



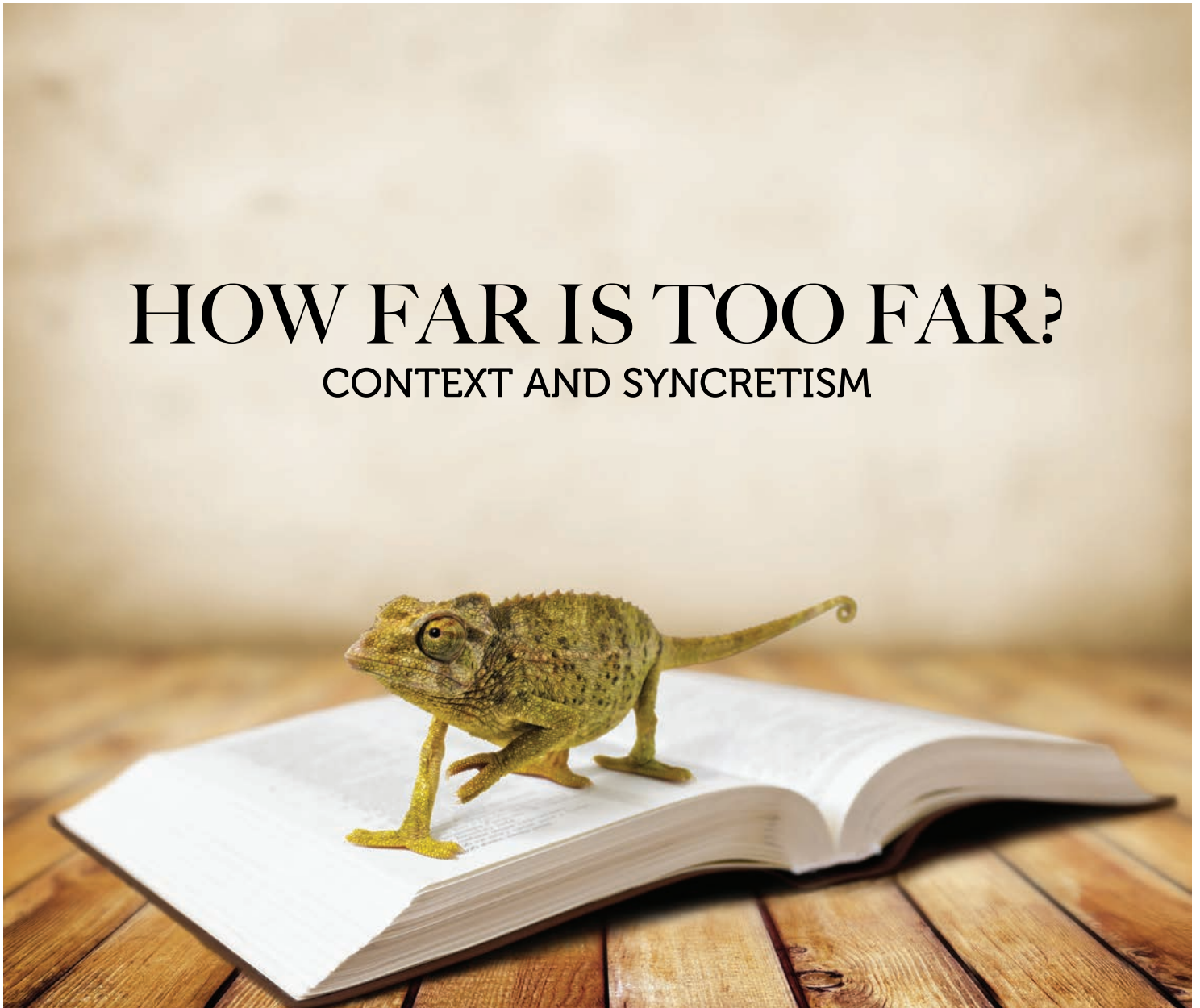
MISSION

ISSUE 3 2013

CATALYST

Intelligent comment on faith and culture

HOW FAR IS TOO FAR? CONTEXT AND SYNCRETISM



CONTEXTUALISATION: HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

06// Syncretism and non-contextualisation: the twin dangers of mission.

02//THE CHURCH NEEDS CONTEXTUALISATION
03//WARNING THE NON-WESTERN CHURCH 04//Q&A:
TIMOTHY C TENNENT 09//THE C1-C6 SPECTRUM
10//Q&A: ARADHNA 12//JESUS AS ETERNAL ANCESTOR
IN AFRICA 14// BIBLE TRANSLATION FOR MUSLIMS
15//WORSHIP AROUND THE WORLD
16//CD, DVD & BOOK REVIEWS

THE CHURCH NEEDS CONTEXTUALISATION



UNDERSTANDING CONTEXTUALISATION AND SYNCRETISM IS EASIER WHEN YOU IMAGINE IT FROM ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

A young couple, Avelino and Belen, arrive from a foreign country, convinced of their faith, and proceed to talk to me in a language I simply don't understand. They have failed to contextualise their message.

If somehow they teach me *their* language, and *their* rituals, and *their* customs so that I become like them, then I have been converted to be like them but in the process I have been extracted from my own culture and am likely to have little to say to those around me who I was once like. They have again failed to contextualise their message, failed to adapt to the culture they hope to reach.

However, if they learn my language, they have made progress towards contextualising their message. But if, in accordance with their beliefs, they insist that everything I have ever learnt about God is wrong, it is likely that their contextualisation is shallow.

Can they be sure that this God they claim to know is wholly absent

from my culture but wholly present in theirs? Some may be attracted to this new set of ideas, but the majority will simply say 'no thank you'.

But Avelino and Belen may be aware of these dynamics and resolve to become like us in all things. They throw themselves into our lives and our culture. Frankly, I'm surprised that they are willing to do some of the things that even I don't like about my culture, but they are clearly trying to identify with us. They make few demands of us – I can follow my understanding of God as well as theirs. This confuses me as the two seem incompatible, but they tell me it's OK. They gain more followers, but I don't really see the point of it – I don't see that the new faith they offered has made any difference to the way people live. Welcome to the world of syncretism.

And along this spectrum – from No Contextualisation at one end to Syncretism at the other, the debate rages about what appropriate

contextualisation looks like.

Contextualisation is alive in obvious cross-cultural settings. Mission workers setting out to share the gospel in other parts of the world should be aware of these things if they have been properly prepared. But theory is one thing, experience is another. They do not yet know the things they have not encountered. It will take years for them to get to know the language and culture they are going to, and even then they will always be outsiders.

