

The Human Universals of Culture: Implications for Contextualization

A three level model of how man, his nature and culture helps mold the contextualizer's task: Effective communication of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

by A. Scott Moreau

No matter how hard man tries, it is impossible for him to divest himself of his own culture, for it has penetrated to the roots of his nervous system and determines how he perceives the world. Most of culture lies hidden and is outside voluntary control making up the warp and weft of human existence. Even when small fragments of culture are elevated to awareness, they are difficult to change, not only because they are so personally experienced but because people cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture¹

It has long been recognized by the social sciences that we are creatures made for culture and by culture. We cannot escape culture just as we cannot escape our physical bodies. Understanding culture is at the heartbeat of the missionary enterprise² Certainly it is also of core concern in the effort to contextualize the Gospel. At the outset we should note that the goal of contextualization is not to make the Gospel relevant: it is relevant whether or not we recognize it. Rather, it is to enable a people to understand the significance of the Gospel in terms which they can understand. On occasion, this will involve bringing new terms into a culture. However, by and large, it generally focuses on communicating or embodying the truths of the Gospel in a particular people through their language, thought forms, worldview, and way of life. Hence, the process of contextualization cannot be divorced from the process of understanding culture.

What is Culture?

There are almost as many definitions

of culture as there are students of culture.³

It is not difficult to see why! The more deeply we take something for granted, and the more intimately it is tied to our thought processes and ways of living, and the less it is on a conscious level, the more difficult it is to define it. In the broadest sense, we may consider culture to be the diverse and dynamic pattern for living which is shared by a people and transmitted from one generation to another as part of the fabric of life. Without drawing out the metaphor too far, we may consider culture as a type of mental software.⁴ More specifically, we may define culture as a total complex, involving 1) our world view, which refers to a set of assumptions through which we filter our perceptions of life 2) a methodological plan embodying functional, structural, and cognitive elements for applying those assumptions in interpreting and explaining everything around us as well as determining how to live in the world; and 3) the manifestations of the assumptions and methodological plan, seen in the system of living exhibited by the people of the culture (the symbolic and ecological elements.)

Because culture is a transmitted pattern, it is dynamic rather than static. Isolated or alienated individuals within a culture may change rapidly, but the culture as a whole changes far more slowly. Because we are reared in an ethos of culture, we naturally tend to assume that our culture is the best or right one. On a practical level, one result of this is that the members of a given culture will be predisposed to prefer certain methods of systematizing their religious views or doctrine over others.

Culture is not monolithic. There seem to be three levels of culture recognized by social scientists as well as Christian communicators (see diagram.)⁵ The first level consists of the universals we all share as humans. We will explore these later, but they are the dimensions or elements found in every human society, and include things such as language, institutions, values, sociability, and so on.

The second level is that of cultural particulars. These are defined and developed in every cultural pattern. They are the means by which a particular culture meets its universal human needs. While there are a bewildering array of approaches to the study of culture, there are commonalities which every discipline recognizes, as Edward T. Hall notes,

In spite of many differences in detail, anthropologists do agree on their characteristics of culture: it is not innate, but learned; the various facets of culture are interrelated—you touch a culture in one place and everything else is affected; it is shared and in effect defines the boundaries of different groups. Culture is man's medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, how their cities are planned and laid out, how transportation systems function and are organized, as well as how economic and government systems are put together and function.⁶

Contextualization, following the lead of anthropology, focuses most of its attention at this level. It is our contention, however, that contextualization can best be accomplished at this level

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only if it is well-grounded in the prior level of human universals.

The third level of culture reflects the fact that each member of a particular culture chooses what elements of the culture to accept and what to reject and has varying skills in applying those elements (a sort of “cultural competency” which may parallel “linguistic competency.”) This is the level of individual idiosyncrasy. While our diagram shows only three levels, certainly many further subdivisions are possible. These may be national, linguistic, or racial. Within a culture, further divisions may be made among groupings of extended families or clans, which in turn may be divided into nuclear elements before reaching the individual level. However many levels are shown, the fact that all draw from a pool of human universals is not changed.

