

MAINTAINING THE INTEGRITY OF THE GOSPEL WHILST PROCLAIMING IT INTO A FOREIGN CULTURE

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1 Introduction

To maintain the integrity of the Gospel in a foreign culture, a course must be charted between two equal and opposite dangers: *miscommunication*, and *false communication*. On the one hand, the Gospel must be presented in ways the receiving culture will correctly understand. For example, the assertion “Jesus is the Son of God” will inevitably be misinterpreted by those of a Muslim culture, unless the missionary actively takes the initiative to dress this naked phrase in meaningful “cultural clothing”. On the other hand, what is to be done when suitable “clothing” with which to adorn the message is lacking? Zealous to be understood, the missionary is tempted to reshape the message to fit the available cultural forms, but this produces *false communication*: the Gospel of God is no longer being proclaimed.

The integrity of the Gospel, therefore, is maintained only by appropriate “contextualisation”. Before any particular cultural form is adopted, two questions must be asked: “Is this form Biblically permissible?” and “Is this form Biblically adequate?” Every case will be different; yet, the missionary’s overall approach to non-Christian culture will inevitably influence each decision.

In general, should non-Christian culture be seen as a positive, neutral, or negative preparation for the Gospel? This essay will Biblically evaluate these three views, giving specific consideration to how each one would work itself out in the context of church-planting in an Islamic culture. Conclusions will then be drawn as

to the appropriate level of contextualisation in Islamic societies, expressed in terms of the C1-C6 “contextualisation scale”.¹

2 Positive view: Fulfilment

One approach is to regard anything good in a non-Christian culture as God’s way of preparing that culture for the Gospel. This positive evaluation of culture extends even to some religious practices. Missionaries, rather than encouraging converts to break from their valuable religious roots, should instead explain how, when seen correctly, the seeds of the Gospel already inherent within the culture actually are fulfilled by Christ. Priscilla and Aquila exemplify this approach: rather than commanding Apollos to abandon his Jewish faith, they instead led him directly from his initial beliefs to a saving faith in Christ, simply by “explaining the way of God more adequately.”²

A very positive view of Islamic culture is implicit within C4-C6 where believers are encouraged to remain within the “community of Islam”. Converts to Christ describe themselves not as “Christians,” but rather as “followers of Isa the Messiah”, “Muslim followers of Isa the Messiah”, or, in C6, simply “Muslims”. The Ramahdan fast, one of the five pillars of Islam, is observed, and converts may worship in “Messianic mosques” or, in C6, even remain in their regular Islamic Mosque.

As Bavinck notes, this approach to mission is not new. Clement of Alexandria saw the Gospel as the fulfilment of Greek philosophy,³ believing each nation to have its own “Old Testament” which is fulfilled in Christ.⁴ Jesuit missionaries, taking a strong view of

¹ See Appendix: Spectrum of Muslim Contextualisation.

² Acts 18:26.

³ J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions* (trans. David H. Freeman; Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 1960), p. 135.

⁴ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, p. 135.

“the natural knowledge of God”,⁵ frequently permit converts to retain some of their former religions practices.⁶ Christianity has been identified with ‘the Chinese reverence for the “noble”, and ... [Indian avatars] regarded as anticipations of the Gospel.’⁷

It is, however, Biblically indefensible to draw parallels between Islam and Judaism. The Bible is explicit that the Jewish nation alone was specially chosen by God to prepare the way for the Messiah.⁸ God’s repeated warnings against syncretism,⁹ and the catastrophic judgments he sent whenever Israel debased their religion with those of the surrounding nations,¹⁰ emphasise Judaism’s uniquely privileged position in salvation history.¹¹ Only Judaism, being a revealed religion, contains Gospel seeds which are fulfilled in Christ.¹² By contrast, Bavinck warns, “there is no direct uninterrupted path from the darkness of paganism to the light of the gospel.”¹³

Even if comparisons with Judaism *were* legitimate, the dawning of the New Covenant has made Old Covenant religion obsolete.¹⁴ All people, including Jews, are now to repent and turn to Christ.¹⁵ Paul’s post-conversion attitude toward Judaism reveals what this entails in practice. While ready to adopt Jewish *cultural* expressions where this would provide a platform for evangelism,¹⁶ Paul nonetheless denounces his earlier, sincere devotion to Jewish *relig-*

⁵ Ibid., p. 173.

⁶ Ibid., p. 170.

⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

⁸ See, e.g. Luke 1:67-79; Romans 9:3-5.

⁹ See, e.g. Exodus 23:23-33; Deuteronomy 18:10-14.

¹⁰ See e.g. 2 Kings 17:7-23.

¹¹ See e.g. Exodus 19:3-6; Psalm 47.

¹² See, e.g. Galatians 3:29; Hebrews 9:23-24.

¹³ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, p. 136.

¹⁴ See e.g. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11; Hebrews 10:8-10.

