

# **Contextualization: A New Missionary Approach To Muslims**

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This text examines how modern Christian missions target Muslims using a strategy called contextualization. It explains how missionaries adapt to Muslim culture, language, and practices to reduce resistance. The study presents theological debates around this method and outlines its risks, including syncretism. Historical examples and missionary guidelines are analysed in depth. The text highlights the challenges of applying Christian concepts within Islamic societies. It warns that such efforts may distort both Islam and Christianity.

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# **Contextualization: A New Missionary Approach to Muslims**

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Christian evangelism, despite consistent organized effort in the Muslim world since the beginnings of the colonial era, has made little progress. The turnout of the resources put in is so low that according to statistics reported by Church sources, on the average one Christian priest in his entire life achieves one convert from Islam.

Unable to reverse the tide of paganism and materialism in its quarters, due to its own inherent

theological weakness, Christianity has been struggling to expand in Africa and Asia. While believing Christians have become a diminishing minority in the West itself, Church authorities have looked hopefully to Africa and Asia, encouraged by the high illiteracy rates and rampant poverty there, both of which are a legacy of the colonial era during which the Christian countries devastated these lands.

Reportedly, Muslims have increased in the last fifty years by 235%, whereas the corresponding increase in the Christian world has been 47% a figure which includes the statistical Christians of the capitalist world as well as the populations of the Eastern European countries of the communist bloc. The high population growth rates in Muslim countries as well as the world-wide resurgence of Islam in recent years have deeply disturbed Christian organizations, leading them to devise new missionary approaches to Muslims. One of such approaches, which is more an antic than evangelism, is 'contextualization'.

Modern Christian missions started their activities in the 16th century and entered alien lands, including the Crescent, under the umbrella of colonial powers. In African animistic societies missions achieved encouraging results. However, in countries like India and China, the homelands of great ancient civilizations, Hinduism and Buddhism, Christian missions failed badly. The Crescent proved more barren.

If Christianity was able to win a few converts from the Crescent, at the same time, it yielded many of its adherents to Islam. However, the failure of the missions did not benight their ardency and sanguinity. Missionaries have been in search of new methods for Muslim outreach. Their newest discovery is contextual approach which has been much debated in some theological books and journals which throw ample light on its theological and practical implications.

## **Arguments For Contextualization**

The term 'contextualization' as a specific missionary term came to the fore in 1972 when the Theological Educational Fund (TEF), sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC), published its report "Ministry in Context", in which churches were strongly urged to introduce some radical reforms in theological education'. Since then, there has been heated controversy representing a very wide divergence of opinion on the issue. However, it has been used in some parts of the world as a successful method for missionary outreach and this has imparted to it further significance and validity.

In 1972, contextuality was a somewhat complicated nuclear concept. However, in 1988, after a period of sixteen years in which it has been much debated, it looks somewhat comprehensible, though some serious practical questions still remain. Is it a new terminology to express the old concept of indigenization or does it mean something: more or is it a totally new concept? And if it is fairly a new terminology, how can it be defined and what are the parameters to distinguish it from being a syncretism? These are some of the questions which, figure in all discussions.

Indigenization and contextualization, in fact, are not contradictory to each other. However, the later has a wider meaning than the former. The concept of an indigenous church came to the fore in the nineteenth

century when Christianity was severely criticized as the white man's religion in Africa and charged with foreignness in Asia.

As the Africans and Asians were required to embrace the paganized Christianity of Europe and denounce their own culture and with the local churches under the direct control of the white foreigners, who were obsessed with a sense of racial superiority and administrative wisdom, the aforesaid Afro-Asian criticism contained a great deal of truth. Moved by such 'allegations' some church leaders, determined to bring some dignity to the national and regional churches, and conceived the idea of an indigenous church. Indignity was then defined as to establish a self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating native church. Much the same idea was expressed in 1938 when the Madras Conference defined indigenization as follows:

An indigenous church, young or old, in the East or in the West, is a church, rooted in obedience to Christ, spontaneously uses forms of thought and modes of action natural and familiar in its own environment.<sup>1</sup>