Human Universals

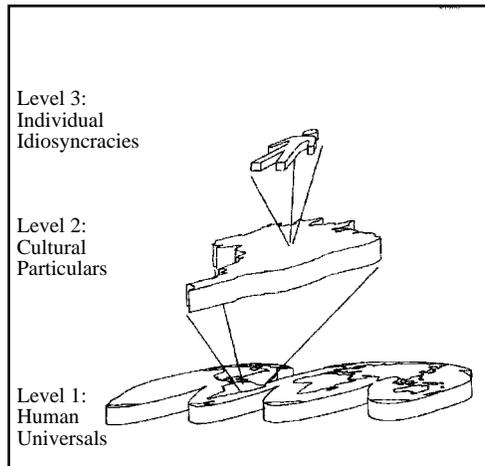
People of all races and ethnic identities share the fact and experiences of being human. Universals found in every culture include, among other things, language, thought, the process of enculturation, myth frameworks, authority structures, and the many institutions necessary for survival of human societies (eg, kinship, economics, education politics, recreation, various types of association, health, transportation, etc..) Proper contextualization in any single culture or sub-culture must be founded on awareness of the human universals and their manifestations within the local context. Those universals help to shed light on the particular setting and ground local expressions of Christian truth in the larger scale of God’s created order. Thus, these universals will be important for the contextualizer whether he or she is working among an unreached people group in Mali or hardened secularists in New York city.

Image of God

The first and perhaps the most signi-

cant universal is that all people are made in the image of God. The debate among theologians over the meaning of “in God’s image” has endured for millennia. One of the more comprehensive views has been concisely summarized by Millard Erickson:

The image refers to the elements in the makeup of man which enable the fulfillment of his destiny.... The image itself is that set of qualities that are required for these relationships and this function to take



place. They are those qualities of God which, if reflected in man, make worship, personal interaction, and work possible.... Man qua man has a nature that includes the whole of what constitutes personality or selfhood: intelligence, will, emotions. This is the image in which man was created, enabling him to have the divinely intended relationship to God and to fellow man, and to exercise dominion.⁷

The implications of being made in God’s image for contextualization are manifold. For example, all humans are built to reflect God in all that we are. Being created in God’s image, vertical communication is not only possible, it is vitally necessary for us as human beings. All of us have an in-built need and desire to connect to the One we image. Thus, we exhibit not only physical needs but “soulful” ones as well. Appropriate contextualization will recognize and respond to this need found in all people. Another implication of being in God’s image is that despite the

bewildering variety found among the world’s cultures, godly values are built into all people. Even though the people of any culture may choose to ignore them or try to suppress them, they will surface as points of contact through which the Gospel may pass and be starting points for the contextualizing process

Purpose of Existence

Intimately linked to being made in God’s image is the universal that all people have a purpose for their existence (Gen. 1:27; Isa. 43:7.) We were created to exercise God’s rule over the earth and all of its creatures, and we are separated from the rest of creation by virtue of that purpose. All of creation, then, is to be utilized by humankind in meeting our needs. Before the fall, this would have been done sinlessly. Thus, we have a physical purpose for being here which is linked to living in a godly fashion with the rest of the created order, utilizing and harnessing it to meet not only our needs as people but the needs of all that God has created. Contextualization in any setting must grapple with the issues of proper use of resources and the human responsibility in maintenance of the harmony of the created order. This has both positive and negative connotations. The former seeks to ensure that created resources are utilized to the benefit of the local people. The latter emphasizes prevention of irreparable exploitation and greed which destroys the harmony which God has given.

Glorifying God

Further, and more significantly in terms of purpose, we were made by God to glorify Him (Isa. 43:7). Contextualization in any setting must set forth the Gospel message that we are more than illusion or random specks of dust on a ball of dirt—we have both dignity and a reason for living. We are created to glorify God, and are capable of doing so within the constraints of the culture in which we grow up. While it is true that

our culture dominates us, it is also true that we have been given both the responsibility and the ability to respond in ways which glorify the Creator and reflects his Kingship over the created order. Every human being is significant, and all seek to connect to the fact of their significance. They do so in a bewildering variety of fashions. Contextualization should seek to harness the energies used in searching for significance and channel it in the direction which gives greatest satisfaction—glorifying the Creator through exercising the gifts bestowed on the creation.

