

5th International Forum for Korean Mission Leaders De-Westernizing Doctrine and Developing Appropriate Theology in Mission

by Mack Harling

Excited to be joining the faculty of an emerging Arab seminary, I arrived shortly before classes began. The first course I was asked to teach was the Old Testament Prophets, so I dusted off the notes from my seminary training that emphasized the permanence of God's promises given through the prophets to His chosen people. They stipulated that the Land was Israel's eternal inheritance, divinely bestowed through an irrevocable, unconditional covenant. Having left Israel-friendly America, I was now in a country where the majority of people were of Palestinian descent. What comfort or hope of justice could my theological teaching about the Land offer to the Christian Palestinian student whose family had been run off their ancestral land at the point of the guns of Jewish settlers or soldiers? Imported theology is not always appropriate!

I was then confronted with the sensitive social issue of Arab identity. Arab Muslims trace their physical descent and spiritual heritage to Ishmael. Yet most American evangelicals, skewed by a bias toward Israel, interpret Genesis 16:12 as portraying Ishmael as a wild donkey who is at war with everyone and forever hostile to Isaac's offspring.¹ Such a theological perspective is hardly appealing to Arabs (nor is it theologically accurate). In addition, subsequent years of teaching confirmed that translated Western theology failed to address other key concerns and issues in Arab society. Theology transplanted from the West is not always accurate, appealing, or even addressing the right agenda!

Western missionary efforts established numerous Arab evangelical seminaries. However, they habitually teach theology as it is taught in the West—the same curriculum and course offerings with translated textbooks, notes, and lectures. But these importations fail to employ indigenous stories, illustrations, values, patterns of thinking, and forms of expression. Western theology is not indigenous!

Not surprisingly, Arab evangelical Christian churches are denominational clones of their mother churches in the West—with the same doctrinal di-

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Mack Harling (Th.M., Dallas Theological Seminary, Ph.D., Fuller Theological Seminary) served with Christar in church planting in the Arab world as well as academic dean and professor of the Jordan Evangelical Theological Seminary in Amman. He is currently president of the International Society of Frontier Missiology (ISFM) and Associate Professor of Islamic and Christian Studies at William Carey International University.

instinctives, structures of governance, and patterns of worship—only the language changes. The few Muslims who join these churches are alienated from the Muslim community for committing cultural treason. They are persecuted for their apostasy—not for following Christ, but for joining those anti-Islamic, pork-eating, booze-drinking, sexually immoral, polytheistic Christians from the West. Western theology produces Westernized churches and Christians!

A further indication of the need for more appropriate theological teaching is in the area of Muslim-Christian relations. Arab Christians have dialogued with Muslims for the past thousand years. But there is little evidence of its fruitfulness—the same misunderstandings, objections, arguments and counter arguments continue to be parroted by both sides with little apparent effect. Unfortunately, what Muslims understand to be the meanings of certain Christian terms and doctrines are so repulsive and blasphemous that many are afraid to read (or even to touch) a Bible, lest they be defiled. They are horrified that Christians call Jesus the “Son of God”, viewing this like a pagan mythology, where God has sexual relations with Mary, producing a biological son, Jesus. Many Muslims think that Christians worship a Trinity of three gods: Allah, Mary, and Jesus. Hence, our traditional expressions of theology often cause misunderstandings, repelling Muslims from reading the Bible. At best, imported theology has been impotent in evangelism.

These are but a few examples that illustrate the critical need for theology that is appropriate for Arab Muslim cultures; however, the situation is the same in other mission contexts. This requires a process for developing new theological thinking that is accurate, appealing, meaningful, relevant, indigenous, and transforming. The process by which this is done is best known as the contextualization of theology. This paper is devoted to providing the rationale for developing contextual theology

(synonymously called indigenous, local, appropriate, and mission theology).

