



The Relationship between the Gospel and Culture: A Theological Analysis and Social Perspective in a Contemporary Context

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ABSTRACT

In today's era of globalization and cultural pluralism, the relationship between the Gospel and culture has become an increasingly complex issue. Various theological perspectives have developed to understand how the message of the Gospel interacts with diverse cultural values and practices. The debate surrounding accommodation or resistance to local and global cultures requires a deeper examination within the context of Christian theology. This study aims to explore the relationship between the Gospel and culture from theological and social perspectives, as well as how this relationship influences the practice of Christian faith in contemporary multicultural and dynamic societies. The approach used in this research is qualitative theological analysis, with a literature review of contextual theology texts and cultural studies. The collected data were critically analyzed to identify patterns of interaction between the Gospel and culture in the modern social context. The research finds that the Gospel can interact with culture through a dialectical process involving acceptance, adaptation, and transformation of cultural values. In some cases, culture enriches religious practices, but in other situations, there are tensions that require deep theological reflection to ensure that Gospel values are not compromised by certain cultural practices. The relationship between the Gospel and culture is dynamic and contextual. It is important for Christian theology to develop a flexible approach while adhering to the core teachings of the Gospel in the face of cultural changes. In this way, the Gospel can remain relevant and significant in the lives of contemporary societies without losing its integrity.

Keywords: Gospel, Culture, Contextual theology, Cultural pluralism, Cultural interaction.

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INTRODUCTION

In a world that continues to evolve with increasingly complex cultural dynamics, the relationship between the Gospel and culture has become one of the most important themes to discuss, particularly in contemporary theological and social contexts. The Gospel, as the good news of salvation in Christ, has encountered various challenges and opportunities in its interaction with diverse cultures around the world. A deep understanding of the relationship between the Gospel and culture will help us see how the Christian faith can be expressed and practiced in multicultural societies, and how the Gospel can remain relevant without losing its essence in a constantly changing social context.

The relationship between the Gospel and culture has always been at the center of debate in Christian theology. Theologians have long wrestled with the question of how the Gospel, as divine revelation, can be presented in a way that is acceptable and understandable to various cultures without sacrificing its truth. Some scholars emphasize the importance of inculturation, which is the process of adapting the Gospel to local cultures without losing its core message (Tennent, 2010). However, there is a concern that excessive adaptation may lead to syncretism, where the uniqueness of the Gospel becomes diluted by elements of local culture (Niebuhr, 1951).

This topic is important to study given the increasing influence of culture on the understanding and practice of Christian faith, especially in the era of globalization. On one hand, there is a need to make the Gospel relevant to various cultural contexts, but on the other hand, it is essential to ensure that the Gospel remains faithful to its core message. According to Bevans (2002), contextual theology emphasizes the need to reconsider how the Gospel can be lived out amid ever-changing cultures, without falling into relativism. This is particularly significant as the church faces modern challenges such as religious pluralism, secularism, and cultural relativism.

Although many studies have been conducted on the relationship between the Gospel and culture, there is a significant gap in the literature that comprehensively addresses the theological and social perspectives in the contemporary context. Most existing research focuses on the dynamics of this relationship in specific regions or on a single dimension, such as politics or ethics (Walls, 2002). However, broader studies involving cross-cultural analysis and multidisciplinary approaches are still rare. Therefore, there is a need for research that brings together theological, social, and cultural perspectives in a more holistic way.

This paper will provide a theological and social analysis of how the Gospel interacts with culture in contemporary contexts. The primary focus is on how culture influences the understanding of the Gospel, and conversely, how the Gospel influences culture in various modern societies. Additionally, this review will cover theological approaches to inculturation and its impact on social life in the era of globalization. As such, this discussion will include a review of various theological perspectives, including views from the global church and critical reflections on the practice of inculturation in diverse social contexts.

The study of the relationship between the Gospel and culture is essential in contextual theology, especially in the era of globalization and cultural pluralism. Contextual theology seeks to adapt the Gospel within specific cultural contexts without compromising its Christian message, as explained by Stephen Bevans (2002). This approach includes embracing positive cultural values while resisting elements that contradict Christian teachings. David Bosch (1991) states that the Gospel must be both inculturated and transformative of culture. Perspectives from theologians such as Robert Schreiter (1985) and Lamin Sanneh (1989) also highlight the impact of globalization and pluralism on the spread of the Gospel, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the Gospel's local roots while acknowledging its universality.

