

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION
AND MINISTERIAL TRAINING IN ASIA:
AN ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVE

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Prepared for the
Integration of Faith and Learning Seminar
held at
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies
Lalaan I, Silang, Cavite
July 1993

147-93 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is a world religion that breaks barriers of race, color, culture and tradition. It is a religion of relationship of man to his God and man to his fellow human being. Yet Christianity itself came out from the background of Judaic and Graeco-Roman cultures. With this as background, theological education must be translated and adapted into the cultural milieu of different people groups in Asia.

In recent years, there has been an important shift in theological perspective among Asians. This shift in perspective concentrates on the role that circumstances play in shaping one's response to the gospel. The central focus of this theological perspective is expressed in the terms "localization," "contextualization," "indigenation" and "inculturation" of theology.

Adventist educators in Asia who are teaching theology in the classroom or its application in the mission fields have been confronted by this issue. They must face it as a challenge that will enhance maturity and growth in the church of God.

THE MEANING OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

A. Definition of Contextualization:

Understanding contextualization calls for a clear definition which is relevant to the theological education in Asia. Some Christian thinkers from the Protestant and Catholic persuasions have given their specific definitions; it is basic that these be considered.

The word "context" is derived from the Latin "contextere" which means "to weave or join together." The noun form

"contextus" refers to what is woven together, what is held together as a connected whole.¹ In relation to a text, the context maybe a unit of words or sentences in which the text is set and to which it is connected (literary context).² It may also refer to the historical situation in which the text was set and out of which it arose (historical context).³ Burtness has suggested that "there is no such thing as a naked text."⁴ The contextualizing of Biblical texts and of theology therefore is the "cry for the recognition of the significance of this time and this place (wherever and whenever that maybe, but particularly in the Third World) without which the Word is a dead word and the Christ is a non-living lord."⁵ "Even as the Word was incarnated at a particular time and place, so the church must embody its witness in concrete historical situations; otherwise, it proclaims a logos asarkos (unincarnate word)."⁶

George Peters says, "Contextualization properly applied means to discover the legitimate implications of the Gospel in a given situation."⁷ Likewise the Theological Education Fund has defined contextualization as "the capacity to respond meaningfully to the Gospel within the framework of one's own situation."⁸ These two definitions of contextualization can simply mean that it is the formulation of the theology that meets the needs of people in a certain cultural context. James Veitch helps us to understand the nature of contextual theology. He said that "Asian theology ... points to the possible existence on potential creation, of a theology shaped, molded and related to a specific historical context, by particular socio-cultural and religious factors so that the emerging form of this theology differs in emphasis

and possibly in structure, though not necessarily in content, from other kinds of theology." 9

Contextualization is the interaction and integration of Christian Theology to the local culture of the people. Culture is used here in a broad sociological to include the total pattern of ideas and practices that characterize the life of a group of people. This was made clear by the statement of the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization. 10 The statement says that "culture is an integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc.) and of institutions which expresses these beliefs, values and customs (government, law events, temples or churches, family, school, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs, etc.), which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security and continuity." 11

Dr. Albert Gammage, Jr., Dean of the Asian Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, pointed out that "contextualization assumes that, though all people have the same basic needs, the intensity of each need and the means of meeting it vary with the cultural context." 12

Applying contextualization to theological education implies "the adaptation of programs of training the set-apart ministry to the needs of the church for leadership in order that it may most effectively formulate its message and method to meet the needs of people in the cultural context on which the church ministers." 13

Basically human needs are the same among people groups

in the world, yet the only difference is the emphasis or stress given to such needs. The four-fold dimensions of ~~human~~ human life are the bases of human needs: the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. Physical needs involve the abundant supplies of air, water, food, sunshine. Man needs exercise, rest, shelter, medical care and clothing.

The emotional needs of men are expressed in his want of companionship, affecting recreation, security, self-fulfilment, self-esteem and love.

