

The Dynamics of Evangelism in a Multicultural Context: Challenges and Opportunities for Contextualization.

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ABSTRACT

Evangelism in a multicultural context has become a primary concern in the mission of the modern church. In an effort to comprehend the dynamics involved in evangelism within multicultural environments, this research aims to identify the primary challenges faced by evangelists while also detailing the emerging opportunities in the endeavor to contextualize the message of the Gospel. Through an in-depth literature review in qualitative research, this study reveals the complexity of the multicultural context within the scope of evangelism. The main challenges encompass differences in religious beliefs, language disparities, and cultural tensions, all of which necessitate a prudent and adaptable approach. However, within these challenges, significant opportunities also arise. These opportunities include the formation of intercultural bridges, an improved understanding of religious pluralism, and the potential for collaboration among people of different faiths. The research findings emphasize the importance of contextualizing the Gospel message to establish an effective and meaningful approach within a multicultural context. This study provides valuable insights for churches and evangelists operating in multicultural environments, stimulating discussions about the role of contextualization in disseminating the message of the Gospel in an increasingly diverse society.

Keywords: Contextualization, Culture, Theology, and Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

The term contextualization has gained popularity in the world of theological education in the late decades of the 20th century. Various definitions of contextualization are as follows: Contextualization is an important concept for enveloping the Gospel within the context of the native culture (Rantosari Siahaan, 2002).

Contextualization is any activity undertaken to make the Gospel more easily understood and relevant to the culture, including its customs, language, and traditions (David Racey, 2012). Contextualization involves delivering the Good News and the Word of God in forms of culture that are meaningful, relatable, and understandable to the audience in both external forms (liturgy) and internal thoughts (content), thus addressing their real issues and needs within their societal framework (Jong Kuk Kim, 2000). Contextualization means translating the unchanging core of the Gospel into words that hold significance for various cultural groups in their unique contexts (Bruce Nicholls, 2007). Contextualization involves connecting the Gospel to a specific culture, encompassing all of its dimensions (John A. Gratton, 1980).

Contextual Theology seriously considers the historical and cultural context in which a person lives and works. It not only interprets traditional theological answers differently but also poses different questions in each culture. Contextual theology has a dual task of interpreting and constructing (Daniel J. Adams, 1993). Contextualization Theology is theology itself. This means that theology can only be called theology when it is truly contextual. Essentially, theology is an effort to dialectically and creatively reconcile the text with the context, the universal kerygma with the contextual reality of life. In simpler terms, theology can be described as an effort to formulate the Christian faith experience within specific contexts, spaces, and times (Eka Darmaputra, 1991). Christian contextualization can be understood as an attempt to proclaim the news of the person, work, Word, and will of God in a faithful manner to the Divine revelation, especially as expressed in the Bible, and also meaningful to audiences within their respective cultures. Contextualization can be carried out through spoken and written forms and is related, among other things, to theological efforts, Bible translation/interpretation, and application, a lifestyle following the example of Christ, evangelism, Christian religious education, church planting, growth, organization, and worship practices. In short, contextualization pertains to all the activities necessary for fulfilling the Great Commission (David J. Hesselgrave & Edward Rommen, 2000). To the extent that contextualization is not applied, Christianity will be perceived as a foreign religion.

There are groups that use and advocate for the use of the term "contextualization," but there are also those who use different terms, such as local theology, enculturation theology, and some choose the terms indigenous or native theology. The explanations are as follows (Y. Tomatala, 2001):

1. **Local Theology** is a term used by Roman Catholic theologians and some Protestant theologians. The term local theology reflects the use of the English language, emphasizing the surrounding context of logical reflection and having a number of ecclesiastical characteristics through its association with the local church. The reason for using this term is its compatibility with the term local church or location as the place for theological reflection, and it better represents sensitivity to the context.
2. **Enculturation Theology** is derived from the English term "inculturation," which means "the cultural learning process of the individual, the process by which a person is inserted into his or her culture" (Ayward Shorter, 1988). The term inculturation is deliberately used in the theological context to distinguish it from the use of the word inculturation in sociology. This term was first used by Fr. Joseph Mason, SJ, a professor at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1962.