However, it should be quite clear that such a native church will remain very much an inseparable part of the universal church. Indigenization, in fact, includes three things: "(1) relatedness to the soil-ability to make elements of local churches captive to Christ; (2) possession of an adequately trained ministry, a ministry adapted to local requirements; (3) an inner spiritual life, nurturing the Christian community, witnessing to the unevangelized."<sup>2</sup>

Contextualization includes, in sum, all that is implied in indigenization and a bit more. It is, in fact, an activity to engage in constructing or developing a national theology or making Christianity relevant to a provided group of people. Kato remarks:

We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation .... Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.<sup>3</sup>

In "Contextualization: Theory, Tradition and Method", Buswell proposes to break down the term into three categories: "contextualization of the Witness, contextualization of the church and its leadership and contextualization of the Word".<sup>4</sup> Contextualization of the Witness, Buswell explains, is a kind of inculturation, that is "to make the Gospel message intelligible in the idiom of the language and culture of the receivers".<sup>5</sup> Buswell finds no significant difference between contextualization and indigenization. To contextualize the church and its leadership means to indigenize both.

Contextualization of the Word, according to Buswell, implies translation of the Logos and doing an ethno theology in the context of this or that ethnic group. Buswell further adduces his point of view by quoting Flonde Efele.

To Africanize Christianity cannot be an occasion for prefabricating a new theology. The purpose of the

Pan–African movement or African theology is to promote an African expression of the interpretation of the Gospel.[6](#)

Bruce Fleming, another missiologist, explains contextualization with reference to the following three terms: supra cultural, Trans cultural and cultural.[7](#) Supra cultural, Fleming explains, is the framework revealed in the Scripture. In other words, it is the Biblical Christianity and truth that can never be compromised during the course of cross–cultural communication. While Christian experiences learnt through history, Christian tradition are termed 'trans cultural', 'cultural' simply implies the construction or development of a native Christian theology.

However, Charles R. Taber offers a more lucid definition. “Contextualization”, he says, “is the 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”. Thus, contextualization for Taber is “to discover in the Scripture what God is saying to these people”. “In other words”, Taber adds, “Contextualization 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”.[8](#)

Contextualization is, no doubt, a fairly new missionary term. However, its germs are found in the past, especially in the life and activity of the early Church. St. Paul, in particular, was a perfect contextualized preacher. He expresses, in fact, a contextual theology and approach when he says:

I am a free man, nobody's slave; but I make myself everybody's slave in order to win as many people as possible.[9](#)

As the Jews were reluctant to give up their Law, Paul did not demand that they abandon it. Instead, he acknowledged their world–view and invited them to believe in Jesus without abandoning the Torah. He dealt with the Gentiles in a similar way when he took the Gospel to them. The Law and other Jewish traditions were absolutely repugnant to the pagans; so Paul abolished the Law for the sake of their conversion. He held that Biblical Christianity was not related to any particular culture. The basic Christian truth is one: faith in Christ. Whoever accepts this truth enters the Christian fold, whatever his culture.

The Church seems to have been conscious of the significance of a contextual approach throughout its history. In the days long past, in 1659, the Roman Papacy had prepared some instructions and guidelines for Christian missionaries working in China which anticipate contextuality:

Do not regard it as your task and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples to change their manners, customs and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy or some other European country to China? ... Do not draw invidious contrasts between the customs of the peoples and those of Europe; do your utmost to adapt yourself to them.[10](#)

The last of the Papal instructions: “do your utmost to adapt yourself to them” is, in fact, the core of the contextualized witness. It involves respect and love extended to the local culture and customs. Furthermore, a missionary is required not only to respect the national culture but to identify with and adapt himself to it as much as possible.

A far better example of contextuality is, however, found in the personality and work of Robert de Nobili (1577–1665), an Italian Jesuit of noble birth who arrived in India in 1605. Within a few months of his arrival, he learnt Tamil, one of the four ancient Dravidian languages, on the Fisher Coast.