Our Physical Nature

A third human universal is that all people of all cultures are physical in nature (Gen. 2:7.) As obvious as this is, it still carries implications which cannot be ignored. As physical creatures we basic foundational needs which all cultures must face: food and water, shelter (whether a cave, cardboard shack, or castle), health (both maintenance of health and healing), and reproduction. The physical nature of our environment will have an impact on our culture, worldview, and communication patterns, a reality well recognized by environmental anthropologists. Contextualization efforts in every culture must account for the physical nature of humanity and the impact of that reality on life. This has implications for a multitude of issues, including the pace of life, the rhythms, the means used to ensure health, issues of appearance and attraction, and so on. Contextualized theology must acknowledge the fact of our physical nature and grapple with the implications of that nature as a means of glorifying the one who chose to create us as physical beings.

Human Sexuality

Intimately linked to our physical nature is our sexuality. We were given our sexuality at the time of creation—it did not come after the fall,

and is thus part of God's normative plan for all people. There are biblical regulations which govern the sexuality of all people (e.g., celibacy outside of marriage.) Being created a two-gender species, contextualizing the practices of Christian living involves not only dealing with the variety of gender-related roles but in the sharpness in distinguishing those roles between the genders.⁸ For example, the current wrestling in American evangelicalism over

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women's roles in ministry is as much cultural as it is biblical, and understanding that fact may be a helpful step in making progress in the ongoing debate. The same will be true in working among a frontier people, who will carry their gender-role preconceptions into churches planted among them.

A final universal implication of our physical nature is the inevitability of death, a fact facing all cultures. Some choose to deal with it through ancestral belief systems, others through denial of physical reality, others by reincarnation, and others by implicit denial of death. All cultures have a myriad of rituals (e.g., burial, mourning, anniversaries) associated with death and in each case, a biblical perspective must be brought to bear on the cultural perspective.

Thinking Creatures

A fourth human universal is that all people are thinking (psychological and cognitive) creatures (Gen. 2:16:18. Adam understood and was able to

choose his own path in response to God's command. We also see Adam's ability to name all the animals (2:19-20) as evidence that people are endowed with psychological creativity and the ability to exercise it in appropriate ways. Being made in the image of God as thinking creatures implies that communication among peoples of different cultures is not only possible, it is necessary.

Thus, for example, the theological reflection of a multi-cultural community of people can benefit every participant as each shares the image of God and creatively reflects that image in culturally meaningful ways.

Linked to both the physical and cognitive nature of people is that we are developmental as a species. Every human in every culture progresses through phases of development as a person. This does not mean that the phases are the same in every culture. However, the fact that all cultures recognize development (e.g., through rites of passage such as naming or initiation ceremonies) must be recognized by those engaged in contextualizing.

Also linked to our psychology is the reality of emotions found in every culture. They may be experienced and expressed differently, but they are a common human phenomena. A contextualized mission approach will engage the fact of emotions and emotional expression in a culture in a way that will enable a people to emotionally connect with their God.

A Context of Relationships

Growing out of our sharing God's image, all people are social creatures (Gen. 2:18-25). We exist in the context of relationships. People need other people to live as God intends us to live. The sociological myth of independent individualism found in Western cultures, encroaching in urban environments world wide is a myth, in the sense of being an untrue perspective. We

are created as relational beings and engaging in the process of relating in a way that fulfills our God-given social needs. This needs to be faced by contextualizers in every culture.

Our social nature is not limited to people—we are also socially related to God (whether we acknowledge His existence or not) and the means by which this relationship is to be experienced is at the heartbeat of contextualizing mission theology and methods.

In addition to the general social sense of relationship, man and woman are creatures of a special relationship which engages our social, psychological, physical and spiritual dimensions i.e. marriage. This relationship, as established by God, enables the propagation of the race as well as meeting needs of intimacy built into us as people. Men and women are uniquely fitted to each other socially, biologically, and psychologically. Contextualizers in every culture must address the issues of marriage, which range from what is acceptable as a ceremony which concretizes the union to the manner of relating within the marriage to the significance of marriage (e.g., whether it is necessary) to the importance of children to the number of spouses, etc.

Our Fallenness

On the negative side, Scripture presents a perspective not acknowledged in the social sciences, namely, all people have to deal with the fact of living in a fallen world—and death is our ultimate reminder. Biblically speaking, the world is not just composed of fallen individuals. The story of Genesis 4-11 indicates clearly that the whole created order is fallen, and the people as well as the systems which people create are affected. They are systems which dominate us and constrain us towards death rather than life.⁹ This death is not just physical, it is also spiritual (our relationship with God), psychological (to ourselves) and social (our relationship

with others.) We may debate the extent of the influence of sin on those who have been declared to be new creatures in Christ, but the fact of degeneration is one all people and all cultures will face until Christ's return. Contextualizers must grapple with the fact of man's fallenness, the means of confronting it (indeed, whether or not it should be confronted is debated in evangelical circles), and the ultimate goal of God's restoration of the created order.