In the mental dimensions of human needs it is basic that he must have knowledge, understanding, communication and beauty and the ability to appreciate it.

In his need for spirituality, service, faith, communion and attitude of loving are foremost.

Thus the Christian message becomes only meaningful to the different cultural groups in Asia if their needs are met. The task of the Adventist educator therefore is to practice this definition and make this a reality through his different instructional approaches.

B. Contextualization and Indigenation

Some scholars use these terms interchangeably but others put the distinctives between the two as follows: "So in using the word contextualization, we try to convey all that is implied in the familiar word indigenation, yet seek to press key and for a more dynamic concept which is open to change and which is also future oriented." ¹⁴ Indigenation "emphasizes the fact that theology is done by and for a given geographical area -- by local people for their area, rather than by outsiders. It aims at focusing upon the integrity and identity of the enterprise." ¹⁵ Contextualization on the

other hand emphasizes the need for continuing adaptation of Christian theology in changing cultural context universally.

C. Contextualization and Syncretism:

Contextualization must never be related to syncretism. For "syncretism is the incorporation into Christian theology of ideas or practices from the cultural context which are inconsistent with Biblical theology." ¹⁶ The important idea here is that anything that is inconsistent with biblical theology must not be accepted in the approach of theological education for Asian.

Authentic contextualization insists on "maintaining the integrity of the biblical revelation in Christian theology. But while Biblical truth cannot change with time or place, the emphasis and expression of the truth in theology must vary in order to meet the needs of people of different cultures." ¹⁷

In contextualizing theological education in Asia, we must employ what is good and true in Asian religion, philosophy, education, administration, etc., that we dare not forget that every culture is what the New Testament refers to as the "world." The risk of syncretism is always present. There are too many unconscious influences of our culture upon our theologizing. In relation to this, the Adventist educator must distinguish syncretistic elements which will alter the Christian message.

The Adventist educator must be aware and sensitive to the wide range of syncretistic possibilities. Schreiter clarified the four points on which syncretistic elements of culture may be incorporated to the Christian message. ¹⁸

The first such mode of incorporation is to play the

similarities between the sign systems of the culture and that of Christianity. Signs which convey different meanings in the mind of the people are identified with Christian message.

The second form of incorporation is filling gaps. The Christian message provides signs and often codes for dealing with the problems not adequately accounted for in the dominant sign system of the culture.

The third form of incorporation is indiscriminate mixing. This is possible when the culture is very submissive and cooperative to the new pattern of faith and belief being introduced to the people group. Yet in reality, the culture is still trying to maintain its uniqueness.

The fourth point form of incorporation is domination. This means that the Christian message has been allowed to be the accepted pattern of beliefs yet the original ideas are still the conscious guide of their practices and behavior.

Adventist educators when they do contextualization must adapt Christian theology to the good element of culture and to transform the evil element as much as possible.

Thus we are to challenge what is evil and affirm what is good; to welcome and seek to promote all that are wholesome and enriching in art, science, technology, agriculture, industry, education, community and development and social welfare; to denounce injustice and support the powerless and the oppressed; to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, which is the most liberating and humanizing force in the world; and actively to engage in good works of love.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO CONTEXTUALIZATION

Approaching the task of contextualization must include guiding principles to be followed and the specification of the areas to be considered.

A. Guiding Principles in Contextualization

Effective contextualization calls for continuous dialogue between biblical text and the cultural context. Shoki Coe has referred to the contextualization process as a "double wrestle."²⁰ This can be pictured as "a sandwich in which the biblical text is the meat and the cultural context is the bread; one piece of bread is the theological emphases demanded by the culture and the other is the expression of biblical theological truth in terms of the culture."²¹ If the contextualization sandwich is well made, it will be tasty, digestive and nourishing to people in the culture. Let us consider these three basic elements in the contextualization process.