But are we aware that the Christian culture we inhabit at home is completely foreign to those who shop at the same supermarket as we do, who collect their kids from the same school gate? Are we aware that their beliefs and worldview may be radically different to that which Christians assume are normative? Even, sometimes, their dress and language?

This is the world of Contextualisation. Sometimes ignored or misunderstood, but without it the mission of the Church will fail.

David Kerrigan
General Director



CATALYST LIVE

9AM - 5PM
WEDNESDAY 27 NOVEMBER - MANCHESTER
THURSDAY 28 NOVEMBER - READING
TICKETS: £29.95 (includes lunch)

Register online for **Catalyst Live:**
bmscatalystlive.com

FEATURING:

JÜRGEN MOLTMANN
JOHN LENNOX | DAVID COFFEY

DENIS ALEXANDER
Director, the Faraday Institute for
Science and Religion and
molecular biologist

YOHANNA KATANACHO
Palestinian theologian, author,
pastor and Academic Dean,
Bethlehem Bible College

ANDREW ST GEORGE
Author of *The Royal Navy Leadership
Manual* and Senior Fellow at
Cass Business School

SHARON DIRCKX
International brain-science
researcher and tutor at Oxford Centre
for Christian Apologetics

By Nour Armagan

A Middle Eastern theologian (using a pseudonym)

ON THE NEVER-ENDING NEED OF WESTERN CHRISTIANS

to warn the non-Western Church

HYPOCRISY, MORE THAN SYNCRETISM, MIGHT BE THE KEY DANGER IN RELATING TO THE DEVELOPING CHURCH

I believe in a global theological accountability. We are all shaped by our contexts, personal and communal concerns, anxieties, questions and capabilities. This shapes how we read the Bible, how we develop theologies, what tools of interpretation we utilise, which metaphors we use and what topics we cover.

This is not relativism, not a denial of universal and absolute truths, but the humility of knowing that God and his truths are often beyond our man-made creations and perceptions. That is why we need the experiences of the global and historical Church, with all of its shades and colours, to be with us if we are to advance his Kingdom and ignore pitfalls of our own bubbles. Church history is full of episodes where a particular country, and the Church in it, gets carried away with its own social and political constructs, all along thinking that 'God wills it'.

Thus, as I try to develop a theology for today's Middle East, I need Christians from Latin America, East Asia and North America as well as Europe to keep me accountable; to challenge me where I

need to be self-critical and to learn from my experiences. Simply put, without such a theological accountability, we are vulnerable to confusing our own constructs, culture and nationalism with the truths of God.

This, however, is not happening and, where particularly Western Evangelical Christians are concerned, is truly far from this ideal.

Allow me to give two symptomatic examples of this. The first is the sloppy phrase of 'contextual theology' used for the writings of non-Western Christians. Works of African, Asian, Latin American and Middle Eastern theologians are designated as 'contextual' whereas works of British or American theologians are marked as 'theology', as if they were

the non-Western theologians, speak of our desperate need to develop theologies that engage with our issues and communicate God's eternal truth within and for our reality. The worried Western Christians almost always raise the grave concern that somehow we, the non-Western Christians, are either not mentally capable of (or, worse, not willing to attempt) understanding or sticking to Biblical truths. This not only insults the non-Western Church, most of which is paying a heavy price for following Christ as persecution increases, but also the Spirit of God who promised to enlighten and guide us as we do our best to follow him.

It is ironic, though, that the same people who sternly warn us would never think of going to a Bible college in the US

“MIDDLE EASTERN THEOLOGIAN ARE DESIGNATED AS 'CONTEXTUAL' WHEREAS WORKS OF BRITISH OR AMERICAN THEOLOGIAN ARE MARKED AS 'THEOLOGY'”

not also products of their context, as if they do theology outside of parameters of a language, culture and preferred methodologies of interpretation and application. This grants Western theology a supra-contextual status and relegates non-Western theology to an inferior, semi-theology status. Obviously, such a classification is not empirical, but merely a sad reflection of how Western Christians see themselves in relation to the rest of the world.

Second is the never-ending warning of 'syncretism' that comes up whenever we,

or UK and asking them to stop writing new books and addressing challenges faced by Christians due to risk of syncretism.

From where we see the world, we often find Western Christian books and worship songs to be truly culturally syncretistic, confusing their 'way of life' and national perspectives on the world and church with the truths of the gospel.

We desperately need one another on this journey, but only when its starting and end point is humility.



President of Asbury Theological Seminary, Professor of World Christianity and author of Theology in the context of world Christianity: how the global Church is influencing the way we think about and discuss theology

Q&A

DR TIMOTHY TENNENT

FROM HYMNS TO ZEUS OR SHIVA AND CHURCHES VENERATING ANGELS, TO THE PROBLEM WITH 'CONTEXTUALISATION', A WORLD CHURCH AUTHORITY TALKS SYNCRETISM AND ORTHODOXY

European and American mission to the world has meant that we have had an incredible impact on the global Church as it is. Is there an indigenous Church movement which is different to that which was planted by European and American missionaries?

The answer to that is yes. One of the major developments of the 20th century was the emergence of what we often call independent or indigenous Christianity – which started out the century in pretty meagre numbers, probably 8-12 million members, but today that membership

has grown to the point that it's over half a billion. Indigenous expressions of Christianity is now probably on a par with Protestantism as a movement, so I think that's been one of the biggest developments – the emergence of what I call the 'fourth branch of Christianity.'

Would your average Western Evangelical Protestant recognise these expressions, or are some of them really very different?

Some of them are really, really different. One of the things about this fourth branch of Christianity that we talk about is that we don't really have a way to define its core. If you look at the Roman Catholic movement, or you look at Protestantism, or Eastern Orthodoxy, there are certain elements that seem to bring cohesion to the movement as a whole.

In the indigenous movement we don't

“HYMNS THAT WERE WRITTEN FOR ZEUS IN THE BOOK OF ACTS”

really have that, so you have movements that are quite diverse. Some that would be very much in keeping with what you might call broader Evangelical movements, some that would have beliefs like those of the Cherubim and Seraphim churches of West Africa, that actually venerate angels, which we'd consider to be outside of orthodoxy. From that, to movements that are very legalistic. There's a lot of variety within these movements and one has to be careful about making broad generalisations.

Christians in the West are often nervous about contextualisation of the gospel in other cultures. Have we misunderstood something about that process?