In light of this, all people and all cultures stand in need of redemption. Contextualizers in every culture will wrestle with ways to make this element of the Gospel message clear to the members of the culture. Tied to this is the fact that we are all capable not only of being deceived but we all too often actively participate in the deception of Satan, who stands as a enemy to all cultures in the world. At the same time, God's work on the cross stands as a paradigm that the best efforts of Satan can be turned upside down and used by God to accomplish His purposes. Therefore, when contextualizers see things in a culture tainted by deception, they need to look also for ways God can turn what they see upside down by "taking the offensive and overcoming evil with good" (paraphrase of Rom. 12:21.)

Another important given in all cultures is that all people have access to general revelation about God (Rom. 1:20-21). The self-revelation of God has been manifest since the creation of the world. It is through God's visible creation that His invisible attributes are clearly displayed. As a result, humankind has no excuse for denying God. "This result of God's selfmanifestation in His creation is not a natural knowledge of God on men's part independent of God's self-revelation in His Word, a valid though limited knowledge, but simply the excuselessness of men in their ignorance."¹⁰ Through general revelation, people can see their need for God, but because of sin, perception is distorted and

we all too often deny our need. Thus, it is not possible to construct a full-scale 'natural' theology with which all humankind will agree. Even so, several implications for the contextualizing process should be seen. For example, there will always be a common ground or a point of contact between the believer and the nonbeliever, or between the Gospel and the thinking of the unbeliever. All persons have a knowledge of God, though that might be denied or suppressed (especially in more secularized environments.) Another implication is that there is a reality of some knowledge of divine truth outside the special revelation. Further, we may gain a clearer understanding about the specially revealed truth by examining the generally revealed truths. We may understand in more complete detail the greatness of God, and comprehend more fully the image of God in the human race, when we attend to general revelation. This should be considered a supplement to, not a substitute for, special revelation. God is just in condemning those who have never heard the Gospel in the full and formal sense. No one is completely without opportunity. All have known God, if they have not effectually perceived him, it is because they have suppressed the truth. Thus all are responsible and in every culture contextualization will need to declare this as a truth from God's special revelation of Himself.

Conclusion

The list of human universals is not intended to be exhaustive, but suggestive. As has been seen, the issues related to culture, what we share in common as human beings, and the process and goals of contextualization are rich, complex, and multi-faceted. The fact that every human has been enculturated is predicated on our nature as learning beings who are able to learn a multitude of adaptation systems. The fact that we share significant universals

serves as an encouragement that relevant contextualizing is not only possible but necessary. It also impels us to engage in contextualization in our own culture. One danger of laying out human universals as we have done is that of reducing the contextualizing task—of striving for uniformity in the answers to the problems every culture faces. The common ground of solution is Christ's work in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection—a fact of history of relevance to all peoples and cultures at all times in human history. The multifaceted nature of human cultures serves as a reminder of the reality of a multifaceted application of that work in ways which makes sense to people clustered in local cultures.

Endnotes

1. Edward Hall. *The Hidden Dimension* (New York; Anchor Books; 1983), p 188.

2. Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1988), p.59.
3. In 1952, Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, Mass.:The Museum, 1952), pp. 38-40; 149 brought together for analysis at least 164 definitions, and use close to 300 definitions in the book.
4. Geert Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*(New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 991) p. 4.
5. See Hofstede, *Cultures and Organizations*, p.6 and David J. Hesselgrave, *Cross-Cultural Counseling* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House. 1984.)
6. Edward Hall, *Beyond Culture* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1981), pp. 16-17.
7. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 513-4.
8. See the discussion in Hofstede- *Cultures and Organizations*, ch.
9. Walter Wink, in *Engaging the Powers:*

Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), translates *kosmos* ("world") as "domination system" and presents a penetrating analysis of ways our cultures not only shape us, but dominates and constrains us in ungodly directions.

10. C. E. B Cranfield, *Romans* International Critical Commentaries (Edinburgh: J & T Clark, 1975), p. 116

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