert to Christianity. The whole town understood that the initiation took the shape of this well-bred Hindu partaking of beef and brandy in the name of the Jesus Christ. These things got on my nerves."*

Contextualisation is part of the answer to these problems



The basic premise of contextualisation is that every Biblical text is affected by its total context – both within revelation history and in its social/cultural context. Hermeneutics is the discipline of understanding the principles and truths taught by that passage. But even hermeneutics can be parochial. For example: African theologians are developing commentaries on the Biblical text that are very different from many western commentaries that were developed in the context of Western European church history.

Dr Ghassan Khalif – of the Arab Baptist Seminary in Lebanon – and others are developing a Semitic hermeneutics that is very different from "western" hermeneutics emerging out of the Greco-Roman hermeneutics of the Patristic Fathers. Dr. Kenneth Bailey has written a number of great books on a Semitic/Middle Eastern interpretation of the Parables of the Lord Jesus that have so enriched all who have read them.

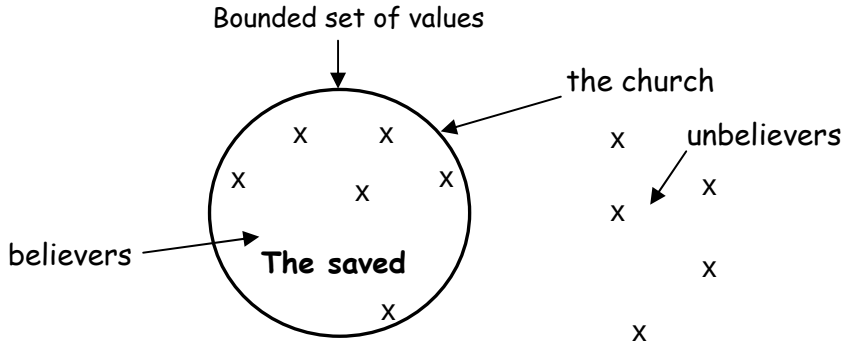
Contextualisation is the reverse process – taking the great truths/principles of the Bible and reformulating them with words and images so that the Gospel of the Kingdom is brought to local people with a local accent.

But a word of warning! There is no praxis without theory – even when that theory is not spelled out. The theory in hermeneutics is the "rules" that govern interpretation in order to discover and categorise the heart/core of the Christian faith – i.e. our evangelical faith. Very often the praxis of contextualisation is an overwhelming event, but the theory is very loosely defined or even hinted at. In spite of this, we need to move forward with a humble boldness.

Two issues that are usually foundational in contextualisation

1. **A Closed Set vs. A Centred Set concept of conversion**

A Bound/Closed Set concept of conversion

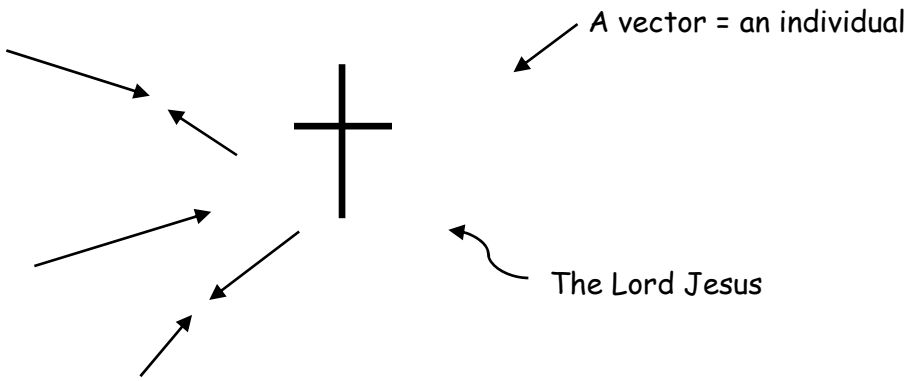


X = individuals

The church/believers are largely defined **by values** both by those inside and outside the church. They are only rarely defined by theology or experience. These values include what we drink, what we wear, the music we listen to and our patterns of behaviour. On this basis we judge whether others are inside or outside the bounded church – i.e. whether they are believers or unbelievers. We teach

that salvation is by grace alone, but in practice we forget this. We work on the premise that it may be partly grace, but that it is mainly by works – i.e. conformity to majority values of the "insider group".

