SUMMARY OF THE CONTEXTUALIZATION DEBATE

BY PHIL BOURNE[1]

1 Introduction

The *International Journal of Frontiers Missiology* (*IJFM*) and *St Francis Magazine* continue to offer a variety of articles debating the pros and cons of 'new paths in Muslim evangelism'. In the years since Phil Parshall's book was first published (1980) there has been an explosion of new ideas and new approaches. Just getting one's head round the terminology is a challenge. While this creative thinking is to be welcomed, it has raised a good deal of controversy. The controversy in turn asks some fundamental questions about what the gospel really implies. What is salvation? What are we saved from and what is the basis of our hope? In addition, what is the Church and what does it mean to be a member of the Church?

Much of the criticism of these 'new paths' has come from that section of the Church who would label themselves as Reformed and Evangelical (in the traditional sense of the word). They stress the teaching of scripture as the guidebook of the Church. On the other hand, many of the 'new approaches' have been generated by those branches of the Church which would portray themselves as more open to the Spirit of God, bringing us into new pastures. They are 'out of the box' people who feel they resonate with contemporary (Western) culture more than tradition-dogged Evangelicalism.

While there has been a good deal of discussion, there does not always seem to be a meeting of minds. This is hardly surprising,

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as these two camps seem to work on different visions of what the Christian faith is all about. I suspect that ultimately the controversy has very little to do with the people we are trying to reach and everything to do with who *we* are.

This article does not seek to break new ground, but tries to identify ideas being debated and clarify the core issues in the various controversies. In some of the articles mentioned, the writers often make links between paradigms and ideas that are not central to the point they wish to make. Consequently some good ideas are condemned by association.

2 Insider Movements, the C1-C6 scale and Common Ground.

The term 'Insider Movement' is often closely linked with C5 communities and, more recently, the Common Ground training program. Historically it would seem that the scale C1-C6 came first. So what is it?

2.1 The C1-C6 scale

Roger Dixon describes the origin of this 'tool':

> When the C1-C6 Spectrum made its appearance in the Sundanese Muslim situation of West Java, Indonesia, it was promoted as a contextual model even though it had few of the traits normally expected of a contextual model. That was around 1990. Although it was obviously the creation of a western educated thinker, a number of workers among Muslims were fascinated by it and it was widely distributed. In 1998, a person using the pseudonym of John Travis published this spectrum as a "practical tool for defining six types of Christ-centered communities". (Dixon 2009:4)

Many people, when writing about the scale, do not say what C stands for. The most commonly expressed view says it means 'Christ-centered communities' (Travis 1998: Abdul Assad 2009: 133). The C6 category was added at a later stage. C6 refers to isolated secret believers who are not part of a church at all (Abdul Asad:124).

Comment: There seems to be some uncertainty as to what the scale actually measures (Dixon, 2009: 5). Advocates of the scale argue it measures the degree to which a community is 'contextualised' (Parshall 1998). Dixon suggests the term 'template' would be a more accurate term. John Travis himself has described it as a 'simple chart' (Travis: 2000:53).

Interestingly, those who have adopted the Insider Approach betray the same confusion. A survey made at the Fruitful Practices Consultation (see further below) showed a considerable degree of confusion about what the C-scale was seeking to measure (Gray Apr 2009:65).

2.2 Insider Movements

The term 'Insider Movement' is of more recent origin. Rebecca Lewis describes it as:

> […] a movement of faith in Christ that remains integrated with or inside its natural community. They have two distinct elements: 1) The gospel takes root within pre-existing communities or social networks, which become the main expression of 'church' in that context. 2) Believers retain their identity as members of their social-religious community, while living under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Bible" (cited Higgins 2009:75).

Higgins himself describes it as, "A growing number of families, individuals, clans and/or friendship-webs becoming faithful disci-

ples of Jesus within the culture of their people group, including their religious culture...." (Higgins 2009:75). John Travis offers a shorter definition: "We define "Insider" as "One who embraces Jesus, yet remains as a light in his '*oikos*' (household) so that as many as possible might be saved" (cited by Jay Smith:22). David Garrison, more neutrally, describes it as, "a popular movement to Christ that bypasses formal and explicit expressions of the Christian religion". (Cited Jay Smith:23). Although the term is new, the core idea goes back to Phil Parshall (1980:175).

