

Institute of Christian Teaching  
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL MESSAGE IN ASIA:  
AN ADVENTIST APPROACH

by

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Prepared for the  
International Faith and Learning Seminar  
held at  
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies  
September 1993

**152-93 Institute for Christian Teaching  
12501 Old Columbia Pike  
Silver Spring, MD 20904, USA**

## I. Introduction

The Christian Church, especially the Seventh-day Adventist Church, is a newcomer in Asia if compared with the traditional Asian religions. The traditional Asian religions have taken deep roots in the culture and lives of the people in Asia.<sup>1</sup> The gospel message is "alien" to the Asian mind. The problem is compounded by the fact that Christianity was introduced by Western missionaries hampered by cultural and language barriers.

In spite of these obstacles, Christianity managed to establish its presence in Asian countries in limited degrees. However, the Church faces the problem of addressing the realities of Asia in the past and even today. The Church looks up to Western theology for a concrete expression of the faith. Difficulties crop up because the questions Western theology confronted do not relate to the problems facing the Church in Asia today.

This essay aims to discuss the problem of contextualizing the gospel message in Asia. It attempts to present a proposal on contextualizing the gospel message in Asia from an Adventist approach.

## II. Definition

The verb "contextualize" comes from the word "context". Context pertains to situation or the circumstances in which a particular event occurs. A text can be correctly and properly understood if seen from the context. Likewise, contextualization

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<sup>1</sup>In the use of the word Asia, we refer to the countries in the Far East. However, the principles expounded in this essay are applicable to any other country or culture.

is the task of communicating the gospel message so that it can be understood by the people within cultural context and needs.

To contextualize the gospel message means that the Church cannot simply ignore the contemporary factors in cultural change in her task of proclaiming the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Byang H. Kato, a theologian from Kenya, pointed out that in contextualization the concepts or ideals are made relevant in a given contextual situation.<sup>3</sup>

The word contextualization began to be used by Shoki Coe and Aharon Sapsezian, directors of the Theological Education Fund in their report, Ministry and Context, in 1972.

Contextualization has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of Third World contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical moment of nations in the Third World.<sup>4</sup>

### III. Biblical Basis for Contextualization

While the word "contextualize" does not appear in the Bible, the purpose and concept of contextualization are present. God intended the plan of salvation for the whole world. That is, not only for the Jews or for the Christian Church but for every

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<sup>2</sup>Bruce J. Nicholls, Contextualization: A Theology of Gospel and Culture (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Pr, 1979), 22.

<sup>3</sup>Byang H. Kato, "The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism," in Let the Earth Hear His Voice, ed. J.D. Douglas (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Pub, 1975), 1217.

<sup>4</sup>Ministry in Context, 20-21; quoted in David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989), 31.

nation. Jesus said, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (John 12:32).<sup>5</sup> In both the Old and New Testaments, the idea of revealing God and His message to all the world is a recurring theme.

When God called Abram to leave his homeland, he promised to make of him a great nation, to bless him and make his name great. God declared, "By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (Genesis 12:3). And when he changed his name, he said, "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). Through Abraham, God intended to reveal himself to the world.

In the time of the kings, God planned to reveal himself to other nations through the prosperity and righteousness of his chosen people. "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6).

In the New Testament, Jesus made it clear to his disciples that the target of the gospel commission is the whole world. "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). God recruited Paul to his work force to help realize his plan. Of Paul, Jesus told Ananias, "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel..." (Acts 9:16)

Ellen G. White wrote regarding the universal nature of the task of revealing God and his love.

No distinction on account of nationality, race, or caste, is recognized by God. He is the Maker of all mankind. All men are of one family by creation, and all are one through redemption.... His love is so

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<sup>5</sup>Scripture references in this essay are from the Revised Standard Version.

broad, so deep, so full, that it penetrates everywhere.<sup>6</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church accepts this challenge of worldwide proclamation of the gospel in the contexts of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. The first angel's message clearly reiterates the worldwide nature of the gospel work. "Then I saw another angel flying in midheaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and tongue and people" (Revelation 14:6).

The consummation of the plan of salvation is portrayed in the vision that John the Revelator saw. "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9,10).

#### IV. The Gospel Message

Anyone who attempts to contextualize the gospel message must first have a clear understanding of the content of the message. The word gospel comes from the Greek words eu angelion meaning good news. The gospel message is good news because it centers on Jesus Christ who gives a solution to the sin problem. Joy comes when man realizes reconciliation and restoration through him. A review of the distinctive features is hereby presented:<sup>7</sup>

Creation. The Bible opens with the affirmation that God created the heaven and the earth. It reveals the original plan of God in creating our first parents. Creation gives us a

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<sup>6</sup>Ellen G. White, The Story of Prophets and Kings (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), 370.