Approaches and Aims of Theology

To contextualize theology is to express biblical truth in ways appropriate to a given context. Dean Gilliland defines theology as

the attempt on the part of the church to explain and interpret the meaning of the gospel for its own life and to answer questions raised by the Christian faith, using the thought, values, and categories of truth which are authentic to that place and time” (1989:10).



Thus, theology is not a finished product that can be transported to all peoples, times, and places.

In the West theology appears in three fundamental forms: (1) philosophical or systematic theology that is concerned with the “unchanging universal structure of reality,” (2) biblical theology that studies the Bible to discern the “unfolding cosmic drama,” and (3) mission theology that applies “divine revelation to human contexts.” As Tiénon and Hiebert maintain:

Missional Theology seeks to build the bridge between biblical revelation and human contexts. It seeks to bridge the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy—between truth, love, and obedience (2005).

Bringing the truth of divine revelation to human cultures for their transformation requires that theology break out of academic confinement. Mission theology is not an abstract academic exercise, but an integration of biblical truth into real life. Orthodoxy must

become orthopraxy—but this can occur only if theology is contextualized! Historically, efforts at contextualization of theology have been largely confined to the propositional level, neglecting the relational, emotional, experiential, and practical (Kraft 2002). Mission theology must address all realms of man’s life—the head, the heart, and the hands. The goal of this paper is to present the need and basis for developing mission theology that will

communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularity of their lives, so that it may transform them, their societies and their cultures into what God intends for them to be (Tiénon and Heibert 2005).

Biblical Foundations for Contextualization of Theology

The primary basis for our attempting to contextualize theology is the Bible. Because the Scriptures themselves portray the practice of contextually appropriate communication so persistently, we have both a theological mandate to do the same, and explicit examples showing us how to faithfully follow the divine model for communication. Insensitivity to God’s radical commitment to locally appropriate communication is a major factor in the overall failure of Western-trained theologians to contextualize theology for non-Western peoples.

Contextualization is Incarnational Communication

There are numerous examples of God’s contextualized communication in both the Old and New Testaments. The supreme example, of course, is the Incarnation. In it God accepted the constraints and risks of contextual communication and revealed Himself to humanity in Christ. All valid contextualization is but a reflection of this principle (Glasser 1989:49). It is essential that we realize that God is a receptor-oriented communicator who goes to extreme measures in order to communicate in ways that are meaningful to men. Charles Kraft declares:

In Jesus, God’s desire to be understood as relevant and important to contemporary human life led him to so contextualize himself as a

They borrowed Canaanite concepts, terms and imagery associated with the worship of Baal and applied them to Yahweh.

human being that he was not even recognized by most of the people of his day. He looked too human.... (1989:122)

God is radically committed to incarnational communication

He speaks the language of the people. He seeks to reach, even disrespected languages like Galilean Aramaic and *koine* (common) Greek. He even uses the cultural practices of pagan societies to communicate His message to those living in them (Kraft 1989:126).

The prophets often model the divine pattern of contextualization as well. In order to reveal God's anguish over a spiritually adulterous people, God ordered Hosea to marry an "adulterous woman". The marriage produced three children whom Hosea gave names which symbolized the imminent judgment of the nation. Later He commanded him to "love a woman living in adultery" to show that God still loved his people, despite their religious harlotry. James Mays sees this incarnational contextualization in Hosea who

had to incarnate in his own personal life the word of Yahweh. That he could and did is evidence of his profound identification with his God, an identification which, if we can judge from his sayings, allowed him even to feel and experience 'the emotions of Yahweh' (1969b:3).

Why did God go to such an extreme in ordering Hosea to act so? Did He not realize that some believers (and even Bible scholars) would stumble over Hosea's conduct, while unbelievers would attack this revelation on the basis that a righteous prophet could not possibly leave such a scandalous example for the godly to follow? The answer seems to be that our God is committed to be relevant and powerful through incarnational communication.

