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RESEARCH ARTICLE

CHRISTIAN GOSPEL AND CULTURE: IT'S RELEVANCE IN LOCAL CULTURES

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Abstract

Western Christianity has been a poor representation for the Christian faith and its message particularly in Asian context. While we discuss about the Gospel, Culture and their conflicts in Missions, we must not lose sight of the sovereignty of God. Christianity is a universal faith intended for the whole world. Understanding of faithful contextualization is the primacy of the gospel. A mission should look to disciple the nations by "teaching them to observe all that [the Lord] commanded" (Matt. 28:20) in a culture-sensitive way. In this context this research article attempts to review the various approaches used to conduct cross cultural missions with an aim to help the reader to realise the need for Africanising or Asianising Christianity than the Christianise Africa or Asia or a similar approach to the rest of the world.

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Introduction:-

Culture

Culture is the combination of the languages, customs, beliefs, rules, arts, knowledge, and collective identities and memories developed by members of all social groups that make their social environments meaningful. It further covers the ideologies, practices, tastes, values, and norms as well as in collective representations and social classifications. Culture, therefore, can be defined as what groups of people feel, think, say and do. It takes into account linguistic, political, economic, social, psychological, religious, national, racial, and still other differences.

Some of the characteristics of Culture are that it (1) learned, (2) it is a shared system (3) It is an integrated whole, (4) It constantly changes. There are no cultural persons. In fact, for any individual his or her culture is more important than such factors as race, nationality, and gender in determining how that person will think, feel, and act.

Western Christianity

Western Christianity is a poor advertisement for the gospel. Often materially-driven, frequently offensive to poorer countries, and sometimes created hurdles in reaching out to them; a significant part of what is considered as biblical Christianity in the West today is far from the Bible's teaching in some vital respects and it was also the result syncretism of their pagan culture.

M.A.C Warren observed in the introduction to Taylor's Primal vision, that Christian missionaries earlier commonly assumed that "Western Civilization and Christianity" were two aspects of the same gift which they were commissioned to offer to the rest of the world. In the process they forgot that, the people they were converting were held in high esteem in their own customs, traditions, and religious beliefs.

Sometimes, it resulted in these converts to accept European customs, an abandonment of social customs, complete withdrawal from their society, separation from one's parents and relatives and a transfer of political allegiance to new European authorities. This social and cultural separation meant that many families and many other traditional social units were destroyed. This was an area of inherent contradiction and confrontation. Christianity changed their diet, introduced new tastes, altered marriage concepts, and customs, burial and funeral rites, and other aspects of family and community life.

Further Newbigin says that Western Modern Christianity itself is at advanced stage of syncretism. In fact he calls for a 'missionary encounter' between the gospel and modern western culture.

Gospel , Culture & Its Relationship In Missions

The gospel and culture are closely interrelated in our understanding of God's word, our communication of it and the kind of response our listeners provide. There is nothing like a culture-free gospel, a gospel that can be disembodied and lifted up as the pure gospel. The problem in the concept of text and context is that we do not have a pure, simple text, but only a text within a context. It is not at all easy to distinguish between what is culturally conditioned and what is not.

In Old Testament times, people praised God with "joyful noise," "with timbrel and dance," and "with loud clashing cymbals" (Ps. 98; 150, RSV). New Testament Christians of Hellenic culture expressed their praise in much more sober forms. Similar differences are characteristic of Christian worship today. Some make a "joyful noise" in loud singing, clapping even dancing etc while others prefer worship more characterized by "silence before the Lord."

I would like to summarise here under differing practices observed in various Churches worldwide.