1. Determine the Theological Emphases Needed by the Cultural Context.

Saphir P. Athyal has pointed out that "in distinction from the Western theological systems, the systematization of any Christian theology will build around certain emphasis not necessarily felt as relevant issues in the West."²² In other words, theology must begin with the theological questions raised by the culture; if it fails to do so, it will fail to meet the needs of the people whose lives are shaped by the culture. "A living theology must speak to the actual questions men in Asia are asking in the midst of their dilemmas; their hopes,

aspirations, and achievements; their doubts, despair and suffering." 23

An example of an aspect of Asian culture that calls for emphasis in Asian theology is the conflict that frequently arises between obedience to parents and obedience to God. Because of the Western tradition of freedom of individual choice in religion and a tendency towards parental permissiveness, this is not a major problem in Western culture; but the Confucian insistence upon the absolute nature of filial piety makes it a major issue in the Asian cultural context. The Adventist educator in Asia must ask the biblical text what it has to say about filial obedience.

2. Select the Truths of Biblical Theology that Relate to the Needed Emphases

The second stage of the contextualization requires the location and exegesis of biblical texts which answer the theological questions raised by the cultural context. With reference to the problem of filial obedience in Asia, this would entail a serious treatment of passages dealing with parent-child relationship in the light of the divine-human relationship.

In locating relevant biblical material, the theologian and educator will naturally employ Bible concordances, topical textbooks and sources on Biblical theology. After the relevant materials are located, the really difficult work begins: exegesis of the Biblical passages. The basic problem of exegesis is to distinguish between universal truth and cultural form in the Scriptures. 24

The Bible is itself a piece of contextualized theology. God himself was the master contextualizer. "God's personal

self-disclosure in the Bible was given in terms of the hearer's own culture," so "the Biblical writers made critical use of whatever cultural material was available to them for the expression of their message." ²⁵ Fortunately this struggle is aided by the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. The Adventist educator or theologian who is familiar with Asian culture has the added advantage of existential insights into Biblical culture arising out of striking similarities between the two. It has been said that "if the study of the historical and cultural context of the Biblical passages is basic to one's understanding of the Biblical message, then at least theoretically saying, Asians should be in a better position than those in the West to develop Biblical scholarship." ²⁶

3. Discover Means of Expressing Relevant Biblical Truth in Terms of the Cultural Context.

This step is to translate the relevant truth into acceptable concepts of the culture. The Willowbank Report employs the distinction between "formal correspondence" and "dynamic equivalence" that has been developed in Bible translation work to explain this aspect of contextualization. "Just as 'dynamic equivalence' translation... seeks to convey to contemporary readers meaning equivalent to those conveyed to the original readers by using appropriate cultural forms, so would a dynamic equivalence church". ²⁷

The expectation of discovering "dynamic equivalence" to relevant Biblical truth in every culture is based on the doctrine of general revelation. If God has revealed himself to all man through nature and conscience, then,

however mixed with gross error, there must be elements of spiritual truth in every culture through which Biblical truth can be expressed. General revelation may be viewed as preparatory to the full and final revelation of God in Christ.²⁸ Islamic culture may be used as an example. "The Islamic faith, in divine unity, the emphases on man's obligation to render God right worship, and the utter rejection of human life has revealed in Jesus Christ."²⁹

There are at least two reasons why Biblical truth must be expressed in terms of the cultural context of the church. The most obvious of these is the need to avoid giving the impression that Christianity is a foreign faith.³⁰ The more compelling reason for contextual expression is the demand of effective communication. If Biblical truth is not clothed in the thought forms of a people, it will not be intelligible to them. "No symbols can have meaning of and through themselves; they always stand for something else. The assigning of "meaning" is done by the culture."³¹ The successful performance of this third phase of contextualization demands that Christian educators and theologians be conversant with all aspect of the culture in which they serve.

B. Areas of Contextualization in Adventist College Theological Education.

Contextualization of theological education must give special consideration to the following areas: purposes and objectives, organization and administration, instructional program, curriculum, faculty, students services and community program, and physical facilities. This section sets forth guidelines for Adventist colleges as they face the

challenge of localization of theology in their respective cultural context in Asia.