Some individuals and groups have adopted the 'Insider' approach as a deliberate strategy for evangelizing Muslims. They would advise those who profess faith in Christ, at least initially, to continue to attend the mosque and retain Muslim formats of worship. (See William Steele 2009:127). Some insider approaches would go further, suggesting that one could remain a Muslim Believer in Christ without formally breaking with Islam. At the extreme end of the spectrum we have those, like Muzhar Mallouhi, who would describe themselves as Muslim followers of Christ. (Chandler 2008).

Comment: Behind these definitions is the assumption that 'religion' is only a cultural construct and therefore ephemeral in nature. In other words it is only a set of rituals/cultural activities and in practicing them one is not giving assent to another 'Lord'. Put this way, such activity does *not* seem to square with the perspective of scripture, which is hostile to any other organized religion that denies the Lordship of YHWH alone.

2.3 Common Ground Training

This is a series of conferences/consultations that seeks to promote Insider Movements. 'Phil' says it is sponsored by The Navigators (Phil 2009:123, note 26), but I have been unable to verify this. The movement is critically described in three articles in St Francis

Magazine: Jay Smith gives his impressions of a meeting in Atlanta Jordan (Smith: 2009) and John and Anne Stan report on their participation in what appears to be the same meeting (Stan: 2009). William Steele's comments (Steele 2009) on the Insider Movement also seem to stem from this same meeting.

2.4 Evangelism as transformation of existing social networks

The concept of transforming existing social networks is explained in two articles in the January and April 2009 issues of the *IJFM* (Gray 2009). The Grays' remarks arose from an in-depth survey made at the *Fruitful Practices Consultation*, held in the spring of 2008 (Allen: 2008). This broadens the strategy of the Insider Movement approach by focusing on networks other than religious ones. Any social network will do - family, professional guild, club, etc. - the aim being to help people stay connected so that they can reach others for Christ.

Comment: This broadening of the paradigm is to be welcomed, in that it gets away from the ambiguity caused by trying to appear to be a Muslim. Yes, where possible, it is important for people to remain within their families and within their communities. But this is not always realistic. In societies that take 'faith' seriously - and I would suggest that on the whole modern Western Culture does not - changing religion will always be problematic.

Nor have we entirely escaped these issues in the West. For example, what is our attitude to membership of Masonic Lodges? Is this a religion or just a club? For many the jury is still out on this one. If it is more than just a club then the danger is that it compromises one's loyalty to Christ. I would err on the side of caution. Similarly in many Muslim societies, trade guilds can be linked to Islam, or one specific expression of it, like Sufism. How to you reconcile this with the Christian faith? What does continued membership imply?

What is interesting about the survey is that it again focuses on what works rather than what is true/truthful. Where the two do not conflict there is much of value to be learned.

3 Other paradigms and methods

In addition to the specific issue of Insider-C5 ministries a number of other peripheral ideas, methodologies and motifs have been brought into the discussion. While proponents of these may not necessarily advocate Insider Approaches, it would be good to mention them so we are clear where they fit in.

The following is not intended to be a comprehensive list. I have included only things that were alluded to in the context of the above discussion. There is no significance in the order.

Messianic Muslims
Use of appropriate vocabulary
Camel Training Method
Use of Story Telling
The Seven Signs
The Emerging Church movement
Fuzzy Set Theory

3.1 Messianic Muslims

The term 'Messianic Muslims' consciously parallels the term Messianic Jew. The latter are Christian believers from a Jewish background, who have now recognized that Jesus is the expected Messiah.

Comment: The parallelism is based on a false analogy. The Jews, as the ancient people of God, possess the authentic scripture in what we call the Old Testament. The Messianic Jews have not

abandoned their own scriptures, but now understand the Christ is the fulfillment of all that was promised. (See Nikides: 2009:101, who emphasizes the covenantal connection between Israel in the Old Testament and the Church.)

The Qur'an of the Muslims is not equivalent to the Old Testament. In fact many would argue that it deliberately sets out to deny key points of the Christian gospel. Whatever common ground we may possess with Muslims, it is very limited in comparison with the commonality of the entire Old Testament.

3.2 The use of appropriate vocabulary both in conversation and Bible translation

The need to translate the scriptures has been central to the Judeo-Christian faith from the time the Jews returned to the land under Ezra and Nehemiah. In the post-exilic period Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the language of the people, and even some parts of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew. With the growing number of proselytes, the Jews needed a Greek version of the Old Testament.

Christianity inherited this openness to translation and, in spite of the sometimes daunting task of rendering the idiom of the Greek and Hebrew into new languages, scholars set to the task with skill and diligence. The work of the various Bible Societies continues this same tradition: only now we have bigger tool boxes and more sophisticated instruments.