<sup>7</sup>This review will be used in the discussion of the contextualization model on page 12.

picture of God as a Creator and Sovereign Ruler of the Universe. We see him as all-powerful yet caring. Creation does not only explain to us the origin of life. It points us to the Creator whose "love led Him to share... one of the greatest gifts that He can confer - existence."<sup>8</sup>

Fall of Man. The great controversy which started with the rebellion of Satan affected our first parents. The disobedience of Adam and Eve meant the rejection of God's rule. It led to the subjection of mankind to Satan, the author of sin.

Sin brought conflict and death to man. "Personal, inter-personal and social breakdowns abound because life is severed from its source."<sup>9</sup> The nature of man became sinful and corrupt. Instead of harmony and tranquility in God's creation, discord, conflict and confusion marks the creation.

Redemption. God revealed his plan of ending the great controversy with his declaration to the serpent, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This prophetic judgment found fulfillment in the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ.

The death of Jesus on the cross vindicated the character of God. Mercy and justice met at the cross. Jesus' death on the cross showed that love and truth comprise the foundation of God's government. "And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:20).

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<sup>8</sup>Seventh-day Adventists Believe...: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Beliefs (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, 1988), 73.

<sup>9</sup>Brian J. Walsh and J. Richard Middleton, The Transforming Vision: Shaping a Christian World View (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 70.

Transformation. Redemption in Christ leads to the transformation of man. It involves the restoration of the image of God in man. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The transformation that takes place in man is wholistic in nature. As the old self has been crucified with him (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20), the new man lives by the Spirit (Galatians 5:25). His life is no longer under the power of sin. Rather, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the new man has the freedom to experience dynamic changes in his life. He will live a fruitful life of service for the glory of God.

Restoration. Full restoration will take place in the Second Advent. In his letters, Paul clearly stated that man would be free from corruption of sin and death. When that time comes, "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Romans 8:21).

#### V. Process of Contextualization

When the task of contextualization was introduced, there was no unanimous agreement among the theologians and church leaders regarding the proper approach. Donald Leroy Stults rightly observed that any attempt to contextualize must be done with great caution because the approach to "contextualization... determines the outcome or product of the contextualization process".<sup>10</sup>

Bong Rin Ro classifies the four theologies that emerged from four different types of contextualization methods.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Donald Leroy Stults, Developing an Asian Evangelical Theology (Manila: OMF Literature, 1989), 151.

<sup>11</sup>Bong Rin Ro, "Contextualization: Asian Theology," in The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: Asia

1. Syncretism. This is the blending of Christianity with the beliefs and world views of Asian religions. Theological syncretism assumes that the Bible is culturally conditioned so that its cultural context is considered as only one of the other cultural contexts.<sup>12</sup> The biblical context is not final and authoritative. This method involves the process of relativising the teachings of various religions so that "the sum total of particular truths is greater than the expression of any one truth"<sup>13</sup> Truth is a consensus.

An example of syncretism is the attempt of Yun Sung-Bum, a professor of theology in Seoul, to relate the doctrine of the Trinity with the Korean myth of creation. In this myth, Hang-in, a heavenly emperor, had a son, Hang-ung, who descended to a specific place in Korea to erect a divine city. Hang-ung married a female bear who bore a son called Tang-gun Wang-Kum. The heavenly emperor, Hang-in, his son, Hang-ung, and the female bear, were united to produce a human being. To Yun Sung-Bum, the myth is an indigenized form of the Christian doctrine of Trinity.<sup>14</sup>

2. Accommodation. Bong Rin Ro describes this method as incorporating good concepts and customs of other religions into Christianity. This method is considered valid as long as the concepts and customs "accomodated" are reinterpreted. The basic and essential message of Christianity must be retained and

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Theological Association, 1984), 68-73.

<sup>12</sup>Bruce J. Nicholls, "A living Theology for Asian Churches: Some Reflections on the Contextualization - Syncretism Debate" in The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 127.

<sup>13</sup>Nicholls, 128.

<sup>14</sup>Bong Rin Ro, 70.



explained. An example of accomodation is the use by the Thailand Bible Society of the word "Dharma" (law, duty virtue, teaching, gospel) for the word logos in John 1:1.

3. Situational Theology. This type of theology arises when the teachings of the church arise out of a specific situation. The situation or the cultural context oftentimes become the norm and the biblical teachings of the church are set aside. Bong Rin Ro illustrates this situational theology with the ark of the covenant.