1. Purposes and Objectives. In a program of theological education its purposes and objectives are basic that chart the course of action and expected outcome in the framework of Christian ministry. The basic rationale for the existence of the program is clearly stated. The statement of purposes and objectives must be influenced by the context. This means that specific needs must be met so that theological training becomes meaningful and relevant to both faculty and students alike.
2. Organization and Administration. The organization and administration should be contextual in style and financial support. Is the administrative style employed in harmony with the prevailing context in the locality? To what extent are nationals involved in administration? What percentage of the financial support comes from within the context and from what sources? Are administrators trained locally? Is there an orientation among the faculty and staff on the "hows" and "whys" of the administrative policies and principles? Are policies and principles updated and revised in order to meet the changing cultural context? Is there involvement of students, faculty and community in the revision of such administrative policies?
3. Instructional Program: Contextual teaching methods should be employed, but this does not imply that the faculty are compelled to use ineffective methods just because they are commonly used in the cultural context. Are the textbooks used written for the local context or the foreign context? To what extent does the library contain materials in the

vernacular? Are the audio-visual aids prepared for the context in use?

4. Curriculum: Does the curriculum provide for the specialized training needed by the various types of ministries in the church body served? Do the length of the course, the number of credit hours required and the language of instruction suit the context? Do the subjects taught cover the ideas and skills actually needed by the minister in his context? Do the mentors select materials for their subjects that equip the set apart ministry with the message and method needed to develop a contextual church, or do they use materials developed for a foreign context? Does the field education program like evangelism and pastoral work expose students to the type of ministry situations they will encounter after graduation, or simply to contrived, artificial situations? Is there a balance of practical and theoretical instructions for the students to be rounded in their ministerial perspective?
5. Faculty. If the purpose of the program of theological education among Adventist colleges is to be realized, there must be an adequate number of qualified teachers carrying out appropriate responsibilities effectively. How are the number, qualifications and duties of the teaching staff affected by the context? Had the faculty members been exposed to field experience before they became attached to the college? Are they successful in their pastoral work and evangelism functions? Do they have ample experiences relevant to their teaching in the classroom?
6. Student Service and Community Program. Is there an admission procedure relevant to the cultural context? Are

graduates well accepted in the churches? Are their training programs relevant to the situation in the field? Are students given time to do community exposure such as social ministry, relief program and voluntary services to the needy and the oppressed?

7. Physical Facilities. This includes the campus site, buildings and equipment which should be determined by the objectives of the programs of theological education, not by what is merely traditional or impressive. In order to be truly functional, facilities must be contextual with regards to location, design and quality. Are the facilities located in an area that is as culturally similar as possible to the areas where the graduates will be ministering? Are the design of the facilities similar to those the students will be using when they perform their ministry?

C. Doing Theology in Asian Context

Today theologians and educators need to present the truth in a manner that is both comprehensible and relevant for different people groups in Asia. Jose M. de Mesa, a Filipino lay theologian, pointed out that "theology has to be born at the grassroots, i.e., in the midst of life and lived experiences of people."³² He continued to express that "the Asian theology has to immerse itself in the present day reality of suffering, oppression, and to search for the liberating word spoken by God within the experience of the poor and the oppressed man of this world."³³ To Mesa there are two poles of doing theology in Asia, which are human experience and Christian tradition.