Comment: April's edition of *IJFM* contains two articles on the need to translate. Rick Brown urges upon us, again, the need to use appropriate vocabulary (Brown: 2009). I would agree that if using Muslim names for the prophets makes comprehension easier, then why not? As far as I can see this involves no theological compromise. Even the term *'Isa*, whose origin is obscure, poses no

real threat. It does miss, however, the significant allusion in the name *Yasu'* to the one who saves us.

However, when we come to use words like Father and Son we need to exercise caution. The Father-Son language is so deeply integrated into the way the Gospel is told, it is hard to see how one can abandon it. See for example Paul's citation of Ps 2:7 in Acts 13:33. Rick Brown has argued elsewhere that the Arabic term *Ibn* implies a physical relationship not present in other Middle Eastern languages. But is that really true? The citation in Acts 13:33 would it seems take us beyond mere metaphor. How we resolve this issue will take some imagination.

3.3 The Camel training method

This is a training program for those seeking to reach Muslims for Christ. It was developed in South East Asia and advocates a radical contextualization approach. It uses passages from the Qur'an as a bridge to sharing the gospel and recommends the use of Muslim terminology. They found, however, that it was better to be more flexible on issues such as dress, but nonetheless would aim to identify as closely as possible with the people they are seeking to reach.

In the context in which the 'method' was evolved, they found that the existing churches were not interested in reaching Muslims and so they discourage taking new believers to traditional churches: "Do not bring new Muslim-background believers into existing traditional churches." (Camel Training Manuel:25). The approach was developed with the encouragement of the International Missions Board of the Southern Baptists. (Phil (anon):123 note 26). The term CAMEL stands for "Chosen, Announcement, Miracles, Eternal Life."

The approach is set out in the *Camel Training Manual*, produced by Kevin Greeson but authored by a number of people. (Published by WIGtake Resources). The initial aim is to find a

'Person of Peace' who is receptive to the message - Lk 10:6-8. They use Sūra 3:42-55 to gauge a person's reaction to the Christian message. Other key passages used are 20:121, 10:94, 46:9 and, 4:136 (attitude to Muhammad). They use 6:115f, 5:65-66 as a bridge to the Bible. These are supplemented by key Biblical texts. The manual also deals with the question of visions of angels and dreams. The plan of salvation is explained in terms of *korbani*: sacrifice.

Comment: Again the emphasis was on technique. It was rather like one of those leaflets you get with IKEA furniture. It is okay if you have all the right parts, but if something is missing the whole enterprise falls to the ground. Real life is more like the latter, and I don't think we can take a 'one-size fits all approach'.

3.4 The use of story telling to communicate the gospel

Jesus used stories to get his message across and in many cultures the use of stories is a good way to communicate information and ideas. Westerners, who tend to be more 'idea' orientated, need more encouragement than most to tell stories. In recent years there has been a number of people who have developed the art of story telling as a means of communicating the gospel. One particular 'methodology' is known as Chronological Story Telling. Some advocates have sought to develop this sort of approach within Muslim contexts and their ideas are generally helpful.

3.5 The Seven Signs

The Seven Signs is a tool which uses the Qur'an to present the gospel to Muslims. It uses seven key passages in the Qur'an which are said to point to the uniqueness of Christ. (Jay Smith:27). I have not been able to find more information on this.

3.6 The Seven Muslim-Christian Principles

This was a tool for evangelism evolved by Fuad Accad (Bible Society), which used verses in the Qur'an as a platform for sharing the Christian faith. This is more fully explained in Accad's later book, *Building Bridges* (1997). This methodology was used extensively by the Navigators in the Middle East in the 1970's and 1980's.

3.7 The Emerging/Emergent Church movement

What is the Emerging Church? Wikipedia describes the emerging church as follows:

> The emerging church is a Christian movement of the late 20th and early 21st century that crosses a number of theological boundaries: participants can be described as evangelical, post-evangelical, liberal, post-liberal, charismatic, neocharismatic and post-charismatic. Participants seek to live their faith in what they believe to be a "postmodern" society. Proponents of this movement call it a "conversation" to emphasize its developing and decentralized nature, its vast range of standpoints and its commitment to dialogue. What those involved in the conversation mostly agree on is their disillusionment with the organized and institutional church and their support for the deconstruction of modern Christian worship, modern evangelism, and the nature of modern Christian community.