In Old Testament times the ark was carried by ox cart. Today in several Asian countries it could be carried by rickshaw, horse, motorcycle or car. Yet the message of the ark must not be changed. Syncretistic theologians are trying to change the ark itself.<sup>15</sup>

Liberation theology is an example of situational theology.

4. Biblically Oriented Asian Theology. Western theologies have been derived from Western cultural and historical contexts. Asian theology must address the Asian cultural contexts. The cultural situation must not be allowed to distort the biblical teachings of the church. Asian theologians have yet to come up with an Asian theology derived from a proper contextualization process.

Of the four types of contextualization methods, the Biblically oriented Asian Theology is the nearest to the ideal. It preserves the Biblical tradition and at the same time attempts to relate the message to the cultural context. This method will be the most appropriate for the Seventh-day Adventist Church which accepts the Bible as the infallible revelation of God's will, and the standard of character and basis of doctrines. In the following section, this method will be further discussed.

## VI. Bible-based Contextualization

The starting point of contextualization must be the Word of God. The Bible is the norm and final authority. Wilson W. Chow

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<sup>15</sup>Bong Rin Ro, 73.

correctly stressed that the cultural context of the biblical revelation should be understood and respected. It should not be reduced to the same level of other cultural contexts as God used the cultural and historical context of the Bible as a vehicle for revelation.<sup>16</sup>

The process of contextualization must therefore involve thorough knowledge of both the historico-cultural contexts of the Christian message and the given culture. This must include not only knowledge of the explicit meanings of cultural forms and symbols but also the implicit theological assumptions upon which they rest.<sup>17</sup>

In the process of contextualization, the content of the gospel message does not change in different situations. One illustration is Jesus' explanation of the teachings of the law in his Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Matthew. Jesus used the formula "You have heard that it was said to the men of old.... But I say to you". In the first half of the formula, Jesus referred to the previous understanding of the law while in the second part, Jesus explains the same law in his present situation.

For example, in Matthew 5:21, Jesus mentioned the law against murder which has been interpreted in the legal context of the past. Moving beyond the mere legal interpretation of the past, Jesus explained the moral and ethical aspects of the same command. However, Jesus did not abrogate the law. The same message was presented differently to meet different situations. Other examples include Matthew 5:27, 31, 33, 38, 43. While these

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<sup>16</sup>Wilson W. Chow, "Biblical Foundation for Evangelical Theology in the Third World" in The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts, ed. Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur (Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 87.

<sup>17</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, "Critical Contextualization," Missiology: An International Review 12 (July 1984): 295.

examples happened in the same culture, they illustrate how the content of the message is retained in different situations.

Borge Schantz pointed to the example of Paul's cross-cultural ministry as an illustration of contextualization. For Paul, the most important is the proclamation of the gospel message. He wisely made a distinction between the unchanging content of the gospel message and cultural variables.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Paul could say, "I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." (1 Cor 9:22, 23)

Following the examples of Jesus and Paul, anyone attempting to contextualize the gospel message in Asia should keep the content of the gospel message intact. But the ways the gospel may be expressed may vary.<sup>19</sup> The cultural context to which the message would be proclaimed should not be the final authority in determining the limits of the gospel message.

The process of Bible-based contextualization can be done by an individual and by the Church as a community. In the global mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church for the unreached groups, the Church need to apply Bible-based contextualization in giving the gospel message to these groups.

The religious and cultural diversity of Asia are overwhelming. No single method can adequately encompass the challenge of contextualization. However, since culture is the manifestation of the world view of the people, a model of contextualization making use of the world view is proposed. In addition, the contemporary needs at various levels are addressed in this model.

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<sup>18</sup>Borge Schantz, "One Message - Many Cultures: How Do We Cope?" Ministry 65 (June 1992): 10.

<sup>19</sup>Saphir P. Athyal, "Emergence of Asian Theologies," Christianity Today, 23 September 1977, 70.

This model utilizes the four basic questions that form the base of any world view.<sup>20</sup>

#### Contextualization Model Using the World View

World View	Asian Culture (E.g. Japan)	Gospel Message
1. Who am I?	Member of the national family of Japan, direct descendants of the sun-goddess	Member of the Family of Adam;
2. Where am I?	I live in the land of the Rising Sun in harmony and oneness with the flow of nature	I live in the world created by God;
3. What's wrong?	Disharmony occurs when I bring dishonor to my family or country.	Sin marred God's creation; Death, conflict, confusion marked human existence.
4. What is the remedy?	My task in life is to enhance the name of my national family, because true blessing only occurs when the superiority of Japan over the world of nations comes to pass.	Redemption and restoration in Christ

In this model, a thorough knowledge of the world view of the Asian culture will provide the Christian or Seventh-day Adventist worker an opportunity to contextualize the gospel message. The features of the gospel message will be presented to the Asian culture as answer to the basic questions. Through the working of the Holy Spirit and the tact and competence of the worker, the Asian will be led to see the teachings of the gospel message as the answer to the basic questions. In this model, the elements of the gospel message permeate the Asian culture through the world view.