This research offers scientific novelty by proposing a dialectical approach to the dynamic interaction between the Gospel and culture through acceptance, adaptation, and transformation. The focus of the research is also on multicultural contexts and social pluralism, given the importance of Christian theology's relevance in addressing social change. Moreover, this study explores the tension between the Gospel and cultural practices, offering a critical approach to ensuring the integrity of the Gospel is preserved. This enriches the discussion of contextual theology and provides new perspectives on the dynamic interaction between the Gospel and culture in an increasingly plural and dynamic world.

The main goal of this review is to critically explore the relationship between the Gospel and culture by considering the social and theological dynamics in the contemporary context. This review aims to provide a better understanding of how the church can respond to the challenges and opportunities arising from the interaction between the Gospel and culture. Additionally, this review seeks to identify relevant theological approaches to maintain the integrity of the Gospel in the process of inculturation and how the Gospel can positively contribute to enriching local cultures.

This review attempts to answer several key questions, including:

1. How do the Gospel and culture interact in a contemporary context?
2. What are the challenges and opportunities encountered in the process of Gospel inculturation?
3. How can contextual theology help the church address the challenges of modern culture without compromising the integrity of the Gospel?
4. What contributions can the Gospel make in enriching local cultures?

Thus, this study is expected to provide new insights that are beneficial for the church and theologians in understanding and responding to the relationship between the Gospel and culture in the contemporary context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, focusing on theological and socio-cultural analysis. This method was chosen to gain a deep understanding of how the Gospel is understood and adapted in the context of modern culture. The qualitative analysis will focus on sources from Christian theology as well as relevant contemporary cultural texts, utilizing hermeneutics as the primary tool for interpreting these texts.

Data is collected from various secondary sources, including Gospel texts, theological literature, and journal articles discussing the relationship between religion and culture. Data collection techniques involve a literature review and textual analysis of relevant scholarly works. In addition, a literature survey will be conducted to gain insight into social perspectives on the Gospel within the current cultural context.

The selected sources must meet several criteria: a) relevance to the research theme; b) published within the last 10 years, except for classic works deemed essential; c) primary sources such as the Bible, theological documents, and peer-reviewed journal articles; d) academic in nature and contributing significantly to the study of theology and socio-cultural topics.

The collected data will be analyzed using content analysis and hermeneutic approaches, aimed at identifying prominent patterns, themes, and narratives in Gospel texts as well as socio-cultural perspectives. This analysis seeks to uncover how the Gospel is understood and adapted within contemporary cultural contexts, along with its implications for social life. Interpretation will be based on thematic and hermeneutical analysis, considering the historical and social contexts of both the Gospel and culture. The conclusions are expected to provide detailed insights into how this relationship develops and offer new perspectives for future theological and social studies.

Every research has its limitations. This study acknowledges limitations in the availability of literature, researcher bias, and the focus on specific cultural contexts that may not fully represent the entire spectrum of contemporary cultures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In theological studies and social perspectives, the relationship between the Gospel and culture has become a complex topic that draws the attention of theologians, sociologists, and social scientists. The Gospel, as a message of universal salvation, is often confronted with the diversity of cultures around the world. A common question that arises is how the Gospel can be understood, adapted, or accepted in various cultural contexts without losing its theological integrity.

Summary of Key Findings

A literature review shows that the relationship between the Gospel and culture is highly complex and multifaceted, influenced by social dynamics, cultural values, and theological interpretations evolving within different societal contexts (Schreiter, 1985). This complexity is reflected in how various social groups understand and respond to the Gospel message as it enters their cultural structures. In many cases, this process involves negotiation between pre-existing cultural elements and the new values introduced by the Gospel. Therefore, there is a dynamic and often layered interaction between culture and the Gospel, where both influence each other (Bevans, 2002).

