

# Contextualization: *Transformational Triologue*

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## Introduction

For those working in mission in the Arab World, it seems that the debate about *contextualization* centers on the *C1-C6 Spectrums of Christ-centered Communities* as proposed by John Travis in 1998. Travis' scheme is widely recognized and used as a benchmark of contextualization by Evangelical missionaries in the Muslim World. It continues to be discussed as recently as the September-October 2005 issue of *Mission Frontiers*, as well as the Fall 2006 issue of *International Journal of Frontier Missions*. This article will not examine all the discussions that have taken place, but it wants to stimulate further discussion on the issue of contextualization.

This paper begins by outlining how, in circles of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and among Evangelical missiologists, the term *contextualization* is used differently. It then critically examines the C1-C6 approach to contextualization, and proposes an alternative approach that takes the role of the national Church and the concept of the Gospel's transforming role into greater consideration.

## 1 The usage of the term Contextualization

### 1. *Contextualization in the Ecumenical Movement*

This study discusses the parameters for proper contextualization of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the Arab World. Among missiologists and missionaries the concept and the limits of contextualization are at times hotly debated. One reason for this debate is that the word *contextualization* itself is, in the words of the leading South African missiologist David J. Bosch, a 'blanket term for a variety of theological models'.<sup>1</sup> Thus the term is often ambiguous when people debate the issue.

In the context of mission, the term *contextualization* was first used in the early 1970s in circles of the Theological Education Fund of the WCC.<sup>2</sup> It referred, broadly speaking, to the theological processes many non-Western churches were going through of reinterpreting the Gospel in terms of their own culture and situation in time.<sup>3</sup> This was especially relevant for churches that had been recently founded as a result of western Protestant mission work in Africa, Latin America and Asia. These indigenous churches re-thinking the implications of the Gospel for their own cultures can be seen as applying *theological decolonization*.

Bosch wrote that 'our entire context comes into play when we interpret a biblical text' therefore, all theology is by its very nature contextual. This means that theology cannot

present a supra-cultural 'pure' message.<sup>4</sup> All churches should be encouraged to write and rewrite their own theologies in an ongoing *trialogue* between the biblical revelation, themselves, and their culture. In Ecumenical circles the movement to contextualize the Gospel led to a focus on the *diversity* of Christianity as something to celebrate. As each people group was supposed to have its own contextualized understanding and implementation of the Gospel, there was suddenly no problem in being different as church communities.

Contextualization is legitimate and necessary for every society if the Gospel is to take root in that society and not to remain an imported pot plant. Bosch, however, was also cautious and warned that while contextualizing the Gospel, theologians must recognize its universal, supra-contextual, significance:

[There] are [italics by Bosch] faith traditions which all Christians share and which should be respected and preserved. [...] We therefore - along with affirming the essentially contextual nature of all theology - also have to affirm the universal and context-transcending dimensions of theology. [...] The best contextual theologies indeed hold on to this dialectic relationship.<sup>5</sup>

The 1990s have seen a reversal in that sole focus on diversity. Presently, interest is focused on the creation of *intercultural hermeneutics* whereby in the midst of the diversity of expressions of the Christian message, the emphasis is on the one Gospel that transcends and unifies Churches of all cultures. Beside that, there is also more focus on the idea that each culture must not only impact the understanding of the Gospel, but that the Gospel also puts all cultures under its prophetic critique. The WCC conference on mission in 1996 in Salvador da Bahía (Brazil) was fully dedicated to the relationship between the Gospel and culture, and WCC afterwards described its new awareness thus:

Salvador insisted on the richness of cultural variety as God's gift, but also on the gospel imperative to link the affirmation of one's cultural identity with an openness to other identities. Salvador recognised the fundamental equal value of all cultures, but also their ambiguity. In its relation with cultures, the gospel may be illuminated, but also obscured. Churches in mission may have to confirm elements of their culture but also challenge others.<sup>6</sup>

This newly developed focus is the result of the changes in world politics and the increased influence of cultural and ethnic identities on violent conflicts during the 1990s.