We also have Amos' creative incarnation of his messages to Israelite culture. Mays explains:

Amos knew the art of appropriating a variety of ...speech-forms as the vehicle of what he had to say. His speeches display a remarkable skill at using all the devices of oral literature available in Israel's culture. He sang a funeral dirge for Israel in anticipation of its doom (5:1-2), and formulated woe-sayings as a way of marking certain kinds of action as those which lead to death (5:18; 6:1; 5:7). He used several forms that belonged to the priest to mimic and attack the cult of the nation (4:4f; 5:4, 21-24). He was especially adept at the employment of forms of speech that appear in the riddles, comparison, and popular proverbs of folk wisdom....He argued with the logic of proverbs (3:3-6) and used comparisons and riddles to make his point (2:9; 3:12; 5:2,7,19, 24; 6:12; 9:9) (1969a:5-6).

The preceding examples underscore the theological urgency for contextualizing theology in mission contexts.

Contextualization Appropriates Forms but Transforms Meanings

Some conservative theologians feel that contextualization will lead to compromise or syncretism. However, the goal of contextualization is to communicate both clearly and relevantly. Contextualization and moral integrity are not incompatible; for the Apostle Paul, who was supremely committed to integrity, was also the most committed to contextualization:

To the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:20-22).

Furthermore, fear of syncretism often leads to the promoting of an opposite form of it. Kraft puts it this way:

If God's message is not contextualized, then it ceases to be true to what God intended and becomes to some extent heretical (1989:122).

A concern to avoid syncretism has led many to reject the use of forms that have been contaminated by non-Christian or pagan usage. Many thus judge various Islamic forms to be unacceptable, because of unbiblical associations. While this type of objection may seem to have merit, we find that it does not seem to have been an insurmountable barrier to the Holy Spirit. For example, *EI* was the basic name for God in the Ancient Near East and was the name of the supreme god of the Canaanite pantheon. Yet the Holy Spirit appropriated it and gave it new meaning and used it as one of the Divine names in the OT revelation. (The use of the plural form *elohim* with singular meaning was not unique to Israel either) (Glasser 1989:36). Richard Longenecker observes,

While the Hebrews were opposed to polytheism and the gross religious practices of the Canaanites, their worship of Yahweh during the late Amarna period probably often paralleled Canaanite worship of Baal and his cohorts in its styling and expressions (1999:157).

They borrowed Canaanite concepts, terms and imagery associated with the worship of Baal (such as "the Rider in the Clouds") and applied them to Yahweh (Ps. 68:5). Even when particular images or motifs carried adverse connotations because of their close association with the Baal cult, they seem to have been simply "disinfected" and "rebaptized" for use in Israel's worship if it were thought to be useful for greater purposes (Longenecker 1999:157).

Furthermore, if inaccurate or pagan conceptions associated with forms render them unusable, we should be astonished to find that the New Testament writers, along with the Jewish translators of the Septuagint, chose *theos* to refer to Yahweh—given the ideas that the Greek world associated with the term. The religious concept of *theos* was polytheistic. Taken from the Greek pantheon, the

conception of hierarchy of the gods was brought into prominence and was ultimately expressed in the person of Zeus. *Theos* was also used for Apollon, Athena, Eros, and even the cosmos, not to mention heroes and outstanding rulers. Although eternal, they came into being from the same mother and had human form. *Theos* did not create the world out of nothing, but merely gave it order and form. The influence of the gods was not universal, but limited, and they certainly were not righteous. The Greek religious conception of God could hardly be described as biblical—neither could their philosophical concept. In Greek philosophy, god was not personal. Though the divine forms were spiritualized and replaced by concepts like “world reason” and “being,” there does not enter into the Greek mind any thought of a “deity whose innermost essence is love, love for man and not merely for individual elect” (Kleinknecht 1965: 67-69). The pagan concepts associated with *theos* and the high potential for miscommunication would have seemed to many of us to have made its use as a form unredeemable. Yet the NT writers chose to use it, says Arthur Glasser, and “transformed it (not having the shape and form as the pagans conceived god, but as pure spirit [see John 4:24])” (1989:36).²

In a similar way John’s concept of the Logos did not adopt either the OT concept or that of the Jewish philosopher Philo (Pentecost 1981:29). J.W. Shepard maintains:

His idea of the Logos was not that of Marcus Aurelius, the generative principle in nature, nor that of Philo, the Divine Reason and Expression, nor merely that of the Hebrew memra, the manifestation of God as the Angel of Jehovah or the Wisdom of God; but the religious idea of the Divine Word, creating, revealing, redeeming. John seized upon the terminology of current Greek thought and filled it with a new content (1947:15).