A Centred Set – centred on the Lord Jesus



Grace is a centred-set concept. The teaching of the Lord Jesus about sheep and sheepfolds is "centred-set thinking". The issue is not about **where** the sheep are, but **whose sheep** they are.

Some believers from a Muslim background (BMBs) start a long way off knowing and understanding very little about the Lord Jesus. But what they know they love. They begin to move towards the Lord Jesus as the centre.

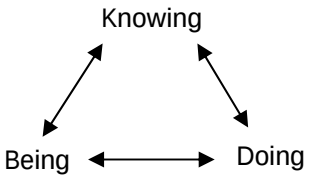
In a darkened room it is very difficult to distinguish between moths and cockroaches, but once the light is turned on, the moths will be drawn to the light. The cockroaches will scurry away. So BMBs are like moths drawn to the Lord Jesus.

The arrows are vectors. Long arrows indicate rapid movement to the "God with us". Short arrows indicate slow movement.

Centred sets are dynamic – the vectors can move towards or away from the centre. There can be interaction between the vectors. So the question is **not,** 'How much do we know about the Lord Jesus'? But 'Who are we growing to love more and more?'

The centred set doesn't have all the answers, but it will help us understand conversion in a less non-Biblical way. Note that in 1 John there are seven proofs that a person is born again. These fit into a centred-set model far better than a closed-set model.

How we understand conversion affects how we do evangelism. In practice, we need to foster a three-dimensional form of conversion.



The three dimensions are:

a. The Cognitive Level – what needs to be known

This involves the mind. In the Muslim World very useful tools for this dimension are: Bible correspondence courses, systematic chronological Bible storying and effective books/booklets and DVDs on apologetics. There needs to be a wide range of issues covered that provide a consistent Christian worldview.

b. The Feeling/Affective Level – what the person needs to feel

Among believers from a Muslim background in the Arab World fear is far less about persecution and more about the fear of being different from other people – especially from family. As regards the media, there is a major impact from testimonies of other BMBs given on Christian satellite TV. This dramatically reduces the feeling of loneliness.

The perception of many young people in the Muslim World is that the Islamists want to restrict personal and social freedoms and they associate being free with Christianity. So they feel drawn to Christianity.

So part of evangelism should focus on **reducing** 'feeling level' obstacles.

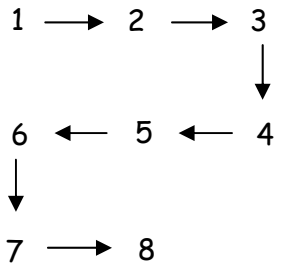
c. The Evaluative Level – this involves what one should do now

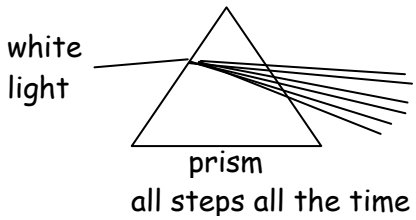
Issues involved are:

- What is morally right and wrong
- How to determine priorities
- How allegiances and commitments are made
- Who is now your "family" and "community"

The Ten Commandments form a very useful checklist of issues to be covered, together with the challenge to break – i.e. repent – with past practices and habits.

2. The Sequence Model vs. the Spectrum Model





The Sequence Model

This involves an individual or a team going to a particular location in order to see a church planted and carrying out eight steps in sequence:

Step One: Initial preparation before going including much prayer and research

Step Two: Initial enculturation and language learning and establishing residency credibility (perhaps starting up a holistic ministry) as well as gaining friendship and trust

Step Three: Evangelism

Step Four: Discipling the new believers – usually one-on-one

Step Five: Gathering together a community of believers – a house church

Step Six: Leadership development

Step Seven: Handing over leadership to local believers and advising them on planting new churches. This includes occasional visits, letters and distant encouragement (shadow leadership).

Step Eight: Withdrawal

The sequence model is a good way to **teach** church planting – getting people in Step One to think through the issues for each of the steps. But the sequence rarely works for an individual or even for a team. Different spiritual gifts are needed from steps 3-7 and it is extremely rare and to find any individuals who are gifted for the whole process and able to go through the whole sequence.