1. Human Experience: Every interpretation of faith which is faithful to the gospel is a meaningfulness of that interpretation. The meaningfulness is present when an interpretation reflects real experience in the world must give meaning and reality to our theological talk. Human experience is a given situation, the issues, problems and concerns of people in specific social cultural context is the only place where faith - understanding has change of becoming meaningful. For Mesa culture "is a patterned way which people experience by doing things together." ³⁴ Human experience then becomes the basic foundation of interpreting the cultural context of people. Thus the theologian and educator must see the pattern of human experience which will serve as guide in the contextualization of Christian theology. This human experience is expressed in the behavior, acting and thinking of people.
2. Christian Tradition. Christian theology ought to be rooted not only in contemporary human experience but also in the historically based tradition in which God is believed to have revealed himself to a people in history with Jesus of Nazareth as its culminating point. "The initiated offer of salvation in history and to man's faith-experience wherein he freely entrusted his whole self to God is basic to Christian theology. This salvific event consisting of two aspects commonly referred to as revelation-faith, found and sustains the life of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Revelation as God's offer of life and love does not become revelation until the offer is experienced and accepted in faith. And Christian faith is not possible without God's offer of life and love to

men." 35

For the Asian Adventist educator, these two poles of theological reflection must always be considered to produce a contextualized theological education. The pattern of human experiences will direct Christian tradition to answer the issues of contemporary mind in the fast changing society of the Orient.

D. Implications of Contextualization to SDA Theological Education

1. Christian educators should understand human experiences. They must be able to study the pattern of a person's thinking, acting, behaving and relating to his fellow human being and to his environment. This will be a vantage ground to explore with their students.
2. Basic human needs of man in the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions of life should be addressed in the theological curriculum so that the future pastor or shepherd of God's people should maintain a balanced approach to his ministry.
3. Program of theological education and ministerial training must be elliptical. This means that two major areas must be adequately addressed, the biblical truth and human needs.
4. The program of contextualization in any theological training must be within the framework of the community of believers. The local church is the basis of the approaches to be developed in any ministerial training.
5. To avoid the extreme of isolation for a particular local field due to contextualization, educators must bear in mind that the church has its universal perspective. The two aspects must always have a constant dialogue in relat-

ing local cultures to the universal nature of the church.

6. Program of contextualization in any theological education in Asia must always seek to develop an awareness in students of the syncretistic elements which endanger the Christian message. Evaluation and assessment of theological training must be done frequently to enhance sureness of Bible-based ministry.
7. Theological educators in Asia must be bold enough to express in writing ideas and experiences that are parallel to the Christian message in their attempt to contextualize ministerial training. These will serve as patterns for future studies on contextualization.

E. General Recommendations Toward an Adventist Perspective of Contextualizing Theological Education in Asia

As the Adventist educator and theologian in Asia carry the burden of the challenge of contextualization, basic recommendations must be considered. These recommendations have been pointed out by Dr. Humberto Rasi in his paper entitled "Adventists Face Culture: Are We to Love or to Hate the World?" ³⁶

First: Nurture a biblical understanding of the Great Controversy motif. This means that the Adventist educator will look at the broader spectrum of the struggle between good and evil; its effect on human beings and the soon outcome of this struggle in the lives of God's people.

Second: Seek a critical engagement with culture. This calls for a balance approach to the attitudes of an Adventist educator. He should separate himself and his teaching from syncretistic elements of culture contrary to God's revealed will. At the same time, he should affirm the good elements of culture which are compatible to God's revela-

tion. In his teaching, he should lead to transform the individual student that through him he should be able to influence others to conform to God's original plan. It is also a need that in his engagement with culture, the mentor should be able to contribute new elements which are relevant to the needs of people groups in Asia which are consistent with a biblical mandate.

Third: The Adventist educator should be committed to the study of God's word daily, pray for heavenly discernment, and listen to the insights of fellow Bible-believing Christians as he relates courageously to contemporary culture. This recommendation gives opportunity for the Holy Spirit to guide and direct the Adventist mentor in his approach to adapt a theology relevant to the people he is serving.

Contextualizing theological education is just another way of communicating the two. Stults states it plainly. "It requires that we know how people think. How people think is specially significant in our pursuit of contextualized theology in Asia... it means understanding the world view, philosophy, and cultural perspective of the group we are trying to communicate with, even if it is our own." 37

CONCLUSION

As the Adventist educator or theologian in Asia formulates a local theology that answers human needs, he should endeavor to relate into history by reviewing what others had contributed as insights in the past. This calls for constant dialogue of human experience with Christian tradition in a global perspective, not

just locally.