I've been somewhat critical of the word 'contextualisation' in my writings, because I think the term contextualisation tends to focus on the receptor context, and so the conversation revolves around that. My big critique of that is that it only looks at half of the story. And, for me, a proper conversation has to include the transmitter source as well as the context. So in our case we're trying to be faithful both to the historic and biblical Christian faith as well as the setting, and we have to be faithful to both of those. So I think the term 'translatability' is actually a better term. This is the term, of course, that Lamin Sanneh and Andrew Walls and others have tried to put on the table, and I've affirmed that in my writing and tried to use the expression 'translatable' or 'translatability', as I think in some ways it's more healthy. So, just like when we translate the Bible, where we have a source language and a receptor language,

[the concept of translation] creates that same conversation axis for the cultural translation of the gospel as well as theological translation of the gospel. It can help us to be aware that we actually have two conversations that must take place to effectively communicate the gospel in new contexts.

A concrete example of where this becomes relevant is in worship. Is there any cause for concern when, say, we adapt say a Hindu song to worship Jesus, using similar language?

Well there are some concerns there. I think it needs to be done well and I know when, for example, that particular *Bhajan* (Hindu worship song) was put out into a Christian hymn by the group Aradhna – Chris Hale was the one who authored that – and he actually called me up and we had a long discussion about it because he was concerned that by using the term *Jaya Deva* that it might actually create the wrong impression because the word *Deva* never appears in the singular in that context. So it is a matter of concern.

This is of course part of the New Testament, you have clear examples where terms are used – for example *Logos* in John 1: 1-14, where John takes the word from Middle Platonism and applies it to the second person of the Trinity, which was a fairly bold move actually. It created potential syncretistic possibilities, which – especially verse 14 – he had to really clarify because in his context the last thing that *Logos* could ever do was

My basic advice to students on this point is that it should only be used in evangelistic context. I have found in the New Testament that this is generally used in an evangelistic context, and it's used in a way with people who are very familiar with that setting so you can clarify and explain how Christianity is building upon that principle. So I think it's not something that is without concern but it can be done.

How do you assess where legitimate cultural contextualisation ends, and where syncretism begins?

Well I think it has to be done in dialogue with many Christians. This goes back to at least the 16th century when the Church was formally having discussions about contextualisations – in those days the Roman Catholics called it 'accommodation' – they would discuss what were the ways that you could and could not accommodate culture. And what they found, which we later found in our own movement in the global Church, was that what may appear to you to be syncretism may in fact not be, and what you may feel is completely normative Christianity turns out in that context to be highly syncretistic and has problems and issues that you haven't fully anticipated. So I think that one has to really allow these conversations to develop. And when the indigenous Church are eager readers of the Bible and are really trying to understand the Scriptures, they themselves will be able to sort out some things over time which I don't think can be resolved by

“THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A CONTEXT-FREE CHRISTIANITY”

become flesh, and yet he makes that clear in verse 14, in this case the *Logos* became flesh. He took the word, he redirected it. You have obvious examples in the book of Acts, where Paul quotes hymns that were popular in his day, hymns that were written for Zeus and about Zeus's son Minos, that are then quoted in the book of Acts. Phrases like 'in him we move and live and have our being' is a phrase that was originally written in praise of Zeus, but it is now applied to our faith in Christ in the gospels. So there are examples in the New Testament where things from other backgrounds were redirected and re-clarified and have been used for Christian purposes.

an outsider. It's hard to pre-judge those situations.

All Christianity is contextual. There's no such thing as a context-free Christianity. You can't even say 'Jesus is Lord' without coming at it with some language and as someone with some cultural particularities who says it. So there's no such thing as a Christianity that is untethered from culture, it's all part of that, and that's how it's meant to be, that's the glory of the Christian movement. And it takes time for every culture to really understand how this applies and how this could be properly brought under the full authority of Christ.



Contextualisation

How far is too far?

GOING TOO FAR IN EITHER 'DIRECTION' ON THE SPECTRUM OF CONTEXTUALISATION RISKS MOVING AWAY FROM THE TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

The challenge of contextualisation of the gospel is not to be feared. In fact, it is one of the greatest gifts we have. The Christian faith demands to be contextualised, and is made capable of such contextualisation because of the dynamic at work at its heart.

From the outset, God contextualised his approach to humankind, through language and imagery, personal encounter and revelation.

The incarnation of Jesus is, of course, the epitome of contextualisation. Jesus enters our world, on our terms, alongside us in all things. Well, not exactly *all* things – for his sinlessness reminds us that contextualisation is not the same as identification: the presence of God will always challenge people and cultures to recognise their need to be transformed into the likeness of God and his Kingdom.

The goal of contextualisation, therefore, is to enable Jesus to be authentically experienced in every human situation, as far as it is possible. That human situation comprises the worldview of the person or community. So, for example, Jesus was embraced as a rabbi by many of the Jewish people, and amongst them were those who suspected he was the long-promised Messiah. Their Jewish worldview meant they were open to such a person entering their world.

Women experienced Jesus as distinctly

counter-cultural, and they welcomed that. Why wouldn't they! And so did all manner of outcasts and sinners. But amongst those for whom that culture had been favourable, many felt threatened.

Rich people walked away downcast because they did not accept the Lordship

“ PULPITS AND SPIRES BETRAY A CULTURAL BLINDNESS ALONGSIDE A DESIRE TO SHARE THE GOSPEL ”

of Christ. Other rich people, amongst them women, supported the ministry of Jesus. The issue isn't riches, it's the love of riches.

Outwardly 'sinless' people were labelled as hypocrites, yet outwardly sinful people were contrite and were restored.

Worldview, or context, is everything. Announcing Jesus as the Messiah to a bunch of Harley-Davidson bikers is likely to have little impact. A prisoner might need to hear the gospel as that which forgives and gives a second chance. A trafficked woman can hear of the God who welcomed women and restored their dignity. Nations that are

powerful need to hear of the dangers of hubris, while the downtrodden will hear good news about the God of small things.

So, in one sense there is no such thing as a simple gospel. The gospel is a fluid thing: subversive, changing shape, finding its way into cracks and crevices and, from there, challenging and embracing in sometimes equal measure. The gospel will embrace aspects of culture not embodied in the gospel imported from elsewhere, but it will also challenge that same culture where the Lordship of Christ is ignored or undervalued.

The messenger, therefore, needs to recognise that the baggage they carry is more than the simple gospel. Their 'shaped-by-my-culture' understanding of the gospel can, if we're not careful, deny new insights that might emerge from other cultures that we have not yet seen. A Western worldview doesn't allow much room for miracles – and that baggage is easily imparted to others. Conversely, those who read the Bible afresh, and from a culture where the reality of the spirit world is readily embraced, may well conclude that God answers our prayers, and often with miracles, and so pray for healing as routine.