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<sup>20</sup>Walsh and Middleton, 35.

Cultural values may also serve as bridges in the process of Bible-based contextualization. The gospel message can be presented in a manner that will relate to the features of the cultural values. For example, three values that are common in various Asian cultures are the following:

Asian Values	Gospel Message
1. Strong Family Relationship	Christian Church as a Family
2. Respect for Elders	God as Father
3. Strong Group Tendencies	Christian Fellowship

In addition, the contemporary needs at various levels must be addressed. These are also in the form of questions:

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|--|-----|-------------------------|
| 1. What is my need?                                      | --- | Individual level        |
| 2. What is the need<br>in my family?<br>In my community? | --- | Family/ Community level |
| 3. What is the need<br>of my country?                    | --- | National level          |

The needs will vary not only from one culture to another, but also from one person to another within the same culture. The task of contextualization is to address the needs by stressing the features of the gospel message that are relevant to the needs. And from these needs, the worker must lead the Asian to an awareness of his need of Christ and the gospel message.

In his ministry, Jesus did not only teach and preach to the people. He also ministered to their needs. However, I do not mean that the Christian Church must utilize all its resources to meet the physical and social needs of the people. The Church cannot provide jobs, food and medicine to everyone. The primary task of the Church is the proclamation of the gospel message. With the proclamation, in ways that the limited resources of the Church can afford, something must be done to address the needs. At present, the Seventh-day Adventist is doing this through the ADRA and through the welfare programs of local churches and private individuals.

For example, if the need at the individual level is release from drug addiction, the teaching on the health aspects of the gospel message and the power of Jesus Christ can be stressed. The need at the family level or the community and at the national level may be economic in nature. The gospel message with emphasis on stewardship principles message will be relevant.

## VI. Method of Communication

The process of Bible-based contextualization can be made easy with the use of appropriate method of communication. While there are many possible techniques, two suggestions are presented for effective contextualization.

1. The Use of Language of the Asian culture -- The ability to use the language of an Asian culture is a tremendous asset. The Christian worker can comprehend the world view and mind of the Asian culture through language. Experience shows that when a Christian worker speaks the language, readiness to listen and ability to understand on the part of the Asian are high.

Ability to use the language may also create bridges of communication. C.H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson attempted to demonstrate how the truths of the Bible, particularly those found in Genesis, could be explained using the characters of the Chinese language.<sup>21</sup>

Expatriate workers and even national workers should be encouraged to learn and use the language of the people of the Asian culture in contextualizing the gospel message.

2. From Known to Unknown Method -- Jesus used parables and illustrations from nature to communicate his message in his times. His teachings were understood not only by people from different cultures, but also by people of different ages, and from different sectors of the society.

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<sup>21</sup>C.H. Kang and Ethel R. Nelson, The Discovery of Genesis (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1979).

The use of stories and illustrations understood by Asians can help much in contextualizing the gospel message. Asian culture is rich in symbols and illustrations that will lead the mind of the Asian minds to the truths of the gospel message.

## VII. Conclusion

The task of contextualizing is imperative and inevitable. While we have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all", the listeners come from various cultures (Ephesians 4:5,6). The gospel message must not only be proclaimed to the people of diverse cultures, such as Asia. It must also address the realities of the cultural context and needs of the people.

The contextualization of the gospel message must take the Word of God as the basis and final authority in its task. The Bible-based Contextualization is the most appropriate method for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The Adventist approach involves, therefore, thorough knowledge of the gospel message and the given cultural context. The use of the world view of the Asian culture can serve as a bridge in communicating the gospel message to the people of Asian culture. Awareness of the Asian values will be helpful in transmitting the gospel message in the diverse Asian cultures. Likewise, the contemporary needs of the people at various levels must be addressed.

The use of appropriate method of communication can facilitate the process of contextualization. The use of the language of the Asian culture and the use of the Known to Unknown method can help contextualization be realized.

The worldwide membership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church is culturally diverse. And this diversity will increase when more converts from various people groups will flock to the Church. The Church can remain united in the midst of diversity only if we continue to have one message and one Lord.

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