Indeed, this work of contextualization or inculturation is to be understood as the work of the Holy Spirit. The educator becomes an instrument in this function of the Holy Spirit to meet the needs of fallen man in Asia. It is not therefore a mere product of human intellect. The Spirit of God is the chief initiator like in the process of the incarnation of Christ. The church and its institutions particularly the centers of learning will cooperate by responding to the challenge of a contextualized program of theological education that will meet the needs of the Asian cultural context.

Awareness of the danger of syncretism must always be considered so that the message and method of Christian theology will not be misunderstood. To guard Christian theology that it will not be incorporated with ideas and practices from the cultural context which are not consistent with the Biblical tradition should be the major concern of the Adventist educator.

We who are Asians should see new insights and perceptions that will enhance new ways of translating and adapting Biblical truths into the lives of our people.

NOTES

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³ Ibid.

⁴ James H. Burtness, "Innovation as the Search for Probabilities: To Recontextualize the Text," in Learning in Context (Broomley, Kent: TEF, 1973), p. 10.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ Tano, Theology in the Philippine Setting, p. 46.

⁷ George W. Peters, "Issues Confronting Evangelical Missions," in Evangelical Mission Tomorrow, ed. W.T. Coggins and E.L. Frizen, Jr. (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1977); p. 19.

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⁹ James A. Veitch, "Is an Asian Theology Possible?" in Human and the Holy: Asian Perspective in Christian Theology (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1978), p. 216.

¹⁰ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, Lausanne Occasional Papers. No. 2 The Willowbank Report: Gospel and Culture (Wheaton: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978)

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Albert W. Gammage, Jr., "Introduction to the Contextualization of Theological Education" The Asian Theologian Occasional Journal No. 2 (Baguio City, Philippines: Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, 1982), p. 6.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education", Theological Education 9 (Summer 1973): pp. 240-241.

¹⁵ Robert J. Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, p. 5.

¹⁶ Gammage, "Contextualization of Theological Education", p. 7.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Schreiter, Constructing Local Theologies, pp. 152-154.

¹⁹ Lausanne Committee, Willowbank Report, p. 29.

²⁰ Coe, "Renewal in Theological Education", p. 238.

²¹ Gammage, "Contextualization of Theological Education", p. 8.

²² Saphir T. Athyal, "Toward an Asian Christian Theology", in What Asian Christians Are Thinking: Readings From Asian Theologians, ed., D.J. Elwood (Manila: New Day Publishers, 1976), p. 40.

²³ Consultation of Confessional Families and the Churches in Asia, "The Confessing Church in Asia and Its Theological Task", in Asian Christians, Elwood, p. 44.

²⁴ Gammage, "Contextualization of Theological Education", p. 8.

²⁵ Lausanne Committee, Willowbank Report, pp. 7-8.

²⁶ Athyal, "Asian Christian Theology", p. 11.

²⁷ Lausanne Committee, Willowbank Report, p. 24.

²⁸ Walter Thomas Conner, Revelation and God: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1936), pp. 72-74.

²⁹ Lausanne Committee, Willowbank Report, p. 14.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

³¹ Eugene A. Nida, Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1960), pp. 57-58.

³² Jose M. de Mesa, Doing Theology (Manila: Well Spring Books, 1987), p. 3.

³³ Ibid. ³⁴ Ibid., p. 24. ³⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

³⁶ Humberto M. Rasi, "Adventists Face Culture: Are We to Love or to Hate the World?" A lecture presented at the IFL Seminar at AIIAS: Philippines, pp. 7-10.

³⁷ Donald Leroy Stults, Developing on Asian Evangelical Theology (Manila, Philippines: DMF Literature, 1989), pp. 207-208.