3. **Indigenous Theology** is derived from the term "indigenous," which is translated as native and is based on the popular theory known as the "three-self" principle (self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating). This emphasizes the fact that theology is done by and for a specific geographic region by local residents for their own region rather than by outsiders. The concept of indigenization explains the process of bringing the Gospel to eventually grow an indigenous church. Charles Kraft referred to this approach as the ethnotheological approach (1979) in delivering the Gospel to a specific society and culture. This term is inherently related to ethnotheology, which is explained below.
4. Ethnotheology is a term used by evangelical theologians. The use of this term is closely related to the word "ethne" found in the Bible (Matt. 28:19-20). The term ethnotheology helps us focus on the unique characteristics of theology for a specific cultural region. The emphasis given is on the validity of this approach, as demonstrated by its transcultural applicability. The term ethnotheology is used with the understanding that ethnology is used for a generalization approach in analyzing data between cultures, not theography (ethnography) used to analyze data from a single culture.

RESEARCH METHOD

This journal research is based on an in-depth literature review with the aim of investigating and developing a theory of evangelism facilitated by cultural contextualization. In this context, cultural contextualization refers to the effort to convey the message of the Gospel by understanding and adapting it to the local cultural context, making the Gospel message more relevant and understandable to diverse audiences within their respective cultures.

The research involves a theoretical review from various reliable sources that have developed theories of contextualization in evangelism. This includes an understanding of the fundamental concepts of contextualization, implementation strategies, and their impact in different cultural contexts. Furthermore, the research also explores the interplay between cultural contextualization and evangelism within the realms of theology and practice.

References used in this research may include works by theologians and researchers competent in the field of evangelism and contextualization. Relevant reference sources could encompass books, journal articles, theses, and related research reports. The research aims to deepen our understanding of the importance of contextualization in the context of evangelism and provide a strong theoretical foundation for successful evangelism practices in various cultural settings. The appropriate references will vary depending on the subject and focus of the research. The journal's authors will refer to relevant and influential works within this domain, as determined through a literature review in the journal research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multicultural Context

The term multiculturalism has shaped an ideology that recognizes and celebrates differences in equality. This definition is then simplified into an ideology that accommodates cultural diversity in terms of religion, ethnicity, race, language, geography, and culture. It serves as a bridge to embrace diversity. The concept of multiculturalism is an idea to manage diversity with the fundamental principles of acknowledging the importance of diversity. This perspective relates to the rules of social relations or relations between ethnic groups. Meanwhile, Suparlan explains that "multiculturalism is an ideology that approves of differences in equality, both individually and in cultural forms.

Therefore, ethnic and cultural diversity becomes a characteristic of diversity because multiculturalism emphasizes equality. Suryana says that "This diversity is like a double-edged sword." On the positive side, it is evident in the richness and cultural diversity of the Indonesian people. On the negative side, it indicates that this diversity is susceptible to conflicts among community groups, which can impact the stability of security, social, political, and economic aspects (Suryana and Rusdiana). In essence, efforts are needed to understand diversity so that diversity does not become an issue in the life of a nation and neighbors. From a theological perspective, in his book "Multicultural Theology," G. Sudarmanto (2014) emphasizes that Multicultural Theology "is a formulation of biblical principles that show God's perspective on relationships among human beings." But it can also be said, "what God desires in terms of what people should understand and do toward each other in their diversity (religiously and ethnically). Basically, God has shown how to live with care and build relationships with His creation (Pardede et al., 2022).

Contextual Theology

One of the key trends in the concept of mission in Asia is contextualization, specifically in the area of theology or the development of mission theology from social, cultural, political, and economic contexts. In other words, it involves theologizing to respond to social, political, economic, cultural, and religious issues directly faced by the church. For this reason, the effort to contextualize theology is called Contextual Theology (Richard A.D. Siwu, 1996).

The term "contextualization" was first introduced by Shoki Coe, a theologian from Taiwan, during a lecture at the KKA General Assembly in Singapore in 1973. At the Asian mission conference in Indonesia in 1989, the term "context" was explicitly stated through the conference theme, "Participation in God's mission in the context of the suffering and struggle of the people of Asia" (Richard A.D. Siwu, 1996). The essence of a living theology should arise from the church's engagement with its surrounding world. Contextualization is open to insights from both the past and future cultural perspectives. Contextual theology should be understood as the insight to contextualize theology (contextualizing theology) rather than contextual theology and also not a theology that is contextualized (contextualized theology) (Richard A.D. Siwu, 1996).

The task of contextual theology lies in two areas: first, to examine the relationship of the Christian faith or the church with society, politics, and the state; second, to examine the relationship of the Christian faith or the church with culture, religions, and ideologies. Ultimately, the task of contextual theology is related to the work of theology within a specific framework and from a specific concrete context (Richard A.D. Siwu, 1996).