Colonial mission and televangelists: looking back

There was much to celebrate in the missionary movement of the 18th and 19th

“ WE ARE TOO FAR AWAY FROM THE GOSPEL IF WE FOCUS SO MUCH ON CONTEXTUALISING THAT WE FORGET THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS ”

centuries. We can see that there were real attempts at contextualisation, long before the concept was ever conceived. Reducing local languages to script and translating the Bible were major steps in allowing the gospel to take root in new soil. But there were also blind spots. African converts dressed as quintessential Englishmen and women. Churches were built with pulpits, pews and spires that betray a cultural blindness alongside a desire to share the gospel.

But, in spite of shortcomings and encouraged by brave pioneers (amongst them some BMS missionaries) the converted slaves of the Jamaican plantations found in Scripture the mandate for their own freedom, and they fought for it. The fight was theirs and the victory too.

More recently in Latin America in the 1970s, where the need for contextualisation was first recognised and named, the social strictures of poverty and powerlessness left people yearning for freedom. And along came the gospel, sown in Latin soil, tilled by the priests who lived alongside the underclass, and through their eyes and out of their worldview they discovered a theology of liberation. No powerful elite were going to offer that to the masses! It wasn't perfect, but it was utterly radical.

These are not just issues of yesteryear. We export our theology today through powerful global Christian publishing houses, when otherwise excellent material such as *Purpose Driven...* or *Alpha* can, if we're not careful, be vehicles for stunting the development of truly indigenous theology. Even worse, the ubiquitous televangelists on satellite channels around the world, owing more to showbiz and money-making than the life of Jesus, so often register zero on the contextualisation meter!

Interpreting Scripture: the challenge of hermeneutics

The debate about contextualisation is not primarily about its intrinsic value. Most people 'get it'. But the underlying tension is what then governs how we interpret the gospel. This is the task of hermeneutics and can be expressed in the question 'How is the meaning of Scripture to be discerned?' 'How much is it governed by the interpretation of God's revelation, how much is it governed by the human condition?' For example, in answer to the question, 'how am I to understand the parable of the lost son?', am I to depend on what others tell me is the divine revelation contained in the text? Or to what extent is its interpretation moulded by my life, my circumstances, my culture?

This, then, is the question that might help us understand the right place to aim for in terms of contextualising the gospel. Hermeneutics recognises two parts to the task of interpretation. These are *meaning* and *significance*. By meaning, obviously, we refer to what the author meant. By significance, we refer to the degree to which a given culture at a given time can access the gospel as a voice that is relevant to its experience.¹

So, how far is too far?

By now you'll have seen, hopefully, that the 'how far is too far?' question cuts both ways. Too far towards either end of the spectrum is too far. So how are we to gauge the right degree of contextualisation?

Firstly, we are too far away from a contextualised gospel if we fail to engage with the particularities of the human condition in any given culture. The Bible certainly speaks a universal word to all of humanity that entails God's creation, humanity's fallenness, God's salvation plan, the cross and resurrection and eschatological hope.

But this universality does not mean that the gospel is uni-dimensional, or simple. Some will argue that the gospel calls for repentance and faith as means of salvation, but is not designed to deal with issues of poverty and justice. Many evangelicals held this view until the 1970s, and it was John Stott's major contribution to evangelical theology that he reminded us of the need to care for the poor, the widow and the outcast.

To adopt a 'Scripture is simple' stance in terms of our understanding of human sexuality, or creation-science, or a hundred other disciplines is to say that the insights of science and the humanities have little

Case study in contextualisation

When BMS missionaries J H Lorraine and F W Savidge went to Mizoram in north east India in 1903, they preached a gospel of forgiveness from sin for six years and saw no fruit. They wrote that these people have "no sense of sin and felt no need of such a Saviour."

Indeed, they didn't. But after six years what they did see was that they had a dreadful fear of the evil spirits in the forest, so they recast the gospel as one of Jesus vanquishing the devil.

They spoke of the father of Jesus as Pathian, the Mizo high-God, and heaven as the Mizo concept of paradise – pialral. Conversions came fast and revivals broke out. Today, almost all Mizos are Christians.

or nothing to add to our understanding of the Bible.

Conversely, we are too far away from a contextualised gospel, in the opposite direction, if we focus so exclusively on contextualising Scripture that we forget the message of the cross. Yes, the human condition is an offence to God and in many respects a product of our making. And yes, it is vital that our faith results in us working for the overturning of injustice and the betterment of human life. But the Bible can never be reduced to a political manifesto. At the heart of the gospel is a spiritual diagnosis that reckons with the seriousness of sin, and the efficacy of the cross. If our focus on culture neglects engagement with the sin that separates us from God, we are just one more political party.

Besides, we will have disempowered the gospel in its ability not just to embrace culture but also to challenge it.

We have a contextual gospel, but it is still *The Gospel* – good news for a broken world.

¹ See *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, Ed A Scott Moreau pp430-432 for an extended treatment of this subject

By Chris Hall
Editor for BMS World Mission

MUSLIM BACKGROUND BELIEVERS: THE SPECTRUM OF FAITH

WHEN DOES CONTEXTUALISING CHRISTIANITY FOR MUSLIMS BECOME SYNCRETISM?

Church can be an intimidating and alien place if you have not grown up attending. Many in the Western Church have acknowledged this and attempted to do something about it. Movements like Café Church and Fresh Expressions have developed in recent years to enable people to feel more comfortable and at ease when exploring faith for the first time.

If you are a Muslim in a Muslim majority country, attending a church is not only alien or intimidating, it is potentially life-threatening. In Sudan for instance, changing your religion from Islam is seen as an insult to God punishable by death. Therefore, the Sudan Interior Church does not expect Muslim inquirers to attend church but has special groups where they can share the gospel without anyone else knowing. Muslim background believers are baptised in a compound rather than in public to ensure their safety.

The way some mission agencies and churches now approach Muslim background believers in the Muslim world is not only to ensure their safety in an often hostile environment but to overcome perceptions that Christianity is too Western by adopting some approaches that are less alien to Islam.

There are varying degrees to which this is done, defined by John Travis (a pseudonym) as a spectrum of Christ-centred communities. It ranges from C1, which is when a former Muslim attends a Western style church, to C6, where they would be a secret believer still 'within Islam'. Communities may adopt some biblically acceptable Islamic practices from hand washing and dress code to calling Jesus Isa,



© somethingsurrealtery

the name for Jesus in the Qur'an.

The closer to C1 a believer is, the closer the believer will define themselves as Christian. Those closer to C6 will probably see themselves, and will be perceived by others, as Muslims.