1. David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York, 1991), p. 421.

2. The idea as such was not new, as many missionaries had been involved in the effort to present the Gospel in understandable terms and forms for recipient cultures.

3. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, pp. 420-421.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 422-423.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 426-428.

6. <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/hist-e.html#11> (29 August 2006).

## 2. Contextualization among Evangelical Missionaries

Among Evangelical missiologists, the word *contextualization* came to be used

not so much for theological processes within indigenous churches, but more for the pragmatic methods of expatriate missionaries endeavoring to communicate the Gospel as much as possible in terms of the *receptor* culture. In this context it is to be noted that whereas in WCC circles the term from the beginning was linked to the idea that only through contextualizing the Christian faith, people and cultures could be transformed by the Gospel, in Evangelical mission circles the concept was also an effort to solve the problems related to the resistance of Muslim societies to the Gospel witness in the public domain.

The American David J. Hesselgrave, one of the leading missiologists of the Evangelical mission movement since the 1970s, defined contextualization as:

[...] the process of communicating the biblical Gospel in such a way as to make it meaningful to the people of any given cultural context.<sup>7</sup>

This definition shows the shift of the usage of the term contextualization from the interpretative activities of non-Western churches to the communication process itself. Hesselgrave suggested in general that the Gospel should be communicated in new cultures by simple biblical storytelling, and that if a church comes into existence, that church should become the ‘hermeneutical community’ deciding how Scripture is best understood and applied in the church’s own context.<sup>8</sup> Although he thereby recognized the need of the indigenous church to be the main factor in the process of contextualization, his definition of contextualization described the foreign missionary as the catalyst of that process.

The different usage of the term *contextualization* in circles of WCC on the one hand and in the Evangelical mission movement on the other hand, is no coincidence. WCC is a meeting place of Churches from the Western World and the Global South that relate ecumenically, so its focus is on denominational initiatives. The Evangelical mission movement is dominated by Western missionaries and non-denominational organizations that proclaim the Gospel in cultures other than their own, and often in contexts with no existent local church or with churches that they do not recognize as valid partners in mission. This focus on the missionary and his role may be a reflection of the individualism that has deeply rooted in Western societies.

Among Evangelical missionaries to the Islamic world, contextualization has become a much discussed theme since the 1970s with missionaries holding radically different viewpoints. One of the first Evangelical proponents of radical ideas of contextualization in the

Arab World was Charles H. Kraft, an anthropologist with Fuller’s Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California (USA) since 1969.<sup>9</sup> In 1974 he suggested to a group of missionaries to the Arab World who met in Marseille (France), what he perceived to be the need in mission:

[a] redoubling of our efforts to assist in the raising up of a people of God who are genuinely saved by faith but who remain culturally Arab or North African, [...] or Berber [...] or Egyptian; not to replace the present Christian churches. These must continue. They serve a need, especially among the westernized or westernizing. But in addition to them.<sup>10</sup>

For Kraft, to ‘remain culturally Arab’ entailed remaining within the confines of Islamic culture:

I would press hard for a faith relationship with God and for a faith renewal movement starting within Islam as a culture, based on the faith of Abraham [...], pointing to the Qur’an, the Old Testament and the New Testament as sources of our information concerning this faith, and issuing in a renewal and a distinct People of God, who retain their Muslim cultural allegiance, worship forms and self-respect. I would press further for this faith renewal movement to use all three books as its basis.<sup>11</sup>

Kraft defended the right and the need for converts from Islam to create their own theology:

The more he accommodates his theology to the cultural expectations of Western churches, the less likely he is to be able to effectively witness to his own people.[...] It raises the specter that he may have to be theologically heretical to communicate to his own people.<sup>12</sup>