He then went to Madurai, then a great centre of Tamil thought, literature and culture. There were already some missionaries in Madurai and a church functioning under the leadership of Father Fernandez, a Portuguese Jesuit. These missionaries were working along the traditional lines they had inherited from Goa, the centre of the Catholic mission in India. Their manners and customs were purely European, hence alien and quite abhorrent to the Indians. These missionaries mistook the European culture as an inseparable part of the Christian faith which made it impossible for affluent and higher Indian castes to embrace it.

Nobili observed the weaknesses of the Catholic mission and the need for a new method for missionary outreach. He realized that the Brahmins could be evangelized only by way of an identification with their culture and life style. As a result, he cut himself off from the rest of the missionaries, studied the Brahmin culture, their prejudices and Tamil classics. Brahmins should not be asked, Nobili said, to abnegate the special privileges they had in the society or to give up their cultural habits unless they were obviously idolatrous. To identify with them Nobili became a Sanyasi guru, a priest and teacher who renounces the luxuries of the material world and adopts an ascetic way of life. As soon as he did so many Brahmins flocked to him to listen to his message. The resulting conversion was encouraging. He baptized several hundred Brahmins in Madurai, Trichinopoly and Salem.

However, Nobili's fellow missionaries were not happy with his method of evangelism and his toleration of certain Hindu taboos. They reported to the Holy Roman See “that he was tolerating Hindu superstition, that he was deceiving the people and that by segregating his converts, he was creating a schism in the Church.”<sup>11</sup> “Whether a deceiver, a hypocrite or the reverse of both let it be judged by theologians from the viewpoint of contextual theology he was a perfect contextualized preacher. As can be ascertained from the above discussion contextualization of the Gospel in any provided group is a risky and difficult task. It “requires a profound empirical analysis of the context in place of a flip or a priory judgment.”<sup>12</sup> This is the reason some theologians and missiologists, especially of the Third World, argue that nationals are best suited to do contextual theology. Foreign missiologists, even trained missionaries, often fail to understand the given situation and as a result commit serious mistakes.

Western missiologists are also divided on this issue. The findings of a survey conducted by the Association of Evangelical Professors of Mission runs:

Though the larger block of votes affirmed this (i.e. encouraging nationals to develop their own theologies) as desirable (27), a significant number were not sure (10), and a slightly large group (17) denied it. The combined total of the 'no' and 'not sure' equated that of the affirmative vote. [13](#)

However, both nationals and foreigners have been engaged in the task of developing contextual theology and approaches to reach the unreached.

Contextualization, as stated above, is a risky enterprise. For, if not carefully done, it might lead to syncretism. Apprehensive of it, many theologians have rejected the whole concept of contextualization and branded it as un-Christian. They believe that Christianity and Western culture are inseparable and Christianization necessarily warrants Westernization. However, the contextualists hold all such notions as baseless and un-Christian.

They point out that Western Christianity itself is paganized and its many postulates have no grounding in the Bible. However, with a view to overcoming the fear of syncretism, advocates of the contextual approach offer a theory of critical contextualization. It implies that every culture will be critically examined and all that is un-Biblical or contradictory to the basic Biblical teachings will be rejected. It naturally implies that whatever corresponds to the Christian truth will be accommodated and adjusted. Norman R. Ericson prescribes three criteria to contextualize the Gospel in given situations in a way that might reduce the possibility of syncretism:

1. "Truth. There is a body of truth which is assumed. This truth, whether implicit or explicit, forms the absolute standard by which everything must be evaluated.
2. Meaning. The Christians in society must so contextualize that the right meanings are delivered through the cultural forms and ideology. We must be continually aware that the meanings of actions or objects in Western society will not regularly have the same meanings in the Third World. The Christian must then be careful not to deliver the wrong meaning by his mode of behaviour or cultural participation. The question must always be asked: What does this mean to the people?
3. Communication. At the verbal-ideological level, consistent attention must be given to effectiveness. How is our Gospel communicated?... How are the people to know that God is love if there is no activity which in culturally meaningful ways demonstrates the love of God in the lives of the evangelizers. [14](#)

But the main and most important question, the contextualization of the Gospel message in a given Muslim society, remains unresolved. There are certain basic differences in the fundamental beliefs and world views of both Christianity and Islam. Islam believes in an uncompromising monotheism *par excellence*, whereas Christianity, though originally a monotheistic religion, has drifted into a trio: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Unlike the animistic and other religious communities and their cultures, Islamic culture is shaped, in large measure, by its faith in one God, the Hereafter and the institution of prophet hood, of which the final

member was our beloved Prophet Muhammad (S). The contextualization of the Gospel message in such a society will lead either to sheer syncretism or to the further distortion of Christianity.