This spectrum has led some to believe that contextualising Christianity too far for Muslim background believers can lead to an unsatisfactory merging of the two faiths. It is debatable where on the spectrum this point is. Timothy Tennent (interviewed in Q&A section, page 4) for instance, argues that at the C5 level, where Muslims accept Isa as their Lord and Saviour but also worship in a mosque, is syncretistic.

In an article published in 2011 in *Christianity Today* magazine, Kevin Higgins, International Director of Global Teams, said that he prefers not to use the C1-6 spectrum. "I prefer not to use the C Scale, as it tends to suggest tight definable boundaries," he said. "But if I had to use it, I would say I know [God] uses and blesses churches or believing communities that are so-called C1, C2, and C3. I believe he loves C6 believers, though I don't know anyone who suggests this is his

perfect will for the long term. The actual C5 movements I know of are best described as a mix of C4 and C5, since intentional gatherings of believers in some form of house-church model are a norm."

BMS World Mission General Director David Kerrigan has written about the

C1-C6 spectrum in a chapter for Roger Standing's latest book *As a Fire by Burning*. In his conclusion he advocates the C4 model as a way forward for Muslim background believers in Britain:

"The goal here is not a stronger local church but a thriving community of Isa believers embedded in their own culture and, we trust, growing in faith and influence. By God's grace, these groups might just be seen here in the UK too."

Using the C1-6 spectrum as a tool for evangelism is problematic. There is a danger of using it as stages to move Muslims from C6 to C1 as the ultimate goal or creating Muslim friendly communities that are not authentic but patronising. Whilst the C1-6 spectrum is very useful in many ways, questions of integrity, context and cultural sensitivity remain.

“C6 CHRISTIANS
ARE SECRET
BELIEVERS, STILL
'WITHIN ISLAM'”

Chris Hale of Aradhna

Worshiping Yeshu in the tradition of Bhakti

Chris Hale, vocalist and co-founder of Aradhna, grew up the son of American missionaries in India and now plays Christian festivals and the occasional Hindu temple.



Photo © Alex Baker (www.studiojoshizen.com)

Q&A

WORSHIPING JESUS USING TRADITIONALLY HINDU MUSIC IN ASIA AND BEYOND

Aradhna is a band working at the point where Worship and World music intersect: a point where fascinating theological questions of contextualisation find melodious expression in the songs of south Asia. Aradhna sing traditionally Hindu worship songs or bhajans, but in praise of Jesus (or *Yeshu*). Christian lyrics in Sanskrit, penned 100 years ago and still with the power to trouble Indian Christians and make Western Evangelicals happy.

You sing in an Indian folk style, often in Hindi. Some Christians can be pretty nervous about listening to things they

don't understand. Is the fact that many in your audience don't understand what you're singing an attraction?

Yes, most people seem to prefer that they don't understand the words, but they also prefer that they generally know what they're about. They'd rather not know what everything's about, because they actually enjoy the music because of the fact that they don't have to get bogged down in the words. But they're much more comfortable and set at ease, specially if they're followers of Jesus, if they know beforehand that the focal point of the music is devotion in an Indian way to *Yeshu*.

What is Bhakti?

Bhakti is a vast thing and there are many different ways of practising Bhakti, but people define it as loving devotion and total surrender to God. And, to be completely honest, the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements are all about Bhakti. It's really a translation of what they are doing in their worship, which has bled into the Anglican churches and mainline denominations of the US over the last 30 to 40 years. So, one attends church

“CHARISMATIC MOVEMENTS ARE ALL ABOUT BHAKTI”

in North America and one experiences Bhakti.

We were in a church in England in 2000, when we recorded our live album, and an Indian couple from the Fiji islands came up to us. In those early days we were singing mostly English worship songs and throwing in a few Hindi ones and they said to us: 'This is our worship.' They meant that we were doing Bhakti.

Simply using the word Bhakti could communicate hugely to an Indian community that might land up in church one day to experience Sunday morning worship.

So would an Indian practitioner of Bhakti recognise what you do?

Definitely. Absolutely. The primary thing I hear from Indians who come to us after our concerts is the word 'devotion'. And they use the word in English. More than anything else, they come up to us and say: 'you sing from your heart, and that's what's touched us.' They don't comment as much about the intricacies of the sitar playing or the tabla or the fusion. The most common description for them is 'a heart of devotion'.

One of your songs, *Jaya Dev*, was written by an Indian Christian who came from a tradition of following Jesus that diverged from the Western expression...

From the late 1800s in north India (in south India there were much earlier expressions, but our music is primarily north Indian and Hindi and Sanskrit based) indigenous expressions of faith in Christ in India began to spring up in different places. And the one that you're

mentioning is a Bengali man named Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, which is a real tongue-twister of a name.

His pilgrimage was basically a pilgrimage of realising that the Sanskrit language was a beautiful language for him to express faith in Christ and, because of the desire to use that language, he had to use words from Sanskrit, which don't have their origin in Hebrew or Greek, in his worship of Christ.

That is a redefining. That is taking a phrase that might have had a particular meaning and giving it a twist that gives it a new meaning. That's what every translator has to do all over the world, in every tribal language and every major language. To take words that already exist and say: I am going to put a new meaning into this word that expresses this new idea.

So for him, one particular word that we use is the title *Narahari*. *Nar* which means in Sanskrit human being or man, and *Hari* a Sanskrit name for God. But again, within the vast and huge world of India, these names for God are multiple and all indigenous. So for somebody who might feel that the sound of the name *Jehova* is the only real sound of the name of God, or even that 'God' is the only real valid

greater struggle is from Indian Christians who have not embraced in a sense some levels of indigenisation that some people like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay have done.

Christians have had a couple of hundred years of history. But missionaries coming to north India in the early days of the 1800s made little attempt at encouraging indigenous expressions, even up to 1870. By 1900 they were promoting indigenous expressions, but by that time a community of Indian Christians had already developed what had essentially become its own culture. A unique and different culture within India. So, when you ask an Indian Christian what they feel about some of these innovations by people like Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, they are more uncomfortable than a Western Christian would be. Because they are much closer to the soil of it.

They are also closer to the experience of having possibly undergone persecution from family members for having become Christians, and having left everything from their previous life to enter into Christianity. So for them to see people using things or validating things that they had left is a very difficult experience for them.

“SOMEONE WHO FEELS THAT 'JEHOVA' IS THE ONLY REAL SOUND OF THE NAME OF GOD WOULD STRUGGLE”

sound, that person would struggle.

Brahmabandhab Upadhyay felt that because with *Nar* meaning man and *Hari* meaning God, here was the *Emmanuel*, here was God with us. The man who was God. That was one of the ways he expressed his indigenous faith and he got a lot of opposition for things like that because these were new names in a Christ-centred context.