¹⁵ See e.g. Acts 4:12; 17:30-31.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 9:20ff.

ious practices as “rubbish,” for the sake of knowing Christ,¹⁷ and condemns Judaizers in the strongest terms for promoting a damnable syncretism.¹⁸

If the mingling of Christian and Jewish religion ruins whole households,¹⁹ no lesser ruin should be expected where followers of Christ are encouraged to consciously identify themselves with Islam in name and practice, rather than as members of the body of Christ. Adoption of explicitly Islamic worship forms to contextualise the Gospel is Biblically impermissible.

3 Neutral view: Accommodation

Others, such as Kraft, see non-Christian culture as generally neutral.²⁰ Apart from explicitly religious cultural forms, we may expect to find many good aspects in the wider non-Christian culture,²¹ to which the Gospel may readily be accommodated. The significance of each custom lies, after all, not in the expression itself, but in the mind of the individual.²²

C3 church-planters appear to take this approach, allowing the Gospel to be accommodated only to “religiously neutral forms” such as “folk music, ethnic dress [and] artwork.” At first glance,

¹⁷ Philippians 3:8.

¹⁸ See e.g. Galatians 1:6-9; Philippians 3:2.

¹⁹ Titus 1:11.

²⁰ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), p. 54. As cited in Glenn B. Nesbitt, “Your Kingdom Come: An Examination of the Compatibility of Johan H. Bavinck’s Concept of *Possessio* and Charles H. Kraft’s Model of Christian Transformational Culture Change as a means of achieving an Indigenous Expression of Christianity” (MTh. diss., Oak Hill College, 2007), p. 18.

²¹ I. Howard Marshall, “Culture and the New Testament,” in *Down to Earth: Studies in Christianity and Culture* (ed. John R. W. Stott and Robert Coote; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 30.

²² Nesbitt, “Your Kingdom Come,” p. 18.

such “accommodation” appears to steer a safe course between incomprehension and syncretism. It must be asked, however, whether non-Christian culture can ever truly be “religiously neutral”?

4 Negative view: Possessio

Bavinck believes not.²³ Every cultural expression originates, he explains, from fallen human hearts.²⁴ Non-Christian culture, therefore, is a part of religion and not vice-versa,²⁵ and hence, as a whole, it is tainted by a deep-seated desire to suppress the truth about God.²⁶ Common grace preserves non-Christian cultures from degenerating to their fullest extent, thereby providing “points of attack” for the missionary.²⁷ However, for Bavinck, “accommodating” the Gospel to any element of a sinful, non-Christian culture necessarily compromises the Gospel’s integrity.²⁸ The C3 belief in “religiously neutral forms” is naive.

Consider, for example, the word “Allah.” The God of the Bible cannot be identified with Allah without undermining his character since, to a Muslim, Allah is emphatically *not* Triune. If Bavinck is correct, however, it is impossible to substitute a perfectly religiously neutral word for “Allah”, since language is itself part of culture and is therefore “polluted.”²⁹ Indeed, “the missionary exhales many pagan ideas with every word that he speaks.”³⁰ No existing words being Biblically adequate, accommodation inevitably forces

²³ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, p. 124.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque: A Study of the Relationship between the Christian Faith and Other Religions*, pp. 117-126. As referred to in Nesbitt, “Your Kingdom Come,” p. 13.

²⁷ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, p. 140.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

a choice between *miscommunication* and *false* communication, and faithful cross-cultural communication of the Gospel becomes impossible!

Thankfully, the dilemma is solved on remembering that Jesus gave “teaching” a primary role in the great commission.³¹ It matters not that the search for words which perfectly convey that Gospel ends in vain: Jesus envisioned the introduction of fresh ideas to explain “heavenly things”.³² Rather than merely “accommodating” the Gospel to a sinful culture, therefore, missionaries should let the Gospel challenge non-Christian worldviews at every point,³³ to subdue and conquer a culture that is hostile to Christ, and recreate it in his name. Bavinck names this approach: “Possessio”.³⁴

One practical benefit of “Possessio” is that it enables the legitimate retention of the word “Allah” to refer to God, on the understanding that, over time, the word will be reclaimed for Christ, as it is intentionally purified from its evil connotations and gradually redefined to take on more and more Biblical content. Alternatively, were the missionary to judge such purification likely to fail, the missionary is free to introduce a new word for God, such as LORD, or Yahweh, and fill that instead with Biblical content.

The apostles were clearly prepared to take both of these approaches, sometimes reshaping words from pagan culture,³⁵ sometimes addressing Gentiles with words directly from the Old Testament Scriptures,³⁶ as circumstances dictated. The early church continued to propagate this methodology leading, on the one hand, to distinctively new religious terms such as “Trinity”, and, on the

³¹ Matthew 28:20.

³² John 3:12.

³³ C.f. 2 Corinthians 10:5.