However, the contextual theologians argue that such a pure Muslim society no longer exists in the world today. The existing Muslim societies are greatly influenced by animistic taboos and superstitions. They also differ from each other in life–style, language, dress, food, manners, attitudes, and even in certain beliefs. Along with these facts, the poverty, religious ignorance and widespread illiteracy of the Muslim world, missionaries believe, provide unprecedented opportunities to win the Muslims for Christ through contextualized witness.

## Requirements for a Contextual Missionary

With such ideas in mind, as mentioned above, contextual missiologists propose certain requirements for missionaries to be deputed to Muslims. They are, first of all, required to acquire some good attitudinal qualities. For the relationship between the two major world communities, Christians and Muslims, has been extremely strained in the past and at present it is not wholly good owing to several factors, especially the Palestinian and Jerusalem question.

There has been a spate of literature despising Islam, denigrating the Prophet (S) and defaming the Muslim world. It is therefore considered indispensable for all missionaries to be extremely different from common Westerners and to “abandon triumphalism and develop sincere respect, appreciation and sensitivity for all Muslim persons, for their faith and for their way of life”, [15](#) not because the Islamic faith merits such esteem and veneration but because it is an unavoidable necessity for genuine communication of the Gospel message to Muslim peoples. Hence no wonder that today some missionaries are found disregarding the medieval crusades, criticizing the excesses of the colonial period and the pioneer colonial missionaries and expressing their disapproval of Zionism and the official terrorism of the Israeli government.

**Language:** Acquiring the language of the target people is indispensable for a contextual missionary, because effective communication of the Gospel in a given situation is impossible without linguistic proficiency. There are certain other advantages. In most ethnic groups proficiency in the local language is regarded as veneration for and a complement to the culture, while improper language use, in certain cases, smacks of contempt and revilement of the culture. Expertise in the language of the target group also enables a missionary to avoid committing offence–instances of which are numerous–against the addressees and to evangelize them in the best way possible.

**Food:** Contextuality is involvement in an alien culture and adoption of its customs without compromising the basic Christian faith. It necessarily includes, among other things, food and dress, etc. Should the Americans and Europeans give up popular Western dishes like ham, bacon and pork–meat–all despicably unclean and prohibited for Muslims–and eat ipso facto dishes like curry, which is full of spices and chillies? It is not of course binding on any contextual missionary to do so, but if he does it is greatly

appreciated.

Missionaries are instructed to deal tactfully and politely with their target people in the matter of foods they find unbearable to eat and never to reject any foods or demand that the nationals give them up as being un-Christian. Rejection of one's food when offered in some Muslim societies is considered a most damaging insult. Missionaries must always be conscious of the fact that a society cannot be evangelized by way of denigration.

**Dress:** Contextual missionaries are generally encouraged to wear the local dress and to show veneration for it. Missionaries, especially women, usually strongly react when asked to put on Muslim-style clothes, especially a veil. However, women missionaries are strongly encouraged to overcome their objection to the veil and other 'conservative' dresses of the Muslim women in the interest of Gospel evangelism. For, missionaries believe, the women workers practicing *pardah* would receive an encouraging response from their Muslim sisters.