Thus scriptural precedent would have us appropriate a familiar term but modify it, giving it new meaning.

In addition, we have the Holy Spirit inspiring the Apostle Paul to search for terms from the mystery religious

cults to communicate gospel truth. Dean Gilliland observes:

It could be somewhat disconcerting, even today, to admit that Paul went into the local religions to find ways to teach Christ. But this is surely part of the reason why God chose him as the apostle to the gentiles.

Such words include: “minister” (*leitourgon*) in Romans 15:16 and “libation” (*thysia*) and “sacrifice” (*leitourgia*) in Philippians 4:18 (1989:56). Another example is Paul’s choice of *katallasso* (reconcile) and *katallage* (reconciliation). These terms were familiar to the Greeks in regard to resolution of the tensions between people and the pagan gods, whereas the more acceptable way of communicating the mediating work of Christ to the Jewish mindset would have been *hilaskesthai* (to propitiate or make expiation for) as in Heb. 2:17—yet the Apostle never uses this word (1989:55-56). Though some theologians may feel uncomfortable adopting expressions that have been so closely associated with pagan cultic practices, the Apostle to the Gentiles adopted, adapted and transformed them into powerful vehicles of communication. Paul searched for language and expressions that conveyed truth with the highest degree of local impact. Gilliland states that in doing so he demonstrated that:

The gospel will be a living faith only as it takes seriously the concrete values and dynamic issues raised by each culture. In general, the Jews balked at a reframing of the order and terminology. They would rather have an abhorrence of what might become syncretism, should the gentiles be given too much liberty. Yet if this liberating gospel had become imprisoned within Jewish belief and practice, the result would have been a Jewish brand of syncretism. This, in fact, almost happened. Paul had to fight Judaistic distortions through his correspondence on at least two occasions (1989:58).³

The point of the Jerusalem Council’s decision in Acts 15 was that those from a non-biblically based cultural-social-religious background have the right to hear, believe, and follow Christ without abandoning their communal heritage. If we do not

allow them this right, then we repeat the same error as those who were Judaizing the Gentiles.⁴

It should also be noted that even forms which we consider biblically sacred may be modified and still convey the meaning. This is evident from the NT authors’ use of the Jewish Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. When quoting from the new form (the Septuagint), they still referred to it, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as the “Word of God.” This is the ultimate proof of the fact that new forms can be every bit as holy as the original ones.⁵

Richard Longenecker (1999) capably argues that confessions, hymns and sayings of the early NT church represented contextualizations of core theological themes that Paul reshaped to fit the situations in his various epistles. Further examples of contextualization in the Scriptures could be presented; however, the foregoing examples should suffice to justify and exemplify this endeavor.

Historical Foundations for Contextualization

In addition to understanding the biblical foundations for contextualization of theology, Western theologians (and those influenced by them) need to grasp how theology was contextualized in their own theological traditions.⁶ Bruce Nicholls declares, “The history of the church is a history of contextualized theologies that are varying responses to the work of the Spirit of God in particular historical contexts” (1979:54). He points out the importance of understanding this:

The failure of missionary communicators to recognize the degree of cultural conditioning of their own theology has been devastating to many Third World churches, creating a kind of Western theological imperialism and stifling the efforts of national Christians to theologize within their own culture (1979:25).