(a) take off their shoes when they enter the sanctuary; (b) women wear hats in some churches, (c) men and women sit in separate areas of the sanctuary (d) those preaching from the pulpit absolutely must wear suits and ties no matter how hot it is. Others allow a formal shirt open at the neck (e) in some churches no gold or silver be worn in any form, (f) In some, the women not wear pants, and always cover their arms and legs, never cut or curl their hair, and enter the sanctuary behind their husbands or fathers (g) In other areas women enter the sanctuary first, and in yet others they may wear certain "ornaments" as part of their dress in honor of God and celebration of their salvation in Christ (h) In some countries, Churches who marry non-Church members are disfellowshipped. (i) In some areas Churches celebrate Christmas with all the trappings required by the local culture, and (j) In some areas Churches regard dating, holding hands, and even kissing in public as acceptable Christian behaviour. In others they reject these practices as outrightly immoral, even adulterous.

None of these forms of worship can, in themselves, be considered more devotional, more worshipful, than any others. They are all biblical. God expects us to express our awe and praises in forms that fits our own culture. He wants the church to be a place where people feel at home. No one church, therefore, has the right to superimpose its own particular cultural forms upon sister churches in other cultures.

As all history of mission teaches us clearly, the greatest barriers to the advance of the gospel and to a rapid growth of the church are not religious but social and cultural! Unless a church couches the eternal gospel in the language, thinking manner, behavior, and values, of the people it is trying to reach, and unless it allows them to express their response to the gospel in their own cultural ways, there will be no universal mission and effective church growth.

Judaism failed to reach out in this way. That's why it never became a worldwide missionary movement. A similar situation threatened the missionary outreach of the early Christian church. Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile believers express their response to God in Jewish cultural ways. Of course, like most people, rather than realizing that these expressions were cultural, they considered them part of the whole divine revelation.

Like no other in the early church, the apostle Paul again and again, in deed and in word, powerfully pleaded for this freedom, nay, this right of believers from different cultures to experience and to express their newly won faith in Christ in terms of their own culture. Paul drove home his point with the question, "How can you compel the Gentiles to live like the Jews?" (Gal. 2:14, RSV).

The lack of progress in Africa, where the church had the potential of reaping large harvests through people movements toward Christ, it was reported to a leading missionary in Africa: "Too many of the methods and habits and fashions have been transported from America to Africa, and the result is not favorable."

In one of the East Asian country with very little growth, a worker from the West remarked that, "If we [missionaries] would all leave, the church here would soon become a heathen Adventist church." To that, a national church leader replied, "As long as you [Westerners] are here, we will never have a church where we feel at home."

Due to the lack of indigenization that the work in China could not advance and the church had practically collapsed. Everything was transplanted from America. The church had no roots in the cultural soil of that country's hundreds of millions of people. Now the church in China is entirely a native plant. And its growth is explosive.

The encounter between gospel and culture is a process. Christians in India are considered as foreign agents, as they follow the Western Christian cultural practices which are very different from the people of other faiths. Robert de Nobili (1577 - 1656) He used a novel method of adaptation (accommodation) to preach Christianity, adopting many local customs of India which were, in his view, not contrary to Christianity. Though his methods were not appreciated, it provided an impetus to several Indian thinkers. Later, Brahmabandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907), Sadhu Sunder Singh (1889-1929) Abbe Jules Monchanin later known as Swami Parama Arupi Anandam (1895-1957) and Dom Henri Le Saux, known as Swami Abhishiktananda (1910-1973) attempted at least at the intellectual level, to live their Christian faith in the Indian tradition.ⁱ Others saw all these efforts of acculturation as 'hinduisation' rather than 'indigenization'.

Wesley Ariarajah points out that the Nairobi Assembly (1975) made significant contribution in resolving some of these conflicts between gospel and culture.ⁱⁱ

Models Of Cross Cultural Missions – Past & Present

Various Terms & Methods: **Let us analyse some of the methods used in the past are being used currently in the Cross Cultural Missions.**