**Masjid-e 'Isa (Jesus Mosque):** According to the contextual missionaries, Muslims are hostile to every thing Christian and unless this hostility is reduced to a normal human relationship, no proper evangelism can take place. What irks Muslims most is a Christian church. Would it not be better, the contextualists propose, to call Christian churches 'Jesus mosques' or even erect a church on the pattern of a mosque. After enumerating many differences between a church and a mosque, Robert S. McClenahan remarks:

The whole construction, furnishing and conduct of the churches traditional and man-made, the ecclesiastical system, environment and organization, present many an occasion to dissuade, not to attract the Moslem, and to make him declare that if this is Christianity, then the farther he remains from it, the better. [16](#)

To solve this problem missionaries, present the idea of Jesus mosque which, they hope, would reduce the Muslims' abhorrence to the church. A Jesus mosque, the contextualists assert, is not un-Christian as the New Testament speaks of no particular directive to be observed regarding the outer form and structure of a church. The contextualists also say that there is no harm from the Biblical point of view in using a mosque or any such building for Christian service.

A Jesus mosque, if it ever comes into existence, would adopt everything from structure pattern to administration, which is considered, scripturally or traditionally, to be necessary for a mosque. A *masjid* by virtue of its meaning is a place of prostration. In its visible physical form, however, a *masjid* is the name attributed to some building constructed or adopted for offering prayers (*salat*) five times a day. Generally, it contains a *minbar*, the pulpit from where the Friday sermon is delivered, a place of ablution—the washing of prescribed parts of body which symbolically means the purification of the soul domes and minarets, but none of them are an essential part of the mosque. The only condition required for the erection of a mosque is that it should face Makkah (*Qiblah*). It is and should be simple as enjoined by the Prophet (S) and free from unnecessary decoration. It should be neat and clean where believers

come for no other purpose than the worship of God, their Maker and Lord.

A church, on the other hand, is a highly decorated building, with a cross up-front, elaborate setting of chancels, choirs, pulpit, pews, altar, baptistery, confessional, icons and images, but none of them are, of course, enjoined by Jesus or commanded in the Scripture. The Scripture's silence regarding the structure of—a cathedral or a church has been taken by the contextualists as unconditional permission to construct any kind of church, including one on a mosque-like pattern.

Likewise, the Scripture has set no particular forms for Christian service. Most of the forms practised by the Western churches are traditional and culture-oriented. The contextualists, especially the Third World theologians, argue that if Europe is free to develop its own forms of worship, why should a Muslim convert not be given the same freedom and right in order to pray to his Lord in his own familiar cultural form: *salat*. Bashir 'Abd al-Masih, a convert, remarks:

Muslim converts who state that their deepest experience of worship to Jesus is in kneeling with their heads to the ground are free to worship just that way, structuring their place of worship accordingly. [17](#)

Moreover, the contextualists say, the churches in Africa and India frequently use the local forms of worship. If they are accepted as Christian, why are Muslim forms of worship, like *salat*, rejected as false syncretism? However, if the *salat* is adopted as a Christian form of worship there would arise many a serious question. For instance, a Muslim offers his prayer five times a day and recites aloud three times some verses from the Holy Quran. What should the contextualized missionaries and Muslim converts do? Will they recite verses from the Bible? If so, in what language? The following answer was once suggested by a Muslim convert:

A catechism can be developed where Bible verses are recited at appropriate times during prayer. Verses which commence on standing, kneeling, bowing and prayer with uplifted hands can be spoken by the worshipper as he makes each change in position. This would give prayer a Biblical flavour rather than being a carbon copy of Western cultural forms. [18](#)

The whole emphasis in missionary literature is placed on efforts to find similarities between Friday prayer and Sunday worship. Sunday has come to be accepted—though not clearly commanded in the Bible—as the day of worship throughout the Christian world. However, according to the contextualists, it would not be a sin if a church, located in a Muslim community, chooses Friday as the day of worship. Again, the differences between Friday prayer and Sunday worship have not been properly discussed. In other words, means for the Christianization of Muslim Friday prayer have not been clearly worked out and many serious questions remain unresolved.

**Christian Fasting:** Fasting, one of the five pillars of Islam, is another obligatory Islamic worship. Ramadan, the ninth month of the Hijrah calendar, has been specified by God for keeping fast every day from dawn to sunset. The whole month is filled with spirituality throughout the Muslim world and stamps a profound influence on the believers. What should a contextualized missionary and Muslim converts still

living in a Muslim country do? Should they abstain from fasting as it has not been commanded in the Scripture? As in the past, traditional missionaries still ask converts not to fast in the month of Ramadan.