Mission theologians must appreciate the cultural conditioning of Western theology if they are to nurture the growth of indigenous theologies. Hopefully the evidence of a few

Theologies are bridges between the Bible and our own cultures, so that the gospel can speak to us today.

examples of such contextualizations in the history of the church in the West will suffice in achieving this purpose.

First, the Hellenistic church expressed biblical truth in vocabulary and frames of reference of Greek culture, using the terms and framework of philosophy and law to construct abstract and technical theological systems. Western theology was shaped by its interaction with Greek philosophy. Non-Western theologians more readily perceive the effects—as Melba Maggay laments,

The domination of Western theological formulations has led to a situation where in order to speak to their people, Christians in Asia and Africa are taught to answer questions raised by Greek sophists in the fourth century A.D. (1989:55-57).

The influence of the Greeks continued in response to the skepticism of Descartes and then the dominance of reason in the Enlightenment; theology sought certainty of knowledge in constructing its defenses against atheism and agnosticism. William Dyrness laments the result:

What we have gained in clarity ... we have sometimes lost in immediacy and emotional depth—the theological knowledge we have gained has sometimes become estranged from everyday life (1992:22).

This stands in stark contrast to theological reflection from the non-Western world.

A second evidence of cultural conditioning is what Robin Boyd calls the “Latin Captivity” of Protestant theology. The carryovers from Catholicism are evident in Protestants’ theological and ecclesiastical vocabulary, Bible translation, ways of approaching theology, church structures, and formal ties to the State (1979:358-369).

Thirdly, we can see the influence of Western culture on theological pre-understandings in non-evangelical European theologians who interpret Scripture through the

lenses of relativism, existentialism, or a mechanical scientific worldview (Nicholls 1979:42ff). This alerts us to the probability that evangelical pre-understandings are likewise influenced by Western culture.

Fourthly, as C. Norman Krauss discovered through his experience in Asia, traditional Western theology is inadequate in supporting the life and work of the church in discipleship. The reasons lie in the historical and cultural factors that shaped it:

For the past 300 years Western theology has been written in the maelstrom of the philosophical transition from rational metaphysics to empiricism. It has been a stormy passage. Besides absorbing the rush of historical and scientific discoveries into theological discussion—a difficult enough task!—theologians have been almost totally involved in the critical issues of rational methodology. This was quite understandable and unavoidable, but as a result, theology has been done largely as polemics and apologetics, and it has been largely a university discipline (1990:15).

A further example of contextualization in the history of the Western church is the emergence of different relational centers within Western theological traditions (such as justification by faith, the covenant, the Holy Spirit, and the kingdom). Each one evidences a unique historical contextualization within the branches of Western theology (Nicholls 1979:54-55).

From these few examples we see that Western theology is itself a series of historical contextualizations of the faith. Recognition of this historical reality is necessary to the stimulation of fresh theologizing mission contexts. The process by which such theologizing occurs is the domain of missiology.

Missiological Foundations for Contextualization

Given the preceding biblical and historical rationale for the

contextualization of theology, I would like to mention several basic missiological principles that are necessary foundations for the contextualization of theology.

1. Every culture needs to be equipped to develop its own theology.

Theologies are bridges between the Bible and our own cultures so that the gospel can speak to us today (Hiebert 1985:201-202). Because cultures differ from each other, the theological bridges must be uniquely constructed for each one. The goal of theologizing is not to convert the local to our frame of reference, but to discover and appropriate his. We must come to grips with the reality that theology must be formulated locally if it is to be relevant and powerfully impact its hearers!

Therefore, instead of teaching a theology we ought to teach local believers how the early church developed theology, so as to give them the tools for constructing an indigenous theology. We need to take them

back beyond any already developed theology to the stage at which the theology of the New Testament was still being worked out ... to uncover the forces that governed the making of that theology, in order that we may in turn let ourselves be guided by the same dynamism as we set about creating a contemporary theology ... (Allmen 1979:341).