1. Syncretism: Religious **syncretism** exhibits blending of two or more religious belief systems into a new system, or the incorporation into a religious tradition of beliefs from unrelated traditions.
2. Enculturation: David J. Bosch considers inculturation as the continuation of the work of Jesus Christ through the community of his disciples, so that every culture can be transformed into the kingdom realityⁱⁱⁱ. Michael Amaladoss asserts that "enculturation points to the need for every church to be an authentic local church, in which a community of people can respond freely to the gospel in a creative and relevant manner without importing, unnecessary, symbolic structures from elsewhere, which alienate them from their own culture and context"^{iv}.
3. Ecumenism: is the principle or aim of promoting unity among the world's Christian Churches. In the context of conflicting cultures, caste identities, marginalization of the poor and the weak, a 'wider ecumenism' will provide a direction towards the unity between cultures.
4. Ethnographers : Spradley explains that ethnographers combine formal training and field experience in such a way as to "learn from people" rather than "studying people."^v
5. Indigenisation: Foreign **missionaries** do not create churches, but simply help local converts develop their own spiritual gifts and leadership abilities and gradually develop their own churches. **Missionaries** provide teaching and pastoral care alone. The church is thus indigenous from the start.
6. Ethnocentrism: **During the 19th century the missionary movement exhibited an ethnocentrism: the western form of the gospel was considered to be normative. All other cultural expressions of the Christian faith were judged by western patterns.**
7. Relativism : According to the Church and to some theologians, **relativism**, as a denial of absolute truth, leads to moral license and a denial of the possibility of sin and of God. Whether moral or epistemological, **relativism** constitutes a denial of the capacity of the human mind and reason to arrive at truth.
8. Possession: Bavinck says, **we would . . . prefer to use the term possessio, to take possession, as opposed to the common terms adaptation and accommodation.** The Christian life does not accommodate or adapt itself to heathen forms of life, but it takes the latter in possession and thereby makes them new. (Bavinck 1960:178-179).
9. Subversive Fulfillment : **Kraemer uses the term —subversive fulfillment and in the same way we could speak of subversive accommodation. Words from the traditional culture and religion must be used, but**

they must be converted in the way in which Paul and John converted Greek philosophical and religious concepts (Visser 't Hooft 1967:13)

10. Contextualization: God's self-revelation was uniquely linked to actual history, the history of a chosen nation that belonged to a particular culture, time and geographical region. It was in history and through history that God showed himself. It was the history of God's patient dealings with them for over a period of some thousand years. God had to work with their capacity to understand their language and their cultural background. This is contextualisation in the true sense. Contextualisation of the gospel is all about both the convergence of, and the encounters between, the story of God's present deeds among all peoples, the biblical history of God's redemptive work in Christ, the story of the evangelist, and the story of those being evangelised.

Analysis of the Challenges to various concepts:

J. H. Bavinck disdains the term accommodation (and, by implication, adaptation also?) because it "connotes something of a denial or a mutilation."^{vi} James O. Buswell accepts the term contextualization but feels that it does not necessarily represent an improvement on the older terms indigenous, indigeneity, and indigenization in every case.^{vii} Whatever may have been the occasion of the very first usage of the word "**contextualization**," it made its public debut in World Council of Churches (WCC) circles. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical moment of nations in the Third World. However we should be careful about the distinction between authentic and false forms of contextualization. **False contextualization** yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture faith. **Authentic contextualization** is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God's Word and His world,^{viii}

To avoid Twin problems of syncretism and irrelevance

The evangelist must use the language of the hearers. Yet that language uses terms that reflect the worldview by which the hearers make sense of their world. The Tamil language, for example, is a shared way of understanding the world that reflects Hindu faith commitments. As such it expresses commitments that are irreconcilable with the gospel. Therefore, there will be a clash of ultimate commitments between the gospel and Hindu culture.

Newbigin employs the notion of challenging relevance and subversive fulfillment to avoid both syncretism and irrelevance. Of the gospel of John, Newbigin writes: He says that John in his Gospel uses the language and thought-forms of the Hellenistic world that Gnostics in all ages have thought that the book was written especially for them.