Kraft discouraged participants from using terms like *Father*, *Son of God* and *Trinity*, as these were misunderstood by Muslims.<sup>13</sup> In that context he also suggested to not speak of Jesus’ death.<sup>14</sup> He challenged them to not bring sensitive issues like the *deity* of Christ up too early on. ‘You break the relationship, and you cut them off from even the possibility of discovering later on the truth, as the disciples discovered it after a considerable period of contact with Christ’.<sup>15</sup> He also suggested using the Islamic name for Jesus, and describing Him as a prophet and not as the object of faith:

Thus, if the Muslim asks if I place my faith in ‘*Īsá*, I cannot answer ‘yes’. [...] Even if he asks whether I place my faith in Jesus, I cannot answer ‘yes’, for his ‘*Īsá*, Jesus, cannot save. Contrary to some

7. David J. Hesselgrave, ‘Great Commission Contextualization’, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Vol. 12, No. 3 (July-September 1995), p. 139. Hesselgrave was Professor of Mission and the director of the *School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School* in Deerfield, Illinois (USA) from 1965-1991.

8. Hesselgrave, ‘Great Commission Contextualization’, pp. 141-143.

9. See his *magnum opus*, Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, 1979).

10. Charles Kraft, ‘Guidelines for Developing Message Geared to Horizon of Receptivity’ (Marseille, 19 February 1974), pp. 5, 9: transcript of a lecture from the Archives of the *Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College*, Collection 86, Box 27, Folder 28.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

14. *Ibid.*, p.10.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

opinions, I believe we must start with informed Muslims, at least with his 'Īsá, if we ever hope to effectively communicate with him.<sup>16</sup>

Kraft's radical ideas were rejected by the missionaries he spoke to, but his ideas were to slowly gain popularity in the missionary community in the Muslim World. The American Phil Parshall, who was a missionary in Bangladesh and in The Philippines with Serving in Mission (SIM), played an important role in popularizing the theme through his many publications calling for contextualizing the Gospel into the cultures of Islam.

In Parshall's influential book, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism: Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Grand Rapids, 1980) he argued for the use of the *Qur'an* in witnessing. Parshall also suggested offering concessions to Muslim converts, such as allowing them to observe the fasting of *Ramadān* and 'Aīd al-Adhā, to pray in the Islamic manner and to go through some initiatory rites other than baptism. Though Parshall did not go as far as Kraft, in 1980 his ideas were considered radical by many Evangelical missiologists. By 1998, when John Travis published his C1-C6 spectrums, it had become clear that since 1980, some missionaries had gone much further than Parshall in their thinking and practice of contextualization.

## 2 John Travis' C1-C6 Contextualization

Travis proposed a descriptive categorization of the contextualization of the Gospel into Islamic cultures.<sup>17</sup> This missionary among Muslims in Asia published his scheme in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (EMQ) in October 1998. He described what was being discussed by many Evangelical missiologists in the Muslim World and implemented by some and thus it is indicative of what missionaries in this area meant by contextualization. Travis spoke of six distinct *Spectrums of Christ-centered Communities: C1-C6*; he described these communities in the Muslim World thus:<sup>18</sup>

### **C1: Historic Churches using a non-Arabic language**

These churches can be Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant. Some predate Islam. There are thousands of these churches in the Muslim world. Some reflect Western cultural styles. A huge cultural chasm exists between these churches and the surrounding Muslim community. Some *Muslim-Background Believers* (MBBs) may be found in C1 churches. They call themselves Christians.<sup>19</sup>

### **C2: Historic Churches using the Arabic church-language**

Except for the Arabic language used in these churches, they are essentially similar to C1. The Arabic used is mainly distinctively Christian and non-Islamic. The cultural gap between Muslims and C2 is large. Often more MBBs are found in C2 than C1. The majority of churches located in the Arab world are C1 or C2. C2 believers call themselves Christians.

### **C3: Churches using religiously neutral Arabic language and cultural forms**

In these churches, religiously neutral forms are used, like folk music, artwork, etc. Islamic elements are filtered out so as to use purely non-religious forms. This is done to reduce the foreignness of the Gospel and the church. The congregation, the majority being MBBs, may meet in a church building or on more religiously neutral terrain. They call themselves Christians.