Most westerners, with their individualistic mindset, imagine that this is how it is going to work. It has a better chance if there is a team approach. The team approach works a great deal better if there is a sustained commitment by an agency to plant a church in that place even though individual team members may come and go. But in practice, there are only a few examples of the Sequence Model working. Usually a few people start the first few steps. They get expelled and other people come in and pick up the pieces. However, these people might have very different theological and missiological

views – including those on contextualisation. The result is that BMBs are confused and progress is slowed.

The sequence method works best in isolated rural communities with no access to satellite TV when done by pioneer church planting teams.

The Spectrum Model

This is more typical among more urbanised people who have had at least some secondary education. Essentially steps 3 to 7 are all done consciously at the same time by the team members. For example: Biblical principles of servant leadership are modelled and to some extent taught (step 7) to people who are still seekers (step 3). Evangelism and discipleship are merged (steps 3 and 4).

This approach requires a multi-gifted team working together. New team members can be integrated more quickly. In practice, this requires a less doctrinaire approach to contextualisation as it encourages a 'go with the flow' model. But it still needs good missiology in setting goals and laying down principles.

Contextualised church planting C_1- C_6

[The current preferred term for church planting is "Germinating Kingdom Communities" – i.e. we try and create a "soil" that will enable Kingdom Communities to develop. This is a term that is a more Biblical concept that the idea of "church" with all its historical and western connotations.]

These six types of contextualised church were devised by John Travis in the mid-90s. John and his family work in Indonesia.

C_1 The church plant is wholly in a foreign language with foreign cultural forms. Usually, these churches are aimed at expatriates. They may be English, Korean or Filipino language-based. In English expatriate congregations there may be a few BMBs who are usually well educated and have been expelled or extracted out of their own communities C_1 implies **no** contextualisation.

C_2 The church plant is in the **local language**, but it uses foreign cultural forms. Usually this means that western Christian culture – music-style, type of preaching, organisation etc. are all used, but are translated into the local language. This is **minimal** contextualisation.

C_3 The church plant is in the **local language** and **local cultural forms** are used, but significantly, all **Islamic forms are consciously excluded**. C_3 churches are usually found in the Muslim World where it is relatively easy to distinguish between the local indigenous culture and imported Islamic forms. For example: In Iran the people are largely very proud of their Persian heritage and Iranian BMBs find it easy to distinguish between Persian culture and "Arab-Islamic" forms introduced by the Arab conquest in the 8th century and re-introduced by the Islamicists. In Iran house churches are largely C_3. The same is true of Berber churches in North Africa – the Kabyles.

C_4 The church plant is in the **local language** with **local cultural forms** and including **some Islamic forms** – others are excluded. This implies that the many Islamic forms are examined critically as to the theological implications of using them. Some are used, while others are discarded. This is the degree of contextualisation advocated by Phil Parshall of Bangladesh, who in many senses is our "father" in contextualisation in the Muslim World.

C_5 The church plant is in the **local language** with **local cultural forms** and **all Islamic forms** are used. This is where the Insider Movement consciously places itself – more later.

C_6 This is outside the contextualisation spectrum. The aim of this approach is to build a network of BMBs who meet one-on-one – usually secretly – from time to time for fellowship. A team would initially aim at a C_6 fellowship in a country where security was very high – i.e. almost certain execution if known to be a believer. Usually this is a temporary phase until more family members have come to faith.

The Border between acceptable Contextualisation and Syncretism

The heat in this discussion on contextualisation is in the area of this border. There is a major border dispute in mission circles today! C_5 is acceptable contextualisation by definition, but $C_{5.1}$ is over the border into syncretism.

Here are 10 characteristics of the Insider Movement. Each of these can be discussed and careful evaluation is needed with each characteristic in the light of the **local** situation. There are no blanket answers.