A more nuanced and sympathetic description is given by Scot McKnight in *Christianity Today*.[2] 'Emerging catches into one term the global reshaping of how to "do church" in postmodern culture. It has no central offices, and it is as varied as evangelicalism itself.' (McKnight: p1). He describes Emerging Church under five headings:

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[2] www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/february/11.35.html.

- It is Prophetic (or at least provocative) [It believes the Church needs to change.]
- It is Postmodern.
- It is Praxis Orientated. [While in modes of worship it can be flexible, in moral behavior it advocates orthopraxis: right behavior. That doesn't sound all that different from good old-fashioned Evangelicalism.]
- It is Post-evangelical.
- It is Political. [McKnight's last point seems to be directed at some American Evangelicals: we don't do politics, but we vote Republican!]

McKnight would want to distinguish the 'Emerging Church', as a movement, from the 'Emergent Village', which is a particular institutional expression of that movement in the USA. Not everything the latter does is true of the whole movement.

In the last two or three decades there has been a lot of debate about 'how to do church', with a variety of approaches, some of which are quite radical. There have been a string of books advocating radical new approaches - for example: *Church Without Walls*, Jim Petersen, 1992, Navpress, and *Houses that Changed the World*, Wolfgang Simson, 2001.

Comment: I have included this here as John Span describes the Insider Movement as "philosophically close to the emergent church movement". (Span:55). Such an understanding of 'Church', he argues, challenges the traditional view the Church as something instituted by Christ. Church is not simply something 'one does'. Rather the Church is something of which we become a part when we accept Christ as Lord and Savior. What actually goes on when the Church meets might be very varied, but it is more than just a collection of believers. It is a community whose focus on Jesus enables them to speak and act on his behalf. This conception of the

'Church' is evidently 'far too heavy' for a postmodernist and in urgent need of deconstruction!

I would *not* share Scot McKnight's enthusiasm for Postmoderism. Postmodernism is the philosophical underpinning of Postmodernity. We certainly have to engage with Postmodernity as, for Westerners at least, it describes much of the culture in which we find ourselves. But that does not mean that we have to "swallow" it. Vanhoozer's critique of Stanley Fish was hardly an endorsement of Postmodernism! I cannot see in what sense he had 'swallowed' it! (See the article for the context of this remark and K. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in the Text*, 2009.)

I can well understand John Span's concern here. A good and useful word (Evangelicalism) has been redefined by the modern world and so now we cannot use it to mean what it once meant: Evangelicals used to be those who believed in the authority of scripture. So what is the Emerging Churches' attitude to the Bible? Do they believe it is the authoritative word of God, or do they believe like Stanley Fish there is no such thing as a 'text'? (Vanhoozer, *op cit*). These are not trivial issues.

The relevance of the Emerging Church to the debate over new approaches to Muslim evangelism is that many of those in the West who are sympathetic to the Emerging Church perspective bring their postmodern baggage with them when they discuss Muslim Evangelism. But neither should we bring our conservative Western baggage when discussing the Church . The value of John Span's approach is that he aims to ground their view of the Church in the teaching of scripture, rather than in some culturally specific model.

Clearly there is a variety of views. But in most, if not all Muslim contexts, being identified with the Church - however it is defined - is a costly and serious commitment. In communities where one can be deemed guilty by association we should be more upfront in our recognition of the consequences. Do we really believe that Jesus is worth it?

3.7 Fuzzy Sets

Fuzzy or Unbounded Set Theory is a branch of Mathematics developed in 1965 by Lotfi A. Zadeh, an Egyptian mathematician. Instead of defining sets in term of a boundary - what is in and what is out - fuzzy sets are defined in terms of 'grade of membership'. This has been found a useful tool in various branches of management and sociology.

Some articles on Muslim evangelism have referred to this (for example: Gray 2009:26.2 p69). But as yet I have not seen any serious development of this to show how this set-theory can be used as a meaningful measurement of anything connected with mission. The Engel Scale was a far more useful tool in this regard. Some studies have shown how using different media is more helpful to individuals at different stages on the Engel scale. This has practical implications for how one uses media in evangelism.

4 Concluding remarks: The role of anthropological insights in developing our strategies for mission

Higgins asks (Higgins 2009:81f), "Can we separate religion and culture?" On the basis that some languages do not have a word for religion, he suggests that we cannot. But, he goes on to argue, we should be able to distinguish them.