The convert is also to denounce the other forms of Islamic worship. However, the contextual missionaries, though they offer no dogmatic answer, exhort converts to fast to give an impression to the Muslims that Christians are not spiritually weak. With this purpose in mind, the contextualized missionaries have been observing the prescribed fast of Ramadan.

As a result, they have won appreciation from their neighboring Muslims. It is worth noting that in uneducated Muslim societies where Islam is mostly understood through the cultural norms of family or the society rather than the Quran and the Sunnah or where the populace depends greatly on their 'Ulama' (religious scholars) for guidance in religious affairs, such contextualized missionaries, often in the garb of a Muslim religious leader, have been highly successful, if not in winning converts, at least in minimizing the 'hostile and stern resistance' which, according to them, overwhelmingly characterizes the Muslim world.

**Bible Recitation:** The Muslims' love and reverence for the Quran and Quranic recitation is evident from the fact that in all parts of the Muslim world there are dedicated persons called *huffaz*, persons who have memorized the whole Quran. Good Muslims are supposed to read the Quran in Arabic, whatever their mother tongue. For this reason Muslim parents are anxious that their children should be taught to read the Quran properly. In recent years Quranic cassettes have become widely popular and this has further increased the Muslims' attachment to the Quran. Even persons unable to understand the Arabic language delight in listening to Quranic cassettes. Because the "efficacy of canonical prayers, litanies, invocations, etc. is contained not only in the content but also in the very sounds and reverberation of the sacred language."<sup>19</sup>

Observing Muslims' veneration for and interest in Quranic recitation missionaries working in the United Arab Emirates once proposed to prepare Biblical cassettes:

The oral communication of the Gospel in tape, radio or memorized form will probably best facilitate evangelization of the nomads. Expressive, poetic translations of the Scripture that can be chanted are needed to fully communicate to Koran-steeped Arab hearts.<sup>20</sup>

Whether Bible-cassettes have been prepared or not, it is quite evident that to what extent a contextual missionary can go to evangelize and convert Muslims to the Christian faith.

**Christian Ids:** Every group in the world has some religious or social and cultural festivals which are celebrated in a unique manner. Muslims celebrate two festivals, *'Id al-Fitr* and *'Id al-'Adha*. However, these festivals are purely of a religious nature, full of meaning and not just occasions provided for merry-making and exultation. It is suggested in missionary literature that the contextualized missionaries should celebrate the two Muslim festivals as Christian 'Ids. "On the Christian Id days," remarks a convert, "new clothes would be purchased for the family, a great feast would be served and special portions of food

would be allotted for the poor. The focus of the day would be a special open air church service where the Good News of the Gospel would be openly proclaimed.

In the light of what has been discussed in the preceding pages it can be said that contextualization of the Gospel in any provided group involves an in-depth study of its world-view, system of values and behavior.

This is the reason that both evangelicals and missiologists who advocate a contextual approach to Muslims urge the missionaries to. Make a comprehensive study of Islam and the world Muslim Ummah, especially of the group they choose to evangelize. Such an all-embracing study of Muslim culture and societies is held as a prerequisite for the missionaries who are to be deputed to some Islamic country.

Such a study, inter alia, enables a missionary to understand the differences between Islam and Christianity, of his culture and that of the target group and discern what the Gospel says to Muslim peoples in their own context. And this, in sum, is the contextual approach. A remarkable difference between the old traditional method of preaching and the contextual approach is that while in olden times missionaries went to the Muslim world with a sense of racial superiority, a different hostile culture and an easily distinguishable Christian message, attacking openly the 'falsity' of Islam, the backwardness of Muslims and demanding that they enter the Christian fold as a semi-European or American, in contextualized witness, on the contrary, Muslims are not required to give up their culture; the missionary himself changes and adapts to the Muslim culture, if not contradictory to the basic tenets of the Bible.[21](#)

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