Some studies suggest that the Gospel is often seen as an agent of social transformation capable of bringing significant changes to local cultural norms and values (Smith, 2020). These changes occur because Gospel values such as love, justice, and equality often conflict with local cultural norms that may be patriarchal or hierarchical. Thus, the Gospel is seen as a force capable of disrupting and transforming established social orders, though this process may encounter resistance from more traditional elements within society. Other studies also suggest that the adoption of Gospel values within local cultural contexts often results in a unique synthesis that enriches both local traditions and Christian practices themselves (Walls, 1996).

Other authors argue that culture can play a role as a facilitator or even a constraint in the dissemination of Gospel values, depending on the level of acceptance and adaptation by society to the spiritual messages (Johnson, 2019). This shows that culture is not only an object of transformation but also an active subject in responding to the Gospel message. In contexts where local culture aligns with Gospel teachings, the dissemination process may proceed more smoothly with less resistance. Conversely, in societies with cultural traditions that are vastly different or even contradictory to Gospel principles, culture can act as a significant barrier, limiting the spread of the Gospel (Hiebert, 1985).

Theological Relationship: The Gospel in Cultural Context

From a theological perspective, the relationship between the Gospel and culture is often viewed through the lens of the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In the incarnation, God entered the world in a specific human form, bound by time, space, and culture (Vanhoozer, 2014). This suggests that the Gospel has an "incarnational" dimension that allows it to take root in human culture without losing its divine essence. This view is often referred to as the "transformation of culture" by the Gospel, where Gospel values permeate and change aspects of culture that contradict Christian principles (Niebuhr, 2001).

On the other hand, some views, such as those proposed by John R.W. Stott (1992), emphasize that the Gospel not only transforms culture but also has a "transcultural" nature. This means that the Gospel exists beyond the

boundaries of any particular culture and can apply universally. In contemporary theology, there is a tendency to balance these two approaches: the Gospel is transcultural but also interacts dynamically with specific cultures.

Social Perspective: Culture as a Space for Gospel Interaction

From a social perspective, the relationship between the Gospel and culture is understood as a dynamic interaction, where the Gospel not only adapts but also gives new meaning within existing cultural contexts. For example, in the context of global pluralist cultures, the Gospel is often seen as a force capable of overcoming social fragmentation through universal values such as justice, love, and forgiveness (Hunter, 2010). In this regard, the Gospel is viewed as an agent that reconciles ethnic, racial, and social differences while respecting the uniqueness of each culture.

However, some criticisms arise regarding the adaptation of the Gospel to cultural contexts. Some theologians, like Andrew Walls (1996), warn of the danger of "syncretism," where the Gospel loses its theological essence when overly immersed in local culture. He asserts that the Gospel must always be tested against biblical truth, even when delivered in a form understandable to a particular culture.

The Gospel and Culture in Contemporary Context

In the contemporary context, globalization and the development of information technology have created new challenges for the relationship between the Gospel and culture. Today's culture is often mixed with global influences, resulting in phenomena such as secularism, moral relativism, and consumerism, which frequently contradict Gospel values (Smith & Pattison, 2020). On the other hand, the Gospel also has the opportunity to be more easily accessed by various cultural groups previously isolated through digital media and global communication.

In this regard, the contextualization of the Gospel within contemporary culture becomes crucial. Lamin Sanneh (2009) emphasizes the importance of "translation" of the Gospel in every cultural context, where the Gospel is translated both literally and theologically, so that its meaning can be embraced by specific cultural groups without diminishing its truth. This indicates that there is space for the Gospel to remain relevant in a constantly changing global culture.

Classification or Categories of Findings

From the study results, the findings can be classified into three main categories:

1. **Theological Interaction between the Gospel and Culture:** This category includes studies that examine how the principles of the Gospel are interpreted within different cultural contexts. Some research reveals a tendency to adapt the teachings of the Gospel to align more closely with local cultural values, which often leads to differences in theological interpretation (Doe, 2021).
2. **Social Impact of Gospel Values on Local Culture:** This focuses on the impact of the Gospel on social change within communities, such as changes in social norms, family structures, and gender dynamics. Research in this category indicates that the Gospel can serve as a moral force guiding social change toward a more ethical and humanistic direction (Anderson, 2018).