Cultural Anthropology is a relatively new discipline. It emerged from a growing awareness in the latter part of the 19th century that societies are different and those differences need to be explained (See Charles Taber:1991). Humans may all share a common biological origin, but somewhere along the way people have become very diverse, and that diversity has become a barrier to communication. It is not simply a matter of language; people think differently. What one society regarded as a conclusive ar-

gument, another society sees as irrelevant. The growing evidence for this often came from missionaries in their descriptions of peoples in other parts of the world. Eventually this data was assimilated and sifted by the academics into manageable chunks - the very process itself based on deeply held cultural assumptions.

Among the great unresolved dilemmas of anthropology is the collection of phenomena we label 'religion'. Is it an aspect of culture; or does it, in some sense, transcend culture? Durkheim, considered by some to be the father of modern anthropology, sought to explain religion in functional terms - what function does it serve? This makes religion to be simply one aspect of culture. This was very different from the classical view that held that religion referred to some transcendent reality: it was a meta-narrative (Taber 1991:179ff). Taber suggests that missiologists have become polarized into two camps. One camp maintains a classical perspective that regards all religions, other than Christianity, as bad. The other camp takes an increasingly flexible view. (In this context Taber contrasts the views of Karl Barth and Hendrik Kraemer with those of John Hick, Paul Knitter and Wilfred Cantwell Smith.) He reflects, "But it seems to me that both extremes in this polarization take far too many unexamined *a prioris* for granted, so their ability to assess empirical evidence is severely impaired. And they tend to think of each religion ... as monolithically susceptible to generalized evaluation."

That may be, but I think those who emphasize the priority of the revelation as given in the Bible would not agree with Taber's conclusion that: "Each religion, including empirical Christianity, is an institutionalized response to whatever light of divine self-disclosure is available." (Taber 1991:185). This is reflected in Bill Nikides argument that Kevin Higgins treats the church as *merely* a social structure: "Again the author's work is shot through with the idea that 'church' and 'religion' are subsets of larger cultural constructs." (Nikides 2009:94).

Comment: From a theological point of view this criticism carries weight. But in our discussion we need to be careful to distinguish the Church as the Bride of Christ and its human expression in the present world. In the latter sense, the Church is quite evidently culturally diverse, but that does not mean that it does not witness to a transcendent body of truth as revealed to us by God. The problem is that we confuse that revelation with a human construct called culture, and like most human constructs it can at times get in the way of what God is trying to say to us. 'Religion' as expressed in human culture is not neutral and must be redeemed or discarded. It strikes me that in this whole debate we have been far too optimistic in our assessment of what can be redeemed.

In our dealing with other faiths is it right that we treat them as if they were on a par with the 'Christian' faith? From a modern, Western cultural point of view it would seem to be the less arrogant thing to do. But then, suddenly, our calling to proclaim what is true is subverted by our post-modernist culture which rejects all meta-narratives as equally false. It is this, surely, that is the nub of debate between the two camps. God (YHWH) is not like the gods of the nations; he transcends culture and is uniquely God. Those who follow him find their true destiny.

Seen in this light, Higgins' argument that God is at work in other religions is a claim that should be treated with care. Higgins cites a number of Biblical examples - Melchizedek, Balaam, the Magi, etc. But that these are examples of God working through other religions is not immediately apparent. Compare Nikides' longer and more careful assessment of these passages (Nikides: 2009:102-110).

Likewise, I think John Span's comments on the Common Ground Consultation are cogent and to the point. They correctly identify the drift into postmodernist thinking in some of the attitudes and ideas being presented. Yes, in places, the Common Ground people offer good advice and make pertinent comments.

But their lack of theological grounding leads to some very silly statements as well. Their critics are quick to pick on these.

A consequence of this disjunction between Biblical authority and contemporary Western culture is the emphasis on technique - what works is good. John Span sees this emphasis on pragmatism as misplaced (Span 2009:56,65). While what works is not necessarily bad, the danger comes when we make it the only criteria for action.

I appreciate that many of the participants in this consultation do not share the Reformed background of their critics. But our reading of the Scriptures is fundamental to the whole discussion. It is quite clear that for many in the Emerging Church movement, Postmodernity is to be welcomed. But in doing this they seem to be unaware of the frailty of its philosophical underpinning, Postmodernism. It is we, not are forebears, who have feet of clay. If we do not recognize the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and practice then on what do we base our salvation? We are back into the muddy waters of cultural relativism and the false dawn of man-made solutions. The LORD (YHWH) alone is God.

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