The mission theologian comes from his own context into his mission milieu carrying excess theological baggage. As far as possible, he works within the local worldview and frame of reference so that the message is not rejected as alien. Once the gospel is planted, the native believers should take an increasingly greater role in theologizing. They are naturally more competent to do so with their insiders’ perspective. Their first task is to contextualize theology wherever the guest theologian was unable to. The role of the skilled outsider shifts from teacher to facilitator and finally to consultant.⁷

2. Theologies are adequate, not absolute.

One of the most problematic issues for Western theologians is their conviction that their theologies are

tantamount to universal, absolute truth; many are nervous about talk of significant changes to their theology in mission contexts. But Daniel von Allmen asserts:

We must not fool ourselves. Western theology is not universal theology. Whatever is universal about Western theology is owed solely to the faith that has been professed at all times and in all places; and Western theology has the duty to reckon with the possibility that others may express the faith in a manner that is just as valid and just as “universal,” in categories that are proper to them (1979:341).

This mistaken notion is true not only of Western theologians and missionaries, but also of most churches that are the fruit of Western mission.

But even though every theology is contextual and therefore not absolute, this does not divest theology of biblical authority. As William Larkin declares:

Apprehension or expression of absolute truth is of course incomplete and partial, but that does not make such apprehension or expression relative.... we may confidently affirm that though our knowledge is not absolute, we do know God’s absolute and divinely revealed truth (1988:241).

This is because God’s Word is given to all peoples and cultures in such a way that everyone can have, as Kraft says, “an adequate, though nonabsolute, understanding of supracultural truth” (1979:129). In other words, God’s Word communicates adequately to all cultures so that they can grasp the essentials of his message.

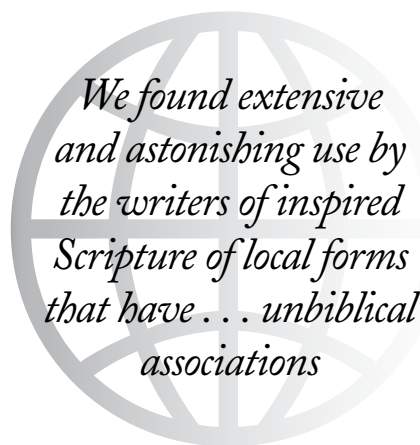
3. The test of a theology’s validity is not its conformity to Western theology, but its compatibility with Scripture—as developed by the Spirit-led local believing community.

Longenecker presents Jesus as the model teacher of the law whom the disciple is to emulate in contextualization by “bringing out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Mt. 13:52) and “putting new wine into fresh wineskins” (Mk. 2:22) (1999:151). In addition, theology should be developed under the leading

of the Holy Spirit. The Jerusalem Council recognized the work of the Spirit in their theologizing about gentile mission and ecclesiology. But such guidance is best confirmed through the community of believers (Hiebert 1985:202-203).

4. Theologians need to study other cultural theologies.

Due to human limitations, personal biases, and cultural baggage they bring from their situations, no person or people can achieve an absolute knowledge of His truth. This then points to the need for comparing any



local theology with other cultural theologies. Stephen Strauss asserts:

Because theologians’ context plays such a significant role in the way their theology is shaped and expressed, theologians from every culture need to be active in intercultural theologizing—learning from theologians of different cultures, socio-educational levels, theological traditions, and periods of history (2004:29).

However, I advocate that study of other (especially Western) theologies should occur in the concluding, not the beginning stages in the development of a contextual theology.

5. Contextual theology is incarnational in utilizing cultural forms and transformational in sanctifying their meanings.

We found extensive and astonishing use by the writers of inspired Scripture of local forms that have negative and unbiblical associations and high potential for miscommunication, distortion and even syncretism. Yet

the Holy Spirit shows little reluctance to adopt those familiar and relevant local forms and then sanctify them for His use in meaningful communication by filling them with new content. We should likewise appropriate local cultural forms and where necessary transform them by filling them with new meaning. Repeated teaching can reinforce the new meaning and reduce the danger of syncretism.