Faithfulness to the Scriptural Story

Newbigin's understanding of faithful contextualization is the primacy of the gospel: the affirmation that the church begins by attending to the story of Scripture as its ultimate commitment, understanding the culture in the context of the Biblical story. (Newbigin 1989:151). Essential for faithful contextualization is (1) proper understanding of the nature of Scripture. (2) It is not simply a rational matter of starting with Scriptural truth but rather a matter of the believing community —indwelling and embodying the story of Scripture. (3) Finally it requires a church that discerns the word of grace and the word of judgement that the gospel pronounces on culture.

Ecumenical Dialogue:

Avoiding Ethnocentrism and Relativism

Faithful contextualization requires a dialogue that moves beyond cultural boundaries. This dialogue must be —open to the witness of churches in all other places, and thus saved from absorption into the culture of that place and enabled to represent to that place the universality, the catholicity of God's purpose of grace and judgement for all humanity (Newbigin 1989:152). At present dialogue takes place in the context of only one cultural tradition of the church—the West:

Mutual Correction and Enrichment :

Newbigin points to another possibility for mutual correction and enrichment in the cross cultural missionary. The gospel comes to the Hindu embodied in the form given to it by the culture of the missionary. . . . As second and third and later generations of Christians make their own explorations in Scripture, they will begin to test the Christianity of the missionaries in the light of their own reading of the Scripture.

Other challenges from Contextualization:**Contextualised Challenge to Culture: the Prophets**

The prophets in Old Testament received the word of God and communicated it to people orally, in symbolic actions, and in writing. They worked in a wide variety of contexts. They spoke in powerful similes, metaphors and pictorial images. The prophets incarnated God's message in their lives. One sublime illustration of this was Hosea marrying a harlot to show the deep pain and love of Yahweh for Israel. Because their messages were delivered in their own cultural form and through their own experience, they had powerful impact in challenging their culture.

The Ethics of Contextualisation:

There are several unethical practices that crept into the missionary work through Contextualisation. Examples include (i) Nigerian Mallams where for financial benefits, they reported conversions. (ii) Converts who behave like Muslims in Bangladesh, during Western relief Agency Operations there (iii) British Missionary in Nigeria, Cultural adaptation and making mockery of their cultures, by wearing the typical Nigerian man's clothing, would present a very dirty and ragged appearance, tied his shoes with rope etc (iv) Providing developmental services in impoverished societies, without being interpreted as bribery (v) Despite conversions maintaining ethnicity like the tragedy of the Tutsis and Hutus in Rwanda and other examples, including the Ibo and Yoruba and the Dukawa and Kambari of Nigeria. (vi) Western preachers equate prosperity with the gospel, in impoverished countries (vii) Young converts are often required to go back to the village when their fathers die and perform the traditional fetish ceremonies. If they fail to do so, they are expelled from their community. (viii) Mass conversions like in Sokoto State (Nigeria) has resulted in whole families turning to Christ, starting with the head of the family. How can we know the sincerity of the conversion of the rest of the family?

Approaches used to study other cultures :

The various approaches used over the past several centuries to study the other cultures can be summarized as under. Ted Ward says that there was a time when it was thought that the basis of cross-cultural effectiveness was natural.

1. Natural (or supernatural) selection— i.e., a person either had or did not have this ability. After it became apparent that one could learn how to function effectively in another culture, various learning approaches were developed.^{ix}
2. The "informational" (study) approach became prominent in the late 1960s. Indebted to classical learning, those who advocated this approach assumed that if one has enough information about the second culture it will be easier to live and work in it.
3. The "training" (experiential) approach of the 1970s shifted the emphasis to actual involvement. To be effective one needs to begin the acculturation process, and this is made possible by purposefully going into cross-cultural situations (often in groups) and observing, questioning, testing, and analyzing.
4. The "learning" (balanced) approach of the 1980s sought to unify these perspectives and to balance information and skills by learning through intracultural and intercultural activities
5. The "encounter" (nontechnical) approach that has been most recently proposed by some is really a more
6. Three Culture (Triangular) Model^x:
7. "Bible culture" (triangular in our model) includes all cultural contexts in which the message of the Bible was originally given,
8. Missionary Culture: The missionary himself is a citizen of a quite different culture, He has likely received the Christian message in the context of that culture
9. Target Culture: The missionary has been sent to a people in still another culture with its own sources, messages, and respondents.
10. Missionary task is to attempt to understand/interpret the message intended by the Holy Spirit and human authors of the biblical text and then to explain/communicate that message in a way that is meaningful and persuasive to respondents in the context of their culture.