You must get a certain number of Western Christians who are uncomfortable with that aspect of your songs.

It's interesting, but we rarely, if ever, get opposition from Westerners. Many Westerners have moved to one of two positions: either they are completely ready to accept all kinds of things, or they say 'well, let the believers in the local country decide.'

I would say where we would get a

I've heard from so many people who say that they feel Jesus and the Holy Spirit in your music. Is that something you hear a lot?

Yes, it's very interesting: older folks, in their 70s and 80s (and Caucasians at that!) who might have spent the better part of the last 30 years opposing the entrance of rock music into their churches, the moment we perform in their church they come to us afterwards and say that they just had tears streaming down their faces. So, we don't really understand why this music seems to connect with such a diverse range of people and ages. I would venture a guess that it really is actually the Holy Spirit.

You can find more from Aradhna at aradhnamusic.com

Chris Hale was talking to Jonathan Langley at Greenbelt Festival 2012

By Dr Jaco Beyers

Senior lecturer in the Department of Science of Religion and Missiology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Pretoria, South Africa and author on the science of religion

JESUS AS ANCESTOR

A CHALLENGE FOR MISSIONARIES IN AFRICA

IN COMMUNICATING
JESUS TO
“TRADITIONAL
AFRICA”, THE
CONCEPT OF THE
ETERNAL ANCESTOR
IS HELPFUL, BUT
NOT WITHOUT
PROBLEMS



Three facets of African religion

Traditional African religions are diverse, with essentially three main characteristics marking the different forms of these religions. First is the belief in a Supreme Being (called by different names). This God created all existing elements and is perceived to be no longer involved in everyday existence of the creatures. The second characteristic is the belief in an invisible spiritual realm. This is what scholars refer to as animism: an understanding of two realities co-existing; one visible and the other invisible. This invisible realm is the residing place of all spiritual beings such as the spirits of ancestors, the souls of the unborn, even mythological and nature spirits, and demons. The third characteristic is the belief in the sacredness of the unified community, the cohesion of families, tribes, villages and communities. Everything in life is connected. This holistic approach to life causes many Africans to anticipate a strong bond between people from Africa, between man and nature and between the living and the deceased.

With this in mind, the difficulty of introducing Christianity to Africa becomes clear. Theologians agree that it is essential that an understanding

of Jesus Christ is necessary when conveying the gospel to a new context. The problem then is how Jesus should be presented to an African context in order for Africans of this mindset to relate to him. One approach is to present Jesus in a familiar category. This exercise in contextualisation endeavours to bring Christ in a familiar form to a new context. This search for cultural identities that

The role of ancestors

In Africa, children consider deceased parents and grandparents to be 'ancestors'. In the dynamistic and animistic African worldview, ancestors automatically acquire supernatural powers. Ancestors can be implored from time to time for advice on personal matters and are worshipped and venerated ambiguously, simultaneously

“ANCESTORS ARE GO-BETWEENS FOR HUMANS AND GOD”

enable understanding of a foreign element is called inculturation.

In truth, the transmitting of the gospel over centuries has been through a long process of inculturation: the message of Jesus originating in a Jewish context was introduced to a Hellenistic and Roman context, and afterwards to a European context, every time utilising new concepts to make the idea of Jesus familiar to new cultures. This process repeats every time the gospel is brought into new missionary contexts.

One possible way of introducing Jesus to an African context is by utilising the African understanding of 'ancestors'.

feared and adored. The same ancestors can bestow gifts and can cause harm for those who neglect their acknowledgement.

Mediation

From a superior hierarchical position to humans, ancestors are inferior to God and act as mediators between God and man. Even holy functionaries like witchdoctors operate through the mediation of ancestors. Ancestors are not of divine nature. Together with their descendants, ancestors worship God. As mediators between God and man, ancestors do not possess the power to mediate salvation.

Sacred communication

Ancestors remain in contact with descendants for quite some time. Ancestors are mostly acknowledged for up to four or five generations, whereupon the memory of these ancestors dies out and they are considered to be truly dead. The spirit of the deceased then becomes an impersonal spirit residing in the spirit world.

Just as in African culture it is unacceptable to approach a higher-ranking person directly, without an intermediary, in the same fashion ancestors function as the “go-betweens” between humans and God. The ancestors become the authority that provides advice and blessings for humans. Ancestors thus seem only to mediate the power from the Supreme Being.

Exemplarity

Ancestors are considered to be good models for human behaviour. Their acts of virtue are seen as good examples of proper life. By their way of living they educate social behaviour. Individuals consult ancestors frequently for advice on daily decisions.

Companions on the journey of life

Traditional African culture has a circular understanding of time in which life is the rhythmic progression through certain stages of birth, puberty, adulthood, old age and death. To assist in the successful completion of the cycle of life, the ancestors act as guides on this journey. At the onset of every stage there are rites to be performed to initiate one into the next phase. Ancestors play a spiritual role at these rites, which ensure salvation.

Guardians of traditions

Ancestors also seem to function as the social conscience of a community. The norms and moral values given by the ancestors assist individuals to live a proper life. The example set by ancestors ensures a harmonious community where everybody knows and understands their identity and function. In doing so there is continuity with the past. In this way ancestors are guardians of traditions.

Jesus as ancestor

It is not uncommon among traditional Africans to refer to Jesus as an ancestor. Specific interpretations of certain biblical texts make portraying Jesus as their Great Ancestor far from impossible for some African Christians. Key features include:

Firstborn: The absent God comes close to his creation when God sends his Son, Jesus, to be born in a human form. The Bible identifies Jesus as the firstborn among many (compare to Romans 8: 29; Colossians 1: 15; Hebrews 2: 10-18), and Jesus is described as the eldest brother of man. Jesus is the firstborn of God in the world. Through this familial relationship with God through Jesus, man can talk with God, through their Ancestor Jesus. Through consulting Jesus, man can follow the will of God.

Originator: God is the Creator and Re-Creator of a world gone astray due to sin. Through Jesus all are born anew amid the guilt of sin. He becomes the progenitor of a new race belonging to God (compare to John 3: 5-8). All that believe in the forgiveness of God through Jesus become part of the family of God (Ephesians 2: 19). A bond comes into existence between the living and the dead

is also God’s son. One can trust him as an ancestor with everything: from giving life, care and protection to guidance and even punishment.

There are good reasons to present Jesus as an ancestor in an African context. There are, however, important objections.

Problems with Jesus as ancestor

The objections to presenting Jesus as an ancestor in Africa can be divided into two groups, namely cultural objections and theological objections.