Contextualization Models

Contextualization models provide a general overview of theological efforts within specific contexts while helping us evaluate the extent to which a biblically-based approach can be implemented (Y. Tomatala, 2001).

1. **Accommodation Model (Acts 17:28):** Accommodation is an attitude of appreciation and openness to the native culture, manifested in both the practical behavior and theological aspects of missionary work. Accommodation involves a comprehensive engagement with the cultural aspects of a nation, encompassing the physical, social, and ideal dimensions.
2. **Adaptation Model:** The key distinction between adaptation and accommodation lies in their approach. The adaptation model does not assimilate cultural elements to express the Gospel but rather employs familiar cultural forms and ideas. For instance, John used the concept of "logos" to explain the truth of

the incarnation (John 1). The purpose of adaptation is to express and translate the Gospel into local terms to make it relevant in the cultural context.

3. **Procession Model:** The procession model is a negative response to culture. Groups following this model view culture as something corrupted by sin and do not see any inherent goodness within it.
4. **Transformation Model:** This model posits that God is above culture and through culture, He employs cultural elements to interact with humanity.
5. **Dialectical Model:** This model involves dynamic interaction between text and context, and it is based on a strong presumption that change is inevitable within culture. As change occurs over time, the church must use its prophetic role to analyze, interpret, and assess each situation.

Application of Contextualization.

The explanation provided by Pastor Noor Anggraito in *Religions of the Eastern World* regarding the theory of the relationship between Christianity and the world's religions is outlined as follows (Noor Anggraito, 2001):

1. **Radical Displacement Theory:** According to this theory, Christian missions should uproot and entirely replace other religions because they are solely of human origin. Essentially, according to this theory, Christianity is unique and true, while other religions are false, and salvation lies outside of them. This approach to Gospel proclamation is polemical in the sense that it not only evaluates or judges other religions but also articulates Christ's demands explicitly in love. According to this theory, during the indigenization process, all practices in a culture must be scrutinized in the light of God's Word, as Special Revelation. General Revelation has been distorted, so all cultural practices or religions that do not pass the test of God's Word should be discarded, disregarded, and removed. Adherents of this theory belong to the contemporary fundamentalist groups.
2. **Fulfillment Theory:** According to this theory, Christianity represents the fulfillment of the quest for religions worldwide. Within those religions, there exists a deep longing and thirst for God. The clear analogy based on this theory is the Old Testament and other religions. Just as Christ fulfilled the expectations of the Jews in the Old Testament, He also fulfills the hopes and longings of other religions. All religions possess some elements of truth. Christianity is superior and fulfills or completes the deficiencies of all religions. In evangelism, a gradual, constructive approach is taken. Evangelists seek a point of truth and then build from there step by step. Their effort is to persuade others of the superiority of Christianity so that they may turn to the Gospel. During the indigenization process, care must be taken to ensure that Christian truths are not compromised. There is a tendency toward syncretism. Advocates of this theory include J.N. Farguhar and N. Macnichol.
3. **Faith Theory:** This theory posits that there is potential for faith in every religion, but it distinguishes between non-Christian faith and Christian faith. The primary emphasis in evangelism is conversation. Someone who has faith but is not a Christian should be heard and recognized by another Christian. In initiating a conversation, the goal is not just to understand that faith but ultimately to acknowledge it as true faith. The Gospel of Christ should be addressed to that faith. A.G. Hogg is an advocate of this theory, which he presented at the Madras Conference.
4. **Triple Relationship Theory:** This theory asserts that, in Jesus Christ, all religions, including Christianity, are evaluated. Froytag named it the Triple Relationship Theory, and Hendrik Kraemer is considered a proponent of this theory. He argues that the relationships between religions should be seen

as a Threefold Relationship: Christian - Gospel - Foreign religions. Here, the Gospel represents God's revelation in Jesus Christ and is distinct from the Bible. The uniqueness of God's Word is entirely present in Jesus Christ. Even the Christian religion, including the New Testament, is an imperfect response by humans, so the New Testament must be evaluated in light of Christian events. The distinction of the Bible lies in its testimony about the Word, which is the Gospel. In evangelism, total confrontation and complete replacement of cultural elements are invited. This theory is often dubbed the Discontinuity Theory. Kraemer proposed dialogue among religions to facilitate Gospel communication. In the indigenization process, careful adaptation is recommended, but assimilation is rejected. When adopting existing terms and practices, the synthesis of the tension between biblical truth is cautiously avoided.