Way Forward

Biblical Christianity, requires change at the deeper levels of values, beliefs, and worldview.

What we need today is a collaboration of gospel, culture and missions. This relationship must be based on mutual trust and contribution to each other with respect. In obedience to the Word of God, they should recommit themselves to praxis-oriented partnership that will strengthen the communities in which they belong. We have come to a point today that we no longer can Christianise any culture; rather Christians can work for the gospel challenges every

culture to transformation. "The option for the church today is not embodiment, but dialogue, which is ready to receive as well as to give."^{xi}

A high view of the Bible and a high view of culture.

McGavran in his book "The Clash between Christianity and Cultures", attempts to resolve the "high-low" debate in a logical and biblical way. (1) A high view of the Bible and a low view of culture. (2) A high view of culture and a low view of the Bible. (3) A low view of the Bible and a low view of culture. (4) A high view of the Bible and a high view of culture. McGavran urges missionaries to take the fourth option: a high view of the Bible and a high view of culture.

Conclusion:-

Charles Kraft is right in insisting that the missionary must "exegete" culture, not just the Bible. Only then can he disciple the nations by "teaching them to observe all that [the Lord] commanded" (Matt. 28:20) in a culture-sensitive way.^{xii} Instead of Christianising Africa or Asia, the missionaries must look for Africanising or Asianising Christianity. The main focus should be that God became visible in Africa / Asia through Christ and the Spirit in the different cultures. The main objective of all this should be the glorification of this God. We may consider the following four points for this purpose. (1) Move From Western Cultural Superiority to Biblical Cultural Relativism (2) Move from Planting Multinational Institutions to **Planting Indigenous, Contextualized Churches** (3) **From Conversion as Implying Cultural Discontinuity to Conversion as Involving Worldview** and (4) **From Inadequate Training Models to More Thorough Missiological Training.**

In conclusion, I would, like to urge all Christians, Churches and Missions worldwide to give serious thought to the God's will. More than the multinational missions, we need multiple grassroots movements of God's people seeking the fresh winds of His spirit, renewed vision and passion, and an impact on lives and cultures for the glory of God. Amen !!!

End Note

ⁱ M.M.Thomas and P.T.Thomas, Towards an Indian Christian Theology: Life and Thoughts of some pioneers, Tiruvalla: The New Day Publications of India, 1992.

ⁱⁱ S.Wesley Ariarajah, Gospel and Culture: An Ongoing Discussion within the Ecumenical Movement, Geneva: WCC Pub., 1994

ⁱⁱⁱ David J.Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts. in Theology and Mission, Mary Knoll: Orbis Books, 1994, pp.447-457.

^{iv} Ibid .• p.17

^v Cf. James P. Spradley, The Ethnographic Interview (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979); idem, Participant Observation (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980). P 3

^{vi} John Herman Bavinck, An Introduction to the Science of Missions, trans. David H. Freeman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 179.

^{vii} James O. Buswell HI, "Contextualization: Theory, Tradition, and Method," in David J. Hesselgrave, ed., Theology and Mission (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 87 -111.

^{viii} Ministry in Context, 20

^{ix} Ted Ward, Living Overseas (New York: Free Press; London: Collier, Macmillan, 1984). p 199

^x Eugene A. Nida, God's Word in Man's Language (New York: Harper & Row, 1952), 45 -46.

^{xi} Michael Amaladoss, Beyond Inculturation: Can the Many be One?, Delhi: Vidyajyoti & ISPCK, 1998, p.16

^{xii} Kraft, Christianity in Culture, 1979, 360 -66.