Culturally, the objection would be that if Jesus is an ancestor, whose ancestor is he? To what tribe and family does he belong? Why is Jesus not black? Why should Jesus, a foreigner in Africa, be presented as the Great Ancestor above local community leaders? These concerns are valid objections that can create an

“ THE FUNCTION OF JESUS IS RELEGATED TO THE DOMAIN OF ETHICS. ”

of one family. Children of God live with the eschatological expectation that Jesus will one day return to restore life for his “family”.

Jesus performing the functions of ancestors: Ancestors have the task of being messengers between God and man. Ancestors can bless, protect and give advice. Ancestors give guidance in the governance of the tribe to ensure the proper functioning of society. Ancestors function as intercessors with God, imploring God for help and forgiveness. These roles are seen as the many acts of mercy that Jesus also fulfils (1 John 2: 1; Romans 8: 34).

The ancestors also tell the people to repent from their evil ways, and if they don’t they bring punishment. When the people bring sacrifices to the ancestors they accept and acknowledge their sins. Their punishment is then wiped out. Similarities with Jesus are not too hard to see.

Like the ancestors, Jesus can provide for spiritual needs. This is what African Christians believe, because Jesus like any other ancestor was created by God and he

aversion for Christianity.

But one of the main concerns of presenting Jesus as an ancestor is a theological concern. The divine character of Jesus becomes contested when he is presented as an ancestor. If he is portrayed as an ancestor, can he still be truly God? To emphasise the fact that Jesus is the Son of God might create the impression that he is inferior to God, his father, making him essentially human, albeit an exemplary figure and trustworthy teacher.

Jesus portrayed as ancestor also has implications for salvation. If Jesus is seen as the one performing the superlative of ancestral functions, his salvific death on the cross for the sin of mankind is not addressed. The function of Jesus is relegated to the domain of ethics.

Some theologians suggest that it might be meaningful to present Jesus in Africa as a king. The concept is familiar in Africa and might communicate something of a hierarchical superior divine figure that is approached with respect.

Clearly, the process of inculturating the gospel in Africa is far from over.

By Martin

A British theological lecturer who has worked amongst Muslims for over 30 years, who cannot be named due to his travels supporting both indigenous and foreign church planting teams around the world

CONTEXTUALISED OR COMPROMISED? BIBLE TRANSLATIONS FOR MUSLIM READERS

CONTEXTUALISING BIBLE TRANSLATION FOR MUSLIMS IS CONTROVERSIAL, BUT SHOULD NOT LEAD TO DIVISION

Bible translations have often provoked controversy. Presently passions are running high, though predominantly across the Atlantic, following last year's launch of a web campaign against Bible translators using so called Muslim Idiom Translations (MIT). This, together with articles attacking these translations, translators and mission organisations in national newspapers in America, Lebanon and here in the UK has heightened the division. In May 2013, the WEA (World Evangelical Alliance) panel on the translation of divine familial terms in Muslim contexts will present its guidelines. Hopefully, this will provide the basis for bridging the divide of one of the most antagonistic issues in recent evangelical missiology.

Muslim-friendly translations

The heart of the controversy concerns the translation of the familial terms, Father, Son and Son of God in Muslim contexts. Is the only acceptable translation the one that uses the most common term (or the term traditionally used by the Christian minority where there is one) even where that term is misunderstood to the point of being offensive? Or, can a possibly less common term, one that conveys the divine familial concept but without taking the reader to an inaccurate meaning, be used (with explanatory footnotes) to better convey the original meaning? Back-translating these



© Evgeni Zotov

terms into English loses their meaning and impact, as these terms don't exist in English. Examples might be local terms referring to 'the divine prince' or 'uniquely beloved one' instead of the most common term for son. Proponents of the latter approach argue that surveys conclusively show that often the most common term, or the traditional translation for these familial terms, is misunderstood and thereby inaccurate to the true meaning of the original Greek or Hebrew text.

When asked to describe the meaning of these terms interviewees repeatedly reported it to be a biological relationship; God, the Father, had a sexual relationship with Mary, the mother, who gave birth to the Son of God, a concept they, quite rightly, found objectionable. They could not understand the term to refer to a spiritual relationship even when presented with that possibility. Opponents to translations which use less common, or non-traditional familial terms, argue that the true meaning of the divine familial relationship is lost in translation; that these translations mislead Muslims as to the true nature of God and are nothing less than an Islamification of the Scriptures.

Taking brothers to court

One question arising from this debate is how Bible-believing Christians should conduct their disagreements. Is it Biblical to

launch a web petition naming organisations and individuals, including some working in Muslim countries, with the goal to flood their inbox with thousands of complaints and undermine their funding? Should Christians use the national secular press to denounce one another's ministry? Or is this a modern public court, like the actions of the Corinthians that so shocked Paul: "one brother takes another to court – and this in front of unbelievers!" (1 Cor 6: 6). Later to that same church, a church in conflict, Paul wrote instructing them on how to rise above conflict: "love.. does not insist on its own way", "love.. does not dishonour others" (1 Cor 13: 5).

This biblical exhortation can be seen in the writings of John Owen, the great 17th century puritan theologian, referred to by Spurgeon as "the prince of divines". Despite the theological conflicts of the time Owen writes: "I confess I would rather, much rather, spend all my time and days in making up and healing the breaches and schisms that are amongst Christians than one hour in justifying our divisions, even therein wherein, on the one side, they are capable of a fair defence. When men have laboured as much in the improvement of the principle of forbearance as they have done to subdue other men to their opinions, religion will have another appearance in the world."

Leaving the last word on this to Scripture, let us heed Paul's warning to the Galatian church, where having challenged their false teaching he warns them: "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." (Gal 5: 15)

Global Connections Muslim World Forum will soon be looking at the WEA recommendations with one of the members of the WEA panel. You are welcome to attend on July 17th, details at: globalconnections.co.uk/forums/MWF

By Margaret Gibbs

Ethnomusicologist, BMS Regional Team Leader for Asia and former mission worker in Albania and Nepal

WORSHIP IN CONTEXT

MUSICAL WORSHIP ALWAYS COMES WITH CULTURAL STRINGS ATTACHED, SAYS OUR RESIDENT ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST

Have you ever suddenly heard a song or piece of music which was special to you at a particular point in your life? What happens within your feelings at that moment? Part of me, for instance, can't hear 'Bread of heaven' without seeing red jerseys and rugby balls, even though I love this hymn for worship. Understanding these feelings can help us understand what is really going on when we are worshipping God with music.

