A Contextual Methodology for Communicating Christ to the Hindus

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1. Introduction

The intention of this article is to develop an acceptable methodological approach in communicating Christ through the experience and faith of others with special interest to the Hindu. This is in keeping the description of contextualisation of Daniel Shaw (1995) "Contextualization enables people to use their creative understanding of their culture in conjunction with their newfound faith and understanding of Scripture…enabling them to create Christian practices that are meaningful to people in that society".

Using Acts 17:8-18 as the starting point, this article seeks to communicate the Christian message from the framework and experience that is relevant to Hindus. The platform for doing this is set by Paul's methodological guineas and his theological maturity. Paul begins by establishing a framework that is common to the philosophers of his time so that he can communicate the Christian message effectively.

In trying to establish Paul's methodology, the article will be divided into two sections. First, the researchers will deal with the principles of contextualisation used by Paul that makes for a clear understanding of the gospel message enabling the progress / process of the gospel in a specific context. The second section applies Paul's methodology of contextualising the gospel to the Hindu worldview, making the communication the gospel more effective to the Hindu hearer.

Paul only had one Gospel, but its presentation was contextualised to the various contexts in which he preached. Gilliland (1989:70) expresses the same basic understanding when he points to the Apostle Paul's contextual mission: "Paul's call to the gentiles was a call to contextualize the gospel. It demanded faithfulness to the central Word of truth and openness to the uniqueness of each situation." When speaking to the Jews Paul began from special revelation which is found in the Old Testament that they accepted (Ac 9, 13, 17). To the pagan at Lystra, he began with an explanation about himself, then God and creation (Ac14). To the philosophers of Athens he began with their form of worship and their own writers (Ac 17). Similarly, in speaking to a Hindu one will start with the redemptive analogies found in the Vedas and the Bagwath Githa. But before we can proceed with the discussion of applying contextualisation, it must be defined.

2. Definition of Contextualisation

Contextualisation is an effort to express the relevance of the gospel in the context of people, while at the same time being faithful to the text of the gospel. Contextualisation should not be viewed as an option but a necessity for all those who want to communicate the gospel effectively because contextualisation has

its origin in the *missio dei*. The Bible presents God as a communicating God, a God who wants to make himself known to people. God wants to communicate with people with impact, for the salvation of people. God's interaction with humankind reached its climax in the incarnation, which is the ultimate form of contextualisation. God calls his people to participate in his mission in the world in an incarnational way, that is, in a contextual way. This way has the following characteristics:

2.1 Contextual communication is faithful to the text.

To know what it means to be faithful to the text, we must develop an understanding of the biblical text. Kraft states (2005:155) "The Bible, then, is seen as an *inspired collection of classic cases* from history . . . exemplifying certain of God's past interactions with human beings for the instruction and guidance of those who now seek to follow in their footsteps". According to this understanding of the Bible, human beings today, each in his/her own context, are called to have dynamic interactions with God similar to the ones between God and the biblical persons described in the biblical text. Faithfulness to the text, then, lies in encouraging people today in the midst of their context to have interactions with God that lead to faith allegiance to God like those we find in the biblical text. Shaw (1995:158) writes "that contextualization is more than the initial presentation of the Gospel, it involves the evaluation and reintegration of life impacted by the revelation of god's truth; allowing the opportunity to create new and much needed local theologies for the newly emerging church".

2.2 Contextual communication is relevant to the context.

Taber (1979:146) states that to communicate the gospel in a way that is relevant in a context involves an "effort to understand and take seriously the specific context of each human group and person on its own terms and in all its dimensions--cultural, religious, social, political, economic--and to discern what the gospel says to people in that context."

 Taber (1979:146) further elaborates on what it means to relate the gospel to specific contexts: "What usable concepts and symbols does this religion provide for the approach of the gospel, on the analogy of Paul's use of the Athenian "unknown god?" What genuine insights does it offer into the character, activity and will of God? What are its gaps, its errors, and its distortions? What particular obstacles does it place in the way of a true understanding of the gospel? It is on the basis of such an analysis that contextualisation tries to discover in the Scriptures what God is saying to these people. In other words, contextualisation takes very seriously the example of Jesus in the sensitive and careful way he offered each person a gospel tailored to his or her own context".