³⁴ Bavinck, *Science of Missions*, p. 178.

³⁵ e.g. the use of *λογος* in the prologue to John’s Gospel.

³⁶ e.g. the word *Χριστος*, drawn from the LXX.

other, to the misconception by some outsiders that Christians were atheistic, incestuous cannibals!³⁷

The attempt of C2 churches to maintain a “distinctively Christian” religious vocabulary, therefore, is overcautious: overlap with the religious terminology of Muslims is permitted, provided these religious terms are gradually redefined according to the Gospel, and not vice-versa. Conversely, C3 churches should not prohibit the use of distinctively Christian vocabulary in their attempt to contextualise; the freedom to define new words will at times prove essential for the church to grasp the fullness of the Gospel, as expounded by the whole counsel of God.

5 Conclusion

Viewing culture Biblically, as a tainted creation of fallen man, will safeguard the missionary against the kind of over-contextualisation seen in C4-C6 churches, which compromise the Gospel’s integrity by promoting expressly Islamic forms of worship and self-identity. On the other hand, a robust confidence in the Gospel’s power to re-fashion cultures for Christ will rule out the over-defensive approaches to contextualisation modelled by C1 and C2 churches. Those who would proclaim the Gospel with integrity in an Islamic society should adopt the C3 contextualisation model.

³⁷ Hence Justin Martyr’s 1st and 2nd Apologies, defending the church against these and other accusations.

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Appendix: Spectrum of Muslim Contextualisation.³⁸

The following chart shows the spectrum of practices in use today for contextualizing the Christian faith in Muslim settings. N.B. “Insider” pertains to the local Muslim population; “outsider” pertains to the local non-Muslim population.

C1: Traditional Church Using Outsider Language.

May be Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant. Some predate Islam. Thousands of C1 churches are found in Muslim lands today. Many reflect Western culture. A huge cultural chasm often exists between the church and the surrounding Muslim community. Some Muslim background believers may be found in C1 churches. C1 believers call themselves “Christians.”

C2: Traditional Church Using Insider Language.

Essentially the same as C1 except for language. Though insider language is used, religious vocabulary is probably non-Islamic (distinctively “Christian”). The cultural gap between Muslims and C2 is still large. Often more Muslim background believers are found in C2 than in C1. The majority of churches located in the Muslim world today are C1 or C2. C2 believers call themselves “Christians”.

C3: Contextualized Christ-Centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms.

Religiously neutral forms may include folk music, ethnic dress, artwork, etc. Islamic elements (where present) are “filtered out” so as to use purely “cultural” forms. The aim is to reduce foreignness

³⁸ Reproduced from A. Scott Moreau, et al., *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 2004), pp. 298-299, as adapted from John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum,” in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34 (October), pp. 407-8.

of the gospel and the church by contextualizing to biblically permissible cultural forms. May meet in a church building or more religiously neutral location. C3 congregations are comprised of a majority of Muslim background believers. C3 believers call themselves “Christians”.

C4: Contextualized Christ-Centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms.

Similar to C3, however, biblically permissible Islamic forms and practices are also utilized (e.g., praying with raised hands; keeping the fast; avoiding pork, alcohol, and dogs as pets; using Islamic terms, dress, etc.). C1 and C2 forms avoided. Meeting not held in church buildings. C4 communities comprised almost entirely of Muslim background believers. C4 believers, though highly contextualized, are usually not seen as Muslim by the Muslim community. C4 believers identify themselves as followers of Isa the Messiah (or something similar).

C5: Christ-Centered Communities of “Messianic Muslims” Who Have Accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior.

C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. Somewhat similar to the Messianic Jewish movement. Aspects of Islamic theology that are incompatible with the Bible are rejected, or reinterpreted if possible. Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. C5 believers meet regularly with other C5 believers and share their faith with unsaved Muslims. Unsaved Muslims may see C5 believers as theologically deviant and may eventually expel them from the community of Islam. Where entire villages accept Christ, C5 may result in “Messianic mosques”. C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.

C6: Small Christ-Centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers.

Similar to persecuted believers suffering under totalitarian regimes. Due to fear, isolation, or threat of extreme governmental/community legal action or retaliation (including capital punishment), C6 believers worship Christ secretly (individually or perhaps infrequently in small clusters). Many come to Christ through dreams, visions, miracles, radio broadcasts, tracts, Christian witness while abroad, or reading the Bible on their own initiative. C6 (as opposed to C5) believers are usually silent about their faith. C6 is not ideal; God desires his people to witness and have regular fellowship (Heb. 10:25). Nonetheless, C6 believers are part of our family in Christ. Though God may call some to a life of suffering, imprisonment, or martyrdom, he may be pleased to have some worship him in secret, at least for a time. C6 believers are perceived as Muslims by the Muslim community and identify themselves as Muslims.