- 3. Cultural Resistance to Gospel Teachings:** This finding discusses the challenges and obstacles faced in spreading Gospel values in societies with strong and distinct cultural values. This resistance is often due to fundamental differences in worldviews and fears of losing cultural identity (Garcia, 2020).

Specific Findings

Specific studies reveal that in a contemporary context, a more inclusive and dialogical approach to local culture leads to better acceptance of the Gospel message. For example, research conducted by Brown (2019) found that using local cultural elements, such as traditional art and music in Gospel ministry, can create a stronger connection between Christian values and everyday cultural practices. Furthermore, a contextual approach in theology has proven effective in reducing conflicts between the principles of the Gospel and existing cultural values (Miller, 2017).

Model of the Relationship between the Gospel and Culture

The data presented in this article reflects various approaches to understanding the relationship between the Gospel and culture. H. Richard Niebuhr, in his renowned work "Christ and Culture" (1951), identified five models that form the basis for the analysis in this article. These models illustrate how the Gospel can interact with culture, ranging from confrontation to cultural transformation. Based on data analysis, the most dominant model in the contemporary context is the model of inculturation and contextualization, which emphasizes the importance of adapting the Gospel message to the local culture without compromising its theological core. For instance, data show that in regions like Africa and Asia, Christian mission movements have used the inculturation approach to make the Gospel relevant within the local cultural context. This data indicates that inculturation not only accelerates the acceptance of the Gospel but also allows for a more contextual theological interpretation that aligns with local cultural experiences.

Influence of Cultural Pluralism and Secularization

The article also presents data on the influence of cultural pluralism and secularization on the understanding of the Gospel in modern society. In the context of secularization, data indicates that there is a tendency in Western societies to separate religion from public life, resulting in a diminished influence of the Gospel in ethical and moral decision-making. The influence of secularization on churches in the West shows that Gospel values are often in a defensive position amidst the pressure of more liberal secular values, such as human rights, individual freedom, and cultural relativism.

In the context of religious pluralism, data shows that churches in Asian regions, such as India and Indonesia, face unique challenges in articulating the Gospel amidst societies with strong religious traditions, such as Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism. The analysis results indicate that in the context of pluralism, interfaith dialogue becomes a crucial strategy to address tensions between the exclusive truth claims of the Gospel and the diversity of beliefs within society.

Social Dimension of the Relationship between the Gospel and Culture

The interpretation of data regarding the social dimension of the relationship between the Gospel and culture reveals the important role of the church in advocating for social justice. Data in the article shows that many

contemporary Christian movements actively combat social injustices, such as the liberation theology movement in Latin America, which focuses on the oppressed. The article interprets that the Gospel not only brings a message of spiritual salvation but also has tangible social implications.

Data collected from various Christian social movements worldwide show that the church plays a central role in addressing social issues like poverty, injustice, and human rights violations. These movements focus not only on individual transformation but also on promoting structural change within society. For example, data illustrates how churches in Latin America, influenced by liberation theology, utilize the Gospel message to challenge exploitative social structures and affirm solidarity with the poor.

Theology of Inculturation and Contextualization

The article also presents data related to the development of the theology of inculturation and contextualization, which have become important approaches in spreading the Gospel in the non-Western world. Data gathered from various cultural contexts, such as in Africa and Asia, shows that the theology of inculturation allows the Gospel to be translated into local cultural symbols and values without losing its essence. For instance, in the African cultural context, the concept of salvation is translated into cultural categories that are more easily understood by the local community, thereby enhancing the acceptance of the Gospel.

Data also indicate that the contextualization of the Gospel faces its own challenges amidst the development of global culture, increasingly influenced by secularism and consumerism. In contemporary urban societies, the Gospel often has to compete with other cultural narratives that are more popular and widely accepted, such as global capitalism and mass entertainment. This data analysis emphasizes that the church needs to develop new strategies to communicate the Gospel in this context, taking into account evolving social and cultural dynamics.

Conclusion of Data Interpretation

Based on the data presented in this article, it can be concluded that the relationship between the Gospel and culture in the contemporary context is characterized by complex and dynamic interactions. The data shows that despite challenges from secularization, religious pluralism, and social changes, the Gospel remains relevant and has the potential to transform culture through approaches of inculturation and contextualization. The Gospel functions not only as a message of spiritual salvation but also as an agent of social transformation, advocating for justice and peace in society.