2.3 Contextual communication is receptor-oriented.

In order for the receptor to understand the message of the communicator accurately, the communicator and the receptor have to operate within the same frame of reference. In communicating the gospel the communicator must have a good

understanding of the culture of the people, particularly the religious content of words such as sin, God, salvation, love, grace which is at the heart of the gospel. The communicator therefore is the one who must adjust to the context of the receptor by adopting the frame of reference of the receptor. If the gospel is not communicated in this receptor-oriented way, which we term the incarnational approach, the communicator will not extract the appropriate responses from the people to whom he /she is communicating to. The term "frame of reference," according to Kraft (1991:15), "refers to the culture, language, life situation, social class, or similar all-embracing setting or context within which one operates."

2.4 Contextual communication recognises and addresses both the sacramental and the sinful and demonic aspects of the context.

Behind this approach to the context lies an emphasis on the fact that the world is the creation of God. Although sin tainted God's creation, including human beings, humans have not lost the image of God, and God's footprints are still visible in every context. Each context has a sacramental nature, because, as Luther expresses it, the world is God's mask and God's word.

God is already at work in all contexts. Communicators of the gospel do not introduce Christ into new contexts; Christ is already present in every context through the Holy Spirit, although He might not as yet have been made known and is not yet worshipped in every context. Part of the work of contextualisation is identifying the presence of God in the context. We can confidently look for redemptive analogies and points of contact with the gospel in all religions and cultures, and, therefore, the gospel must be expressed in cultural forms that are understood and appreciated by the members of a particular society.

At the same time, each context is part of the fallen world, so the devil is also at work in every context. This means that there is both good and bad, both divine and demonic elements in every culture. While there are important elements of continuity with the gospel in each culture and religion, there are at the same time critical elements of discontinuity. The elements of discontinuity necessitate encounters between the worldview of the culture in question and the gospel and a break with certain patterns of behavior characteristic of the culture.

2.5 Incarnation as the model for contextual communication.

The supreme model of contextualisation is the incarnation, the Word of God being born into a specific socio-cultural context. As Gilliland (1989: 52) has expressed it, "When we speak of mission, we are saying that what God did once and for all in Jesus Christ must become Life in every human situation." Therefore, contextualisation is more than *transferring or translating the gospel* as it is preached among people in the West; it is more than a *mere adaptation or alteration* of the theology of Western churches so that it looks indigenous in the new culture. As Taber (1978:10) has stated, "what is needed now is for *Indians* to start afresh, beginning with the direct interaction of their cultures with the Scriptures rather than tagging along at the tail end of the long history of western embroidery, and to restate the Christian faith in answer to *Indian* questions, with *Indian* methodologies and terminologies" (*Italics is added for emphasis*).

Similarly, the communicator of the gospel must participate in God's already ongoing mission in each culture and society in the world by relating the gospel to the felt needs of each people group by communicating the gospel within the frame of reference of each people group.

3. Application to Hinduism

The origin of Hinduism has roots in the Indus valley civilization (4000 to 2200 BC) making Hinduism one of the oldest religions today and the third largest after Christianity and Islam. Hindus are henotheistic, that is, they recognizes a single deity, and view other gods and goddesses as manifestations or aspects of that supreme God (Brahman). Boyd (1969:34) views Hinduism as Trinitarian because Brahman is simultaneously visualized as a triad -- one God with three persons: Boyd expounded the meaning of the Trinity in the light of the Vedantic understanding of Brahman as Sachidananda. He suggests that the Father is *Sat* (being), the still God; Son is *Sit* (knowledge) the journeying God and the Holy Spirit is Ananda (joy) the returning God. Our focus is the use of redemptive analogies as found in the Hindu Texts.

Unlike Christianity, Hinduism has more than one scared or holy book such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and many other epics like the Mahabharart and Ramanya texts. The Vedas however is the most authoritative and most important of all Hindus texts. Dowson (2004:34-50) explains that there are various statements as to the origins of the Vedas. One of the views is that hymns emanated like breath from Brahma, the soul of the universe. It is believed that the hymns were orally received by the *Rishis* or sages whose name they bear, and hence the whole body of the Veda is known as *Sruti* 'what was heard'.