5. **Reconception Theory:** The objective of this theory is to present Jesus Christ in such a way that He Himself becomes the point of reconception for their beliefs. Evangelists should not aim to win converts from other religions. Instead, they hope for a merger (unity) between Christianity and other religions. Albert Schweitzer and Arnold Toynbee are two figures who espouse this perspective. The premise is that there are many ways to seek the truth, so there is truth in every religion, but none is perfect. In evangelism, the term "worldwide evangelism" is unknown; what exists is cooperation. Christians impart the truth of Christianity to non-Christians but must also be willing to accept new truths found in other religions. The process of indigenization aims for mutual understanding. This approach leans toward syncretism.

Challenges and Opportunities for Contextualization.

"Challenges and Opportunities for Contextualization" is an important and multifaceted aspect of various fields such as theology, cross-cultural communication, education, and more. Contextualization refers to the process of adapting or tailoring a particular idea, message, or practice to fit a specific cultural, social, or contextual setting. It involves understanding and respecting the nuances, values, beliefs, and customs of a particular group or community in order to make information or ideas more relevant and accessible to them. Here are some perspectives on this concept: **Cross-Cultural Communication:** In the context of communication, contextualization is crucial for effective cross-cultural interaction. The challenge lies in navigating the differences between cultures and languages to convey a message accurately. The opportunity is to bridge gaps and build stronger relationships by understanding and respecting diverse worldviews. **Theology and Religion:** In theology and religion, contextualization is about presenting religious messages and teachings in a way that resonates with the beliefs and practices of a specific culture or community. The challenge is to avoid diluting the core message while adapting it to the local context.

The opportunity is to make religion more accessible and relatable to a wider audience. **Education:** In education, contextualization involves tailoring teaching methods and materials to match the cultural and educational background of students. The challenge is to create a curriculum that accommodates diverse learning styles and needs. The opportunity is to enhance the learning experience and outcomes for students from various backgrounds. **Business and Marketing:** In the business world, contextualization is essential for global marketing and product development. The challenge is to understand local consumer preferences and adapt products or services accordingly. The opportunity is to tap into new markets and increase the relevance of offerings. **Social and Political Issues:** Contextualization is also significant in addressing social and political issues. It involves understanding the unique challenges and opportunities within different communities, which can help in developing more effective policies and solutions. In summary, challenges and opportunities for contextualization are essential

in today's interconnected world. The ability to adapt and respect diverse cultural contexts can lead to more effective communication, education, religious outreach, business success, and problem-solving in various fields. It's an ongoing process that requires sensitivity, research, and a commitment to bridging cultural gaps while preserving the core of the message or idea.

CONCLUSION

In a multicultural environment, the practice of evangelism encounters a range of challenges that involve cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. Nevertheless, these challenges also present opportunities to develop wiser and more adaptable approaches in disseminating religious messages and fostering a deeper understanding of cultural diversity. Moreover, they offer the potential for collaboration with diverse community groups. The concept of contextualization plays a pivotal role in addressing these challenges and harnessing the opportunities within multicultural evangelism.

In a multicultural setting, the dynamics of evangelism are marked by the need to navigate through the complexities of diverse cultures, languages, and belief systems. This calls for a level of sensitivity and cultural competence to effectively convey religious messages while respecting the local customs and traditions. Although these challenges may seem daunting, they also serve as a catalyst for developing more nuanced and context-specific approaches to evangelism.

The advantages of engaging in evangelism within a multicultural framework are manifold. It provides a unique opportunity to bridge cultural divides, foster intercultural understanding, and build bridges of communication across diverse groups. These interactions offer the potential to create connections, promote empathy, and develop a richer tapestry of spiritual experiences within a multicultural society.

Contextualization, a fundamental concept in this context, is the key to overcoming these challenges and maximizing the opportunities. It involves the skillful adaptation of religious teachings and messages to align with the cultural and social context of the target audience. By contextualizing religious messages, evangelists can ensure that the message is not only comprehensible but also relevant and meaningful to those from different cultural backgrounds.

In summary, within a multicultural setting, the practice of evangelism presents challenges that are intricately linked to cultural, linguistic, and religious differences. However, these challenges, when approached with cultural sensitivity and the concept of contextualization, open doors to a world of opportunities for deeper intercultural understanding, collaboration, and the dissemination of religious messages that resonate with diverse audiences.

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