1. An insider BMB is defined as one who has embraced Jesus, yet remains as light and salt in his "oikos" (his extended family that could include servants and business clients) so that as many as possible are won for the Lord Jesus. The implication of this is that they continue to call themselves Muslims (as defined by the Qur'an Sura 5:111).
2. The Qur'an is used as an effective tool in evangelism. This could be the Camel Method, the Common Ground Method or "the Seven Signs". The Qur'an is seen as a stepping-stone that leads people to the Bible and to the Lord Jesus.
3. The use of "Muslim-compliant Bibles". These are paraphrases rather than literal translations. They use many dynamic equivalents. For example: in one Arabic Bible, instead of calling God "Father", He is called 'Rabb' (Lord) and for "Son of God" they use 'The representative of God'.
4. New BMBs are given freedom to come to their own conclusions concerning the role that Muhammad plays in their lives.
5. Christian forms – traditions, creeds and words like 'Trinity' are considered extra-Biblical and so should be considered optional. Only the Bible is considered authoritative and the standard for belief and practice.
6. Muslim forms – the mosque, Salat prayers, the Ramadan fast, the Qur'an – are "baptised" and given new meanings. The result is that BMBs have a different way of living out the commands of the Lord Jesus.
7. There is no intrinsic demonic spiritual power in Islamic forms and they can be used to glorify God or – as they have been – used to maintain bondage to demons.
8. The central theme of the Insider Movement is the Good News of the Kingdom. The reign of God in this world is bigger than religious labels.
9. Water baptism and circumcision were both rituals of the Jewish community. Believers from the Greco-Roman world rejected circumcision, but accepted water baptism. Today Muslims accept circumcision, but reject water baptism.
10. Jesus is called both "Lord" and "Saviour", but both terms are used in Islam of all the prophets. So the same word is used, but to a Muslim there is no sense that Jesus is the Saviour from sin and eternal punishment. In practice, there is a downplaying in evangelism and early discipleship of the Lord Jesus being God incarnate and so being divine.

There are 4 significant Church Planting Movements in the Muslim World in terms of contextualisation:

Algeria and Iran are about C_3

Bangladesh is about C_4

The Sudanese in West Java is C_5

There are historical reasons – i.e. the context – that have determined the rapid growth of churches. At least in Algeria and in Iran there has been very little direct foreign input into the situation – perhaps with the exception of Christian satellite TV.

Tests for Contextualisation

- **Will the 2nd and 3rd generation of BMBs be recognisably Biblical in belief and practice?**

  To me this is the key issue and the only adequate test of our "success". We are largely engaged with first generation BMBs, so C_5 cannot be either proved or disproved **now**. This should discourage us from being too hasty in our criticism of the efforts of others or being too hasty in jumping on board this current bandwagon.

  There are groups of Muslims who have been inadequately evangelised and who form a sort of Sufi sect. They have a heightened appreciation of the Lord Jesus, but they do not have saving faith. In Nigeria they call themselves Isa-awi and in Turkey and Iran the Ahli Haq (people of truth).

- **Beware of too great an application of social anthropology. Our theology is not to be culture-conditioned. The Sermon on the Mount is counter-cultural to all cultures.**

  There are Biblical propositions that have to be normative. They are part of the nature of our risen life in Christ. (Col.3) They cannot be conditioned by cultural contexts.

Prayer is an example. Jesus taught that when we pray we ought to pray privately and this was in a context similar to the Muslim World where an open display of spirituality was both common and encouraged. Now there is an argument that goes like this: when in a Muslim environment we need to contextualise our spirituality in order to be credible as religious people. So we need to be **seen** praying frequently. But in so doing, we are clearly contradicting the plain words of the Lord Jesus! In so many cases the example of Jesus in his cultural setting was confrontation with cultural norms rather than accommodation to them.

There needs to be liberty of the spirit within the guidelines of Biblical revelation. It is this that gives us freedom. We should not let culture alone determine these parameters.

- **We must study the principle of hermeneutics.**

The New Testament states both practice and principle that were given to us in a particular context. Clearly we have to distinguish between practice and principle. We need to learn the rules governing the study of how we derive Biblical principles from their cultural framework. Keeping the same sort of rules in reverse should enable us to put Biblical principles back into a new culture and time.

Over-contextualisation blurs "Kingdom distinctives". For example: What is the role of women in an Islamic Society and to what extent should we contextualise in a BMB church? Clearly, the teaching and the example of the Lord Jesus in regard to the position of women in society was at considerable variance with his cultural framework and it is also at variance with the culture of the Muslim World today. Jesus clearly broke cultural taboos in order to demonstrate "Kingdom distinctives".

Does the homogeneous unit church growth principle, as an example of a sociological principle, blur a "Kingdom distinctive"?