Music, musicologists say, is a unique and necessary phenomenon within human society which helps us express feelings and realities deeper than words can express. It releases and even shapes aspects of the human spirit in ways nothing else can. It cements beliefs for the individual and for social groups and, furthermore, its effect through life becomes profoundly connected with former associations, bringing back feelings and situations in helpful and unhelpful ways. For these reasons, great care is needed in choosing music for worship in different cultural contexts.

Pre-Christian associations

It is a truism that people are generally touched more deeply by their 'heart music' than foreign-sounding music, just as they are by their heart language more than second or third languages; and so it's easy for cross-cultural workers to understand that local music is generally more effective in releasing people into worship than foreign music styles with translated words.

However, musical cultures are complex. Most societies have several kinds of music at least which are appreciated by different subgroups, or used in different settings, and so it is not obvious which will be the most effective and appropriate to use for Christian worship. In some cases elders may respond deeply to traditional

“IN CHRIST, ASPECTS OF CULTURE ARE REDEEMABLE”

music, helping them to experience God as directly present in their culture and not just imported from elsewhere, but elders may just as easily find it has unhelpful associations for them because of previous/pre-Christian experiences. Young people can be strongly in favour of national music because of a proper pride in their own culture but otherwise can be determined to espouse the Western pop style of worship music as appearing upwardly mobile or a way of escaping what they feel are narrow cultural norms. A deep understanding of the variety of needs and associations in each culture and its music is needed to negotiate these issues wisely.

So, down to practicalities. The Catholic invaders of Peru built many of their churches directly upon the foundations of Inca buildings below and have been reaping the consequences

of syncretism ever since. Moving from architecture back to music, is it safe to take a local love song melody and replace the words with Christ-centred ones? An Albanian friend of mine set the words of his testimony to the Albanian love song 'Snowdrop', and it went down an absolute treat with everyone, especially un-churched elders.

Shamanistic worship rhythms?

What about using music which has particular rhythms associated with negative settings within a culture? Could music used in trance-inducing shamanistic worship in Korea, for example, be legitimately adapted for Christian worship? In Christ, aspects of culture are redeemable, but rhythm has the facility to press extremely deep but subliminal buttons. Is it acceptable to use instruments which are normally used for other religions' worship or even have religious meanings within their structure and decoration? Javanese gamelan gongs are associated with the spirit world and, in normal usage, have offerings burning below them. But the Baptist and Catholic churches in Java have chosen to include them in worship.

As these examples begin to show, the answers to our questions about usage, as is usual in cross-cultural work, depend on the context. No 'one-size-fits-all' solution here. Everything depends on what is going on in the hearts and minds of those who will use particular music in worship. What associations does it hold for them? The 'right' answer may change from day to day and year to year in each context. This is all part of the exciting and stimulating challenge for anyone involved in developing worship which will best help people experience the true presence of God, in new settings.

A SELECTION OF RELEVANT FILM, MUSIC AND LITERATURE TO HELP YOU MEDITATE ON THE SUBJECT

BOOK
URBAN TO THE CORE:
motives for
incarnational mission

Juliet Kilpin

Troubadour Publishing – 2013

Price: £9.95 from

troubadour.co.uk

Juliet Kilpin brings together stories from Urban Expression church planting teams. Her approach is to integrate the accounts of contextualisation with the core values that everyone working with Urban Expression subscribes to. This is a multi-voiced book with the author acting as a guide, stimulating your thinking and guiding your reflection. It is a fascinating read and brings to life the challenges that people engaged in mission in an urban setting are faced with. If you want to earth thinking about contextualisation with a blend of practice, missiological thinking and biblical reflection then this book will help.

Graham Doel is BMS UK Field Leader

DVD
SON OF MAN

Director: Mark Dornford-May

Spier Films, 2006

Price: £6 - £29.99, Amazon UK

Jesus Christ Superstar caused controversy when it first sought to contextualise Jesus for mass consumption – personally I hated it! But I loved Mark Dornford-May's gospel adaptation, *Son of Man*, shot in the townships of South Africa but set in the midst of a fictional African transitional government. Presenting Jesus as a pan-African Marxist sounds controversial, but the film remains cleverly committed to the Biblical narrative and thus hits the mark by provoking uncomfortable questions about power, injustice, peaceful protest, exclusion and salvation. For some, the extent of African contextualisation will make it a hard film to penetrate, but if you stick with it, you will be challenged and blessed by this intelligent and stirring story of the Messiah.

Steve Sanderson is BMS Manager for Mission Projects

CD
AMRIT VANI

Aradhna

AradhnaMusic.com, 2007

Price: £7.99 on iTunes

Worship is where the contextual rubber often hits the ecclesiastical road, and this album, released in 2007 and featuring two former missionary kids from North America, is a great way to hear it happen. Infusing classic Hindu worship *bhajans* with Christ-centred lyrics, Amrit Vani is both beautiful and thought-provoking. Jaya Dev (its lyrics translated helpfully in the booklet – also available for download) offers some of the most original worship images you're likely to encounter. Original author of the song's lyrics, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (a 19th century Indian thinker who sought an indigenous expression of Christianity) expresses devotion to Christ in profoundly un-Western ways that will delight and disturb in equal measure and other tracks do the same. Fascinating listening.

Jonathan Langley is Editor of *Mission Catalyst*

BOOK
THEOLOGY IN THE
CONTEXT OF WORLD
CHRISTIANITY:
how the global church is
influencing the way we think
about and discuss theology

Timothy C Tennent

Zondervan, 2007

Price: £12.74, Amazon UK

ISBN 978-0-31027-511-4

This outstanding book is a strong introduction to contemporary missiology. Tennent draws together examples of how the World Church is illuminating areas of Western-dominated theological enquiry. In relation to Islam he asks: "Is the Father of Jesus the God of Mohammad?" and: "How we are to understand Jesus-followers within Islam?" Tennent comes from a conservative theological perspective which makes these explorations all the better. He is not afraid to say where the boundaries of orthodoxy lie, though you may not always agree. Above all, these insights, the fruit of years of working in mission in the global south, can rejuvenate our theological understanding and offer us encouragement to pursue the mission of God with greater imagination.

David Kerrigan is General Director of BMS World Mission



Mission Catalyst



Mission Catalyst is produced four times a year. The views and opinions expressed by contributors in print and online are not necessarily those of BMS World Mission. Email us with comments about *Mission Catalyst* to: catalyst@bmsworldmission.org

Managing Editor: David Kerrigan Editor: Jonty Langley Research: Katherine Wagner Design: Malky Currie

BMS World Mission, PO Box 49, 129 Broadway, Didcot, Oxfordshire, OX11 8XA Website: www.bmsworldmission.org

Baptist Missionary Society: registered as a charity in England & Wales (number 233782) and in Scotland (number SC037767)