Gilliland declares,

The good news for people everywhere is that the Word became flesh and speaking contextually, the Word must become flesh again and again to each locale and for every people (1989:52).

Therefore, we “cannot demand that people accept what is alien to them or what they do not understand” (1989:58).

A Sample of Contextual Theology

At this point, our theoretical understanding of this challenging topic can be illuminated through some illustrations of contextual theology. Recalling the theological challenges that I mentioned at the outset of this paper, I will now sketch the outlines of some proposals for developing more appropriate theology for Arab Muslims.

1. A Theology of the Land.

God offered the Land to His chosen people, Israel, as an eternal inheritance, through an irrevocable, unconditional covenant made with Abraham (as in Genesis chapters 12 and 15). However, their right to experience the blessing of living in the Land depended on their faithfulness to God, as outlined in the Mosaic Covenant. Deuteronomy 28-29 promised both blessings and curses for Israel. If they failed to fulfill the conditions of righteousness stipulated in the Mosaic law (such as keeping the Sabbath holy or treating aliens justly), then they would forfeit their promised right to occupy the Land until they repented. This is exactly what transpired in their Exile to Babylon. They were scattered again after the nation rejected Jesus as Messiah; until the nation

repents of this (and “mourns for him whom they pierced” (Zechariah 12: 10) the current state of Israel has no biblical claim to occupy the Land—only a human one).⁸

2. Arab identification with Ishmael.

Contrary to the American evangelical perception of Ishmael as one of the “bad guys of the Bible”, a convincingly positive picture of Ishmael is presented by an Arab Christian scholar,⁹ God made a covenant concerning him that unlike his mother Hagar who was “under the hand” of her mistress and separated from her people, he would be as free as the prized wild donkey, unconquered by neighbors, and would dwell in the presence of (to the east) of his brother Israel, so as to be the first nation to behold the glory of God when the Light shone upon Israel.

3. The “Son of God” as a Title of Jesus

In Western theology “Son of God” refers to the second person of the Trinity and its being applied to Jesus is cited as proof of his deity. However, in biblical usage it is primarily used to signify that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s anointed ruler over Israel and His kingdom. Thus, it can usually be translated as “Christ” or “Messiah” or “Lord.”¹⁰

4. The Trinity

Muslims are aggravated by the Arabic term for Trinity (*thaluth*) that they understand as tri-theism that compromises the unity of God—the supreme value in Islamic theology! We might instead use the term *tawhid mu’aqad* (complex unity). When pressed to explain the logic of this complex unity, we would not use Western theological formulations, but rather the approach of an Eastern Christian, John of Damascus, the ancient Arab apologist to the Muslims. John asked the Muslims, “Who existed first: God, His Spirit, or His Word?” Though a Muslim might instinctively reply “God,” John explained that if God was at any time without His Word or Spirit, He would be imperfect and thus not God. God’s Spirit and Word were with him from the beginning, and will remain with Him forever, yet He is One God. The fact that

‘Isa is called the Word of God in the Qur’an is a natural bridge to revealing his eternity in John’s Gospel (1:1). Moreover, we take advantage of Islam’s belief that the Qur’an is the eternal uncreated word of God, yet was revealed as a Book on earth. Similarly, we can argue that that uncreated Word of God of John 1:1 became flesh (John 1:14).

5. Ways of Expressing Theology

Western ways of theologizing fail to employ indigenous stories, illustrations, values, patterns of thinking, and forms of expression. Rather than translating our systematic theologies, theology should be expressed in more appropriate forms, such as commentaries, sermons, proverbs, stories, poetry, songs, anthologies, analogies, metaphors, drama and oratory. Biblical theology (teaching the narratives and major themes of biblical writings) should be our initial approach to theology. Even historical theology would likely be more appropriate than systematic. Furthermore, theology can be expressed as spiritual pilgrimage and transformation through biographies of the saints, including some of the Muslim saints—like the Sufi mystic al-Hallaj who inspired the French orientalist Massignon to follow Christ.