- **Group Conversion vs. Personal Decision**

We long to see "Church Planting Movements" rapidly transform whole Muslim People Groups. In a few parts of the Muslim World this is happening. In the contextualisation debate there are two broad "ends". The one "end" is that BMBs who come to faith should be extracted out of their family and culture and be 'Christianised'. At the other "end" the advice to a BMB is to 'stay a secret believer' and be salt and light in his/her family and the whole 'oikos'. They are told, 'Don't make a declaration of your faith until your whole 'oikos' wants to join with you.' Is this Biblical? In the Bible each individual must have personal faith. So wisdom is needed in discipling a new BMB as to how and when to share his/her new faith in the Lord Jesus. But clearly working in families and with families should be encouraged.

- **An uncritical acceptance of Form vs. Meaning**

The Form vs. Meaning concept is well developed in social anthropology. But some of the concepts are being applied uncritically in some missiology. In much of Islam form cannot be separated from meaning. Often the form is the meaning. You carry out proscribed actions because God, through the Shari'a, told you to do so. One example would be reading the Qur'an. Even in the Arab World the emphasis is on reading the text with little or no emphasis on the meaning of the text. It is reading – preferably aloud – with the emphasis on correct pronunciation in order to bring out the rhythm and it is this that gives 'baraka' not any understanding of the text.

The essence of much contextualisation is to retain the form, but inject new meaning into it – i.e. to keep the Islamic forms but put Biblical meaning into these forms. In practice this is not easily done. Much rather deep Biblical theology needs to be taught thoroughly before Islamic forms can be re-interpreted with Biblical meaning by the ordinary BMB.

The heart of all incarnational contextualised ministry is in 1 Cor. 13. Love is at a deeper level and is more effective than any methodology of contextualisation. My basic plea is that we constantly re-examine how to express our Christology and Ecclesiology in the light of the cultures where we work. So we need to think, pray, challenge and provoke each other in this area. We need to be aware of the danger of syncretism. We need to remember, as Europeans, that so much syncretism entered into European Christianity in 325 AD when the Roman Empire became Christian and we are still not free of it! So we need to think deeply about the long-term implications of what we are doing and cry out to God for wisdom and the leading of the Holy Spirit. We need to work together and avoid the isolation that comes when we are surrounded

by people who think just like us. We need to challenge each other and reflect and re-evaluate all we do. We must avoid building the foundations of the church on boggy ground. As priests, let us minister the Gospel in such a way that our offering of Muslim peoples may be acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Areas of Very Fruitful Contextualisation largely neglected in the Muslim World: Finding Biblically functional substitutes for cultural patterns

The principles of the Kingdom frequently challenge the culture of our friends. All cultures have been demonised to some extent and it is evident that the principalities and powers have their greatest ability to bring people into bondage in the areas of "Folk Religion" and "The Occult". For example there are folk religious rituals for:

- agricultural cycles and how they are celebrated
- protection – of buildings, in travel and from curses
- events surrounding human life cycles – conception, birth, naming ceremonies, circumcision, initiation into adulthood, marriage, death and subsequent special days of memorials
- attracting the opposite sex
- areas of sickness and many other possible crises

This covers many, many potential problems and folk religion has answers to these. Fear of the inability to cope brings people under the bondage of fear to demons.

Aims of contextualisation

The aim is to meet these inherent and felt needs **and** retain the relevance of God and the Kingdom of God in the situation. Too much western mission work in education, in medicine and in development has been a profoundly secularising force. We have dismissed these occult forces as superstition and given "rational" scientific explanations for events. Among BMBs we have tended to eliminate all these "occult events", but this has led to huge cultural voids. Neglect in this area will give a new Kingdom Community a strong pull into syncretism or into formalism.

Who should start Biblical Functional Substitutes?

What is needed is a Biblically acceptable, culturally appropriate but **new** substitute for the custom that is being "put off" – i.e. when a custom/practice is "put off" it needs to be replaced with a new custom that is Biblically acceptable and that the local culture will recognise as having elements of their own culture.

Expatriate leaders and **mature** national leaders need to work together. Neither should act independently. If expatriates alone take charge of the process, foreign elements are brought in. If only nationals take charge then there is the danger of syncretism.

In this way, over time, ceremonies and rituals can be transformed. Most Muslims operate holistically and if the Gospel is to be relevant to them, it must be accompanied by a holistic worldview. This requires some "putting off" and a great deal of "putting on" in order to introduce a Biblical worldview. Biblical functional substitutes must present a visual and mental image that attests to a living and active God who promises help and guarantees hope for the future.