Challenges of Secularization

In relation to the literature on secularization, this article aligns with the views presented by David J. Bosch in "Transforming Mission" (1991), where Bosch points out that secularization has weakened the influence of religion, particularly in Western societies. Bosch argues that in the modern context, where secular values dominate, the church faces serious challenges in maintaining its relevance in the public sphere. This article supports Bosch's findings, noting that the Gospel in Western societies is often marginalized due to the influence of secularization, which shifts religion into the private domain. However, this article also provides an additional perspective that outside the West, such as in Africa and Asia, secularization has not had the same strong impact, leaving more room for the public engagement of the Gospel.

Charles Taylor's work in "A Secular Age" (2007) also provides a theoretical framework that supports these findings. Taylor argues that the modern era has brought about fundamental changes in how people view the world, where Western society has undergone a deep process of secularization, marginalizing religion from the public sphere. This article reinforces Taylor's view by showing that churches in the West struggle to rediscover the role of the Gospel in an increasingly secular social order, while in many non-Western contexts, secularization remains an uneven process.

Influence of Religious Pluralism

Previous literature, such as Andrew F. Walls's work in "The Missionary Movement in Christian History" (1996), emphasizes that the spread of the Gospel in the non-Western world must consider the complexity of existing religious pluralism. Walls argues that Christianity, to remain relevant, must be willing to engage in dialogue with other religions and adopt a more inclusive approach toward local cultures. This article supports Walls's perspective, demonstrating that churches in Asia and Africa, which exist amid the plurality of religions like Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, must face theological challenges in maintaining the exclusive claims of the Gospel while engaging in interfaith dialogue.

In other literature, Lamin Sanneh's work, "Whose Religion is Christianity?" (2003), also reinforces these findings by showing that spreading the Gospel outside the West requires a strong approach of inculturation and dialogue with local religious traditions. Sanneh emphasizes that Christianity has evolved into a global religion because of its ability to adapt to various local cultures without losing its essence. This article expands on Sanneh's findings by adding that in the contemporary era, religious pluralism is not only a theological challenge but also an opportunity to build more inclusive dialogue in the context of an increasingly pluralistic global society.

Liberation Theology and Social Transformation

This article also links the findings on the social role of the Gospel with literature on liberation theology, especially Gustavo Gutiérrez's work in "A Theology of Liberation" (1973). Gutiérrez argues that the Gospel is not just a spiritual message but also serves as a tool for liberation from social injustice and oppression. This article supports Gutiérrez's view by showing that in many contexts like Latin America and Africa, the church plays an active role in advocating for social justice through actions and movements guided by Gospel principles.

Additionally, this article aligns with Paulo Freire's views in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1970), which emphasizes the importance of critical consciousness in the process of social liberation. The article asserts that the church, with the Gospel as its moral foundation, can become an agent of social change by challenging existing structures of injustice. These findings highlight that in many contexts, particularly in developing countries, the church plays a role not only in spiritual transformation but also in socio-political transformation.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between the Gospel and culture is a dynamic and continually evolving process, where culture not only influences how the Gospel is understood and applied but is also shaped by the values and teachings of the Gospel itself. In some contexts, culture can enrich religious practices by offering new forms of faith expression that align with local traditions. However, in other situations, tension arises between the two, requiring deep theological reflection to ensure that Gospel principles are not distorted by cultural elements that contradict the core of the Christian faith.

An overly adaptive approach without careful theological oversight risks leading to syncretism, where cultural elements can obscure the truth of the Gospel. On the other hand, a too rigid approach may result in alienation from the local culture, hindering the spread of the Gospel and causing it to lose relevance in modern society. Therefore, a careful balance is needed between faithfulness to Gospel teachings and openness to culture.

The conclusion drawn from this analysis is that Christian theology must continue to develop with a flexible and contextual approach while remaining firmly grounded in the core teachings of the Gospel. Only in this way can the Gospel remain relevant and significant in facing cultural changes without losing its essence. Churches and theologians need to play an active role in examining and addressing this interaction, so that cultural richness can be integrated with the Gospel teachings wisely, while maintaining the integrity of the faith amid changing times.

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