### **C4: Christian communities using Arabic Islamic language and forms**

These communities are similar to C3, but Islamic forms and practices are also utilized (for instance, praying with raised hands, keeping the fast, avoiding pork, alcohol, and dogs as pets, using Islamic terms, dress). Meetings are not held in church buildings. C4 communities consist almost entirely of MBBs. C4 believers, though highly contextualized, are usually not seen as Muslim by the Muslim community. C4 believers identify themselves as followers of 'Īsā al-Masīh (using the *Qur'ānic* name of Jesus) or something similar.

### **C5: Communities of 'Messianic Muslims' who are followers of 'Īsā al-Masīh**

C5 believers remain legally and socially within the *ummah* (community) of Islam. Aspects of Islamic theology which are incompatible with the Christian faith are rejected, or reinterpreted. Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. C5 believers meet regularly in communities with other C5 believers and share their faith with Muslims who do not follow Christ. C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow 'Īsā al-Masīh. Other Muslims may see them as theologically deviant and expel them from the community. Where entire villages accept Christ, C5 communities may result in 'Messianic mosques'.

### **C6: Small communities of secret believers**

Due to fear, isolation, or the threat of severe governmental or community retaliation (including capital punishment), C6 believers worship Christ in secret, either individually or in small groups. Many came to Christ through dreams, visions, miracles, radio broadcasts, tracts, Christian witness while abroad, or reading the Bible on their own initiative. C6 (as opposed to C5) believers are usually silent

16. Ibid., pp. 7-8.

17. His name is a pseudonym, and his nationality is unknown.

18. John Travis, 'The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of Christ-centered Communities (C) Found in the Muslim Context', in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1998), pp. 407-408.

19. The term MBB is used by many Evangelical missiologists. The disadvantage of the term is that it focuses on the past of the people it designates and thus creates a distinct class of Christians. In the context of the Arab World, some missionaries even speak of *Christian-Background Believers* (CBB's), thus distinguishing 'true' believers who were born in the Christian community, from nominal Christians.

about their faith. They are perceived as Muslims by the Muslim community and identify themselves as Muslims.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 C5: Insider Movements

Many discussions about the scheme of Travis presently focus on what he termed C5. Some missiologists propagate the idea that instead of getting Muslims into the Church, Jesus should be brought into the Mosque. That would allow Muslims who decide to become followers of Jesus Christ to stay within the fold of Islam, just as Messianic Jews have stayed within Judaism. People propagating this idea usually hope that it will lead to what they term an Insider *Movement* of large numbers of Muslims who become followers of *‘Īsá al-Masīh*. Whereas traditional mission in the Muslim World did not lead to mass conversions, it is hoped that this approach might create a larger harvest. Kraft was an early propagator of this idea in the 1970s.

Parshall was highly critical of the missionaries that considered the C5 position as a missiologically desirable and theologically acceptable end-goal. Many missionaries however believed that Parshall propagated exactly that position and that MBBs should stay in the mosque as loyal Muslims. He therefore felt obliged to publicly deny this, in an article titled ‘Danger! New Directions in Contextualization’ in the same issue of EMQ in which Travis’ scheme was published.<sup>21</sup> Parshall wrote in this article that he did not agree with the idea and that he never held that position. Joshua Massey, a pseudonym for a cultural anthropologist and missionary in Asia, responded to Parshall’s viewpoints in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (IJFM) of Spring 2000:

Phil Parshall certainly became the vanguard of C4 in the late 70s. Phil endured an extreme amount of opposition from more than a few C1-3 believers. But Phil [...] wrote a book to build his case for C4, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism*. [...] Ironically, less than 20 years after its release, C4 is today probably the most common approach used by new missionaries to Muslims.<sup>22</sup>

Massey then argued that the C5 approach was just as good as all the other approaches, because there are many different types of Muslims. He implicitly criticized Parshall:

When you hear a brother engaging in missiological gossip, discrediting another for his approach either up or down the C1-5 spectrum, kindly stop him, and help him see that not all Muslims are the same. God therefore does not call all of his messengers to reach them in the same way. As dangerous or outdated as an approach may seem, God will use a variety of Christ-centered approaches to reach a variety of Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

The discussion continued unabated, as was evidenced by another lengthy article by Parshall in July 2004 in EMQ, in which he explained why he still disagreed with the C5 method.<sup>24</sup> In the missiological magazines as well as among missionaries, the discussions continue. Mark Williams wrote a good article on the issue in *Journal of Asian Mission* in 2003, while Timothy C. Tennent and Kevin Higgins wrote on the matter in the Fall 2006 issue of IJFM.<sup>25</sup>

These discussions show how important Travis’ categorization has been since it was published in 1998. This makes it all the more important to look critically at it; a whole new generation of missionaries are using the terminology and arguing *pro or con* contextualization based on Travis’ categorization, possibly without wondering whether the categorization is, in itself, flawed. The following discussion outlines why there is much reason to think it is.

## 4 Critique of the C1-C6 Spectrums

### 4.1 Cultural chasm

Travis’ scheme has major flaws based on its explicit and implicit pre-suppositions. Firstly Travis states that there is a ‘huge cultural chasm [...] between these [C1 and C2] churches and the surrounding Muslim community’, and in that he includes a linguistic gap. This generalization is questionable.

Before the Arab conquests, Christians in the Middle East and North Africa suffered deeply from interference by the Byzantine Empire that enforced its ‘Greek-Orthodox’ state-religion on the churches. After the conquests of Islam, the Christians of the Middle East could, within the confines of their churches, believe and worship as they wanted. Initially the Muslim armies that occupied the Middle East and North Africa were small and the process of Islamization was generally very slow. Consequently the coming of Islam would not have had a dramatic *cultural* impact on the Christians of the Middle East during the first few centuries of Islam. To suggest that their worship and beliefs were ‘foreign’ to the region is unfounded. It was always truly indigenous.

The Christians in the Middle East as encountered by the triumphant Islamic Arab armies during the seventh century spoke mainly Aramaic, Arabic and Coptic. Linguistically, the native Arabic of the early Muslims was closely aligned to the Arabic spoken by large segments of Christianity, not only amongst some tribes in the Arabian Peninsula, but also in the kingdoms of the Ghassānids and of al-Hīrah. Aramaic was also close to their Arabic.

During the first centuries of Islam, the Syriac-Orthodox, the Coptic-Orthodox and the Nestorians were the

20. John Travis, ‘The C1 to C6 Spectrum’, pp. 407-408.

21. Phil Parshall, ‘Danger! New Directions in Contextualization’, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1998), pp. 404-417.

22. John Massey, ‘God’s Amazing Diversity in Drawing Muslims to Christ’, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* (Spring 2000), p. 8.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

24. Phil Parshall, ‘Lifting the Fatwa’, in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (July 2004), as found on <http://bgc.Gospelcom.net/emis>.

25. Mark Williams, ‘Aspects of High-Spectrum Contextualization in Ministries to Muslims’, in *Journal of Asian Mission* Vol. 5, Issue 1 (2003). Timothy C. Tennent, ‘Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C5 “High Spectrum” Contextualization’, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Vol. 23 Issue 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 101-115. Kevin Higgins, ‘Identity, Integrity and Insider Movements: A brief Paper Inspired by Timothy C. Tennent’s Critique of C5-Thinking’, in *International Journal of Frontier Missions* Vol. 23 Issue 3 (Fall 2006), pp. 117-123.

scientists, medical doctors, administrators, linguists, and the theologians of the Arab Empire due to the small numbers of educated Muslims. Christians therefore played a very important role in how Islam came to define itself and how 'Islamic' culture developed. One important cultural adaptation of the Christians was that over the centuries they came to adopt the Arabic language, not only for daily life, but also for worship in church. It seems that the paradigm for Arabic Christian and Muslim studies should be that the Muslims of the Arabian Peninsula began a process of *enculturalization* in the Christian Middle East after they conquered the region. Islam was contextualized to the Christian faith and its expressions.