The Vedas are divided into four groups Rig-Vedas, Yaju-Veda , Sama- Veda and Atharva-Veda. The Rig Veda is considered to be oldest writings of the Vedas and is the key to understanding Hindu doctrine. It is because of the important role that the Rig-Veda play in Hinduism that we intend in this section to investigate how the Rig Veda personifies God and redemption and how Christians can communicate Christ more effectively using these redemptive analogies.

4. The Rig-Veda's Description of God, creation and Christ

The Vedas show the redemption activity of Christ and has the Gospel hidden in it. Yajur Veda (31:18-19) describes how the world was formed. In the essence of this hymn, creation is attributed to God. The hymn then describes God coming to earth in human form, being born while at the same time never being created, "never being born is born in sundry figures. The wise discerns the womb from which He springeth. In Him alone stand all existing creatures", V19. In v18 it states that unless we understand this we cannot be saved from death, thus one cannot achieve Mokshya (salvation). This is a wonderful starting point that can be used to describe the incarnation of Christ and the sacrifice he becomes for humanity sin.

In the Veda the Yajur Veda is known as the sacrificial text; it describes how sacrifices have to be performed. There are other verses in the Vedas that show God himself becoming a sacrifice. In the Tandyamabrahmana (2.7) it states that hav-

ing done a self self-sacrifice, the *Prajapati* (Lord of creation all creation) offers Himself for gods (*people*).

This is very significant in Hinduism because normally God is supposed to receive sacrifices and offerings, but here God sacrifices Himself. Thus the concept of self-sacrifice is very significant. Aguilar states (1976:76) "taken in its totality the myth of the *Purusa/Prajapati* is not unworthy of the Christian conception of the redemptive incarnation of the logos."

The Rig Veda (10:90) refers to the *Purusa*, as the Man of Perfection. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man is the one and only perfect Man in this world. The Chadaogyopanisad (1.6:6-7) say that this man is above all sin and the one who worships and follows Him also raise himself above sins. Thus the *Purusa-Parajpati* sacrifice should be blameless. This was fulfilled in Jesus Christ who came into this world to save sinners, while He himself was sinless (above sin). These redemptive analogies can be used as a starting point to bring the Hindu to acknowledge the ultimate sacrifice in Jesus Christ. The Hindu's own framework and understanding of redemption as performed through the *Parajpati*, can be used to point them to the true sacrifice of Jesus Christ as found in the Scriptures.

In addition, the Sathapathabrahmana (3.7.3) speaks of the *Prajapati* the sacrifice being tied to a sacrificial pillar. Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross, the sacrificial pillar.

Furthermore, in the Brhadaranyopanisad (3.9.28 4-5) the *Prajapati* should return to life after the sacrifice. Here is a link to the resurrection of Jesus as recorded in the New Testament.

These are just few a redemptive analogies that are found in the Rig Vedas that can be used as starting points to communicate the gospel to the Hindu within his /her own religious context.

5. Conclusion

As believers in Jesus Christ, we firmly affirm that in the Christian faith we have the mind and will of God revealed to us. Jesus Christ being both the manifestation of God- the effulgence of His glory and the very image of His substance. Jesus Christ taught with a fullness of authority that had no equal. However it should not be forgotten that God revealed Himself in many ways. As God of the earth who loved the world, he did not forget of the nations who strayed away from truth and knowledge. Peter in Acts 10:34-35 addressing the Gentiles for the first time declares a new revelation that "God shows no partiality. But in every nation whosoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him" (NKJV)

The apostle Paul in Lystra proclaimed that at no time God left Himself without witness amongst the nations of the earth (Ac 14:17) and at Athens Paul boldly proclaims that the universal purpose of God had been that men should seek Him, because He is not far from man's ability to know Him (Ac 17:27). Paul does not hesitate to quote the words of the Greek poet Epimended (600BC) "In him we live and move and have our being" and "we are his offspring" from Aratus's (315-240 BC); *Phaenomena* as well as all men are sons of God from Cleanthes (331-233 BC) in his *Hymn to Zeus*. The apostle Paul uses these concepts from the

Greek world view like the "*Unknown God*" and "*We are His offspring*" to communicate the gospel more clearly to the Greeks so that some may come to know Jesus Christ as the only true way to God (Ac 17:34).

Thus, Paul sets forth an acceptable methodology for using phrases and concepts from other cultures to make the gospel understandable without it becoming syncretism.

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All translation of the Vedic Texts is taken from Scared Texts: Vedas www.sacred-texts.com/hin

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