Rather than starting with the New Testament, we might begin the Old; for like the Hebrews, the Arabs are Semites—not just ethnically, but linguistically, culturally, and religiously. Analyzing the Hebrews’ theological thought as expressed in the books of the Old Testament gives us helpful clues for theologizing in Arab contexts. Old Testament wisdom literature such as Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job could be the entry point for the Muslim’s theological study, followed by examination of the great narrative books of the Bible. Our central message should be the teaching of Christ in the four Gospels, not the epistles. Semitic writers like James, Peter, John, and Jude should be given priority over the Pauline epistles that were directed to more Hellenistic audiences.

Conclusion

This paper has introduced the need for contextual theology in mission. Having examined the biblical, historical, and missiological grounds for contextualized communication, along with illustrations of it appropriate to Arab Muslim contexts, my hope is that each of you will pursue the development of appropriate mission theology in your own contexts. **IJFM**

Questions for discussion

1. As result of Western missionaries bringing the Gospel to Korea, can you see parts of their theology that were not appropriate, meaningful, or relevant to Korean society or culture?
2. Are there Koreans today who reject Christianity as alien or contrary to traditional Korean culture? How could we contextualize the Gospel for them?
3. What needs to happen in order for Korean missionaries to more effectively contextualize theology in non-Korean mission contexts?

Endnotes

¹ A convincing corrective to this picture of Ishmael is presented by an Arab Christian scholar, Tony Maalouf, in *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003).

² When the apostles preached to the gentiles in Acts, their hearers would have had in mind the common pagan notions in regard to *theos*. But employing the same term, they corrected their misconceptions about Him—as we see Paul did with the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17: 23-31).

³ If we substitute the word “Christians” for “Jews” and “Muslims” for “gentiles” the above quotation would describe the unwittingly accepted development of Christian syncretism that is so prevalent in Arab Muslim contexts today. In our zeal to avoid syncretism and compromise we too often have promoted another type of syncretism—that of expecting or requiring Muslims to forsake their own forms and adopt those of our Christian culture. Our attitude toward believers from Islam is very much like the first century Jewish believers’ toward gentile believers.

⁴ By a similar Christianizing of Arab Muslims, we perpetuate this heresy of requiring proselyte conversion to our own cultural heritage.

⁵ Contrast this with Islam's stance against the translatability of the Qur'an and its insistence of performance of the prayers in Arabic by non-Arabs.

⁶ I use "the West" or "Western" in the modern sense when applied to mission theologians coming from North America and Europe. It could also include the Orthodox churches that were founded in Greek thought. Even churches outside the West that were founded by Western missions tend to be Westernized in many ways.

⁷ Though the missionary is a cultural outsider, he has a critical role. Since indigenous theological thinking cannot properly occur without a contextually appropriate translation of the Bible, there is a role for outsiders in contextual theologizing related to its translation. Moreover, the great commission commands outsiders to disciple and teach insiders. The Apostle Paul exemplifies this essential role of the outsider in his theologizing (which we have as his inspired epistles) to meet the pastoral needs of the churches that he, as an outsider, had planted. His most important task is to train the locals to theologize themselves. Furthermore, those who ultimately develop local theology must correlate it to the faith of the one universal church (Eph. 4); the informed outsider theologian's knowledge should be beneficial for this.

⁸ Mark Harlan, "A Middle Way in the Middle East: a third theological path through the Israeli-Palestinian thicket" at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/004/5.84.html>.

⁹ Tony Maalouf, *Arabs in the Shadow of Israel* (Kregel: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2003).

¹⁰ Observe how the two titles of Christ in Peter's confession in Mt. 16: 16 "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" are contextualized by Luke for a gentile audience by the one term "the Christ of God" (Lk. 9:20). Refer to Rick Brown's articles in the IJFM: "The Son of God—Understanding the Messianic Titles of Jesus," (2000) and "Explaining the Biblical Term 'Son(s) of God' in Muslim Contexts" (2005).

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