#### 4.2 Theology is the actual issue

Travis' scheme does not touch upon theology, but mostly on more tangible, external matters. He defines contextualization almost solely in terms of using a certain jargon, the right symbols, and proper locations. To define the perceived chasm as a *cultural* one and not as one of *theology*, is problematic because the real difference between Christians and Muslims is theological. It is in this respect interesting to note that many of those with an interest in rather far-going forms of contextualization come from a background of anthropology or sociology, not theology.

Christians in any culture must be careful to explain the Gospel in terms that are understood by the *receptor* culture. This entails trying to minimize the usage of sub-cultural jargon. However, those who turn to Christ will also have to learn to understand a new biblical and theological language that expresses their new faith. Ignoring Christian theology and its own language, and focusing on Islamic sub-cultural habits and forms only, indicates a very limited view of contextualization.

Any effort at contextualization must start with a recognition of and a belief in the uniqueness of the self-revelation of God in the Bible and ultimately in Jesus Christ, and of the necessity of faith in that revelation and participation in the community of Christians for salvation. Without this recognition and belief, the process of contextualization is no longer a matter of *trialogue* but of *dialogue* between the church and its beliefs with the prevalent culture. It will predictably lead to the church evermore adapting to that culture for a lack of an Archimedean biblical point.

Michael Frost, director of the Centre for Evangelism and Global Mission (CEGM) at Morling Theological College in Sydney (Australia) gives a useful definition of the meaning of *context in the term contextualization*:

No matter the socio-economic, ethnic or age group, the gospel must relate to the whole human context, including both the situational and the experiential. By situational I mean all that is true of people in their given situation, comprising their past, present and future; their lot in life, including their culture, nationality, language, the laws that affect them. It also includes their situation as God sees it; their fallenness and their beauty.

But the gospel must also relate to the experiential context of people - the subjective experiences of humans arising out of but also creating their situational context, such as feelings of insecurity, hopes, fears. The totality of context is obviously very wide and fluid. This makes the concept of contextualisation an ongoing, dynamic process wherever the gospel is being preached and lived.<sup>26</sup>

Proper contextualization applies the whole message of the Bible to the whole of life in any given culture for the sake of transforming that culture. When the Gospel enters a new cultural context, it becomes part of that culture, but it also has a prophetic, transformational message for that culture. The Gospel of the crucified and risen Son of God is a stumbling block in all cultures; to accommodate the core of Christian theology, to make it more culturally acceptable, makes the message less offensive but also less salvific.<sup>27</sup>

The overriding concern in the C1-C6 scheme seems to be the question whether those who are followers of Jesus should identify themselves with the mosque or with the church. In his article in IJFM of Fall 2006, Tennent describes in detail the issues at hand. He discusses the major biblical arguments made for allowing Muslims to call themselves Muslims and to remain in the mosque as followers of Jesus, and he insists that the arguments are not valid. He concludes:

I think that the best approach is to see C5 as a temporary, transitional bridge by which some Muslims are crossing over into explicit Christian faith, hopefully to one of a C3 or C4 character. On the other hand, a wide number of C3 and C4 church movements have long and distinguished track records showing that they are sustaining faith in the lives of MBBs without major cultural disruption and yet maintaining historic Christian orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup>

For Tennent, the issue is primarily a theological one: 'There are not two bodies of Christ, one Jew and one Gentile, or one "Western" and one "Eastern". There is one body of Christ throughout the world, culturally diverse, and yet the one church of Jesus Christ.'<sup>29</sup> Or to say it differently, missionaries must integrate their Nicene belief in the 'one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church' in their missiological methodology.

#### 4.3 The mosque as the sole context

C6 is an oddity in Travis' scheme, as hardly anyone will agree that a Muslim who does not tell or show anyone that he is actually a believer in Jesus Christ, is an example of contextualization. Travis himself initially

26. Michael Frost, 'Translating the Gospel', on [www.cegm.org.au](http://www.cegm.org.au) (26 August 2006).

27. See Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, 1994), pp. 84-86. Paul G. Hiebert has been Professor of Mission and Anthropology as well as chairperson of the *School of World Mission and Evangelism at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School* in Deerfield, Illinois (USA) since 1991

28. Tennent, 'Followers of Jesus (Isa) in Islamic Mosques: A Closer Examination of C5 "High Spectrum" Contextualization', p. 101

29. *Ibid.*

did not have C6 in his scheme, but he added it in order to also accommodate that category of Muslim believers in Christ. In Travis' line of thought, to place this example of a Muslim who speaks as a Muslim and who behaves as a Muslim at the farthest end of the scale, is logical; the organizational pattern that he uses is the question to what extent a community or an individual resembles the religious life of Muslims and of the mosque.

The idea that contextualization is mostly a matter of adaptation to the mosque and its religious culture, seems to be the defining background to Travis' scheme. But who has decided that a truly contextual theology is so *monofocal* and that it adapts mostly to the patterns and language of the mosque? Muslims who turn to Christ usually do that because they want to turn away from the mosque and from its *milieu*. Why not use the language and structure, strangely upsetting as it may sound to Western Evangelicals, of the historic Churches, the oldest institutes of the Arab World? Or why not make the *home* the *locus* for the message? That is certainly the preferred option of the vast majority of MBB's themselves in the Arab World. They do not want to stay in the mosque and they do not want to see themselves as Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

An added problem in the sole focus on Islamic religious institutes and symbols is that cultural forms and language are inextricably linked with meaning; they cannot be easily separated. Cognitive Anthropologists have shown that complex culturally and religiously embedded terms cannot be simply and directly transferred into another culture or religion.<sup>31</sup> This means that typical Islamic theological jargon must be used cautiously, if at all. It carries too much of the core of Islamic thinking into the understanding of the Christian faith. Additional reasons to avoid Islamic terminology are that Muslims usually see

30. It is strange that some missionaries, in their endeavor to contextualize, are willing to accept the imperfections of the mosque and its environment but reject out of hand, the idea that the Oriental Churches could be seen as legitimate partners in presenting Christ in the midst of Arab culture.

31. In an email to the author (1 September 2006), David B. Kronenfeld, Professor of Anthropology at the *University of California* in Riverside, California (USA) stated: 'Certainly any naive assumption that complex culturally and religiously embedded terms will simply and directly translate is very unlikely to work out very well. Kronenberg also added that with respect to the complexity of the usage of Islamic terminology for explaining Christian concepts, especially by outsiders to the culture, 'In my view, words have literal (and focal or prototypic) meanings that can often (not always) be fairly well translated across disparate languages. But the problem is that those prototypic meanings often can be far removed from how we understand words in actual communication. The problem is that several kinds of contexts, presuppositions, and contextual knowledge informs what we actually understand when words (especially, important words) are used. Relevant contexts include who is talking, who else is in the conversation, what is the topic of the conversation, the tone and register of the conversation, and what is the goal of the conversation. Relevant contextual knowledge can include what the participants know about each other's intentions, prior knowledge (relevant to the topic), stake in the outcome, facility in relevant languages and cultures, knowledge about the facility of other participants, and relevant historical knowledge (both history of the focal concepts themselves in pertinent tradition and history of external/outsider knowledge of the concepts). Presuppositions can include assumptions about what kind of conversation it is supposed to be, what are the participants' goals, and so forth.' Another view is held by James S. Boster, Professor of Anthropology of the *University of Connecticut* in Storrs, Connecticut (USA). This specialist in cognitive anthropology suggests that 'dialogue always happens within a language, so why not [...] use Islamic theology as the ground rules?' That statement should probably be seen in the context of his belief that 'Islam offers a better understanding of Jesus than Christianity does.' James S. Boster in an email to the author (3 September 2006).

this as either a manner of subverting the true Islamic faith or as plain cheating.

## 5 Another Approach to Contextualization

### 5.1 A necessary new approach

Travis' scheme purports to be descriptive of the different Christian communities as he sees them, but his scheme certainly suggests an increasing *intensity* of contextualization from C1 and up. That gives his scheme a *prescriptive* character for those with an interest in contextualization and this is how it is used by many missionaries with an interest in contextualization. Given its flaws, it seems better to lay the scheme aside. Parshall seemed to hint to do just that in 2004:

All of us are indebted to Travis for his abbreviating an identification of evangelistic strategy. It is much more convenient to say, 'I practice C4', rather than give an elongated description that is accurate but loses the audience. But what has happened is the creation of a heavy fog that produces more confusion than clarity. Times without number I have had people who profess to be C5 vehemently deny that they believe in some important point of strategy that another self-declared C5er holds.<sup>32</sup>

C1-C6 has created confusion and it has set many missionaries on the wrong track regarding the basic tenets of contextualization. It is necessary to think completely afresh about contextualization. Our proposal is to agree that no scheme will help us; the reality in mission in the Arab World is that there are so many cultural and socio-economic differences, that no scheme will work for all environments. What is needed is a contextualized missiology for the different cultures within the Arab World; these missiologies must be created in conjunction with the Churches in those cultures, in dependence on the Holy Spirit and in line with the theology of historic Christianity.

### 5.2 Contextualization and Unity of the Church

Church communities that contextualize the Gospel into their own culture must ensure that their methods of contextualization and the outcome of that process are strengthening the unity with the worldwide church of the past and of today. Contextualized theology must uphold unity with other churches in the same culture and in other cultures. This is in line with Jesus' prayer for the unity of his flock. This means, for instance, that from the perspective of Biblical ecclesiology, it is not acceptable to create a new community of followers of Jesus without positive links to existent churches in the same culture.

For many Evangelicals, Church unity is something almost exclusively *spiritual* and an attribute of the *invisible* church. Where visible unity is mentioned, it tends to be stressed only for the sake of more effective evangelism and not as a non-negotiable theological premise.<sup>33</sup> In the Ecumenical movement member churches are giving

32. Phil Parshall, 'Lifting the Fatwa'.

33. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, p. 461.

expression to the notion that is fundamental to the Christian faith: the indissoluble link between unity and mission.<sup>34</sup> The Evangelical mission movement must confess, with the Ecumenical movement, that the loss of Church unity is a sin because the Lord Jesus prayed for the unity of the Church; Missionaries must be careful to not participate in proliferating the creation of new Churches in apposition to the existent Churches. How this is to be concretely done, will be different in each country, and maybe even in each region of a country, but the principle is important as the Christian witness to Jesus Christ must testify to the unity of all parts of the Body of Christ; missionary methods that do not do this, are questionable.

### 5.3 Arab Churches and missionaries

Presently, Christians in the Arab World, for a diversity of reasons, use a theological language and have a world view that is different from that of Muslims; it is also undeniable that in the Muslim World, Christians and Muslims often behave as if they are wholly different tribes. There is a moat that must be bridged. Christian Arabs have often drawn up the bridge of their castle in order to avoid social interaction. On the other hand, the Churches of the Arab World, like the Coptic Orthodox, Greek-Orthodox, the Maronites, the Presbyterians, the Pentecostals, all participate in the one Body of Christ in their lands. They adhere to the verbal inspiration of the Bible and share, broadly speaking, the same historic confessions. They have leadership and members with a faith in the crucified and risen Christ. Many of these Churches desire to see the Gospel proclaimed to all and, in all Churches, clergy and lay-people involve themselves in evangelism. Many Churches oversee groups of MBBs in one way or another.<sup>35</sup> To write the native Churches off in regard to mission to Muslims, is unwise and from an ecclesiological perspective unacceptable.<sup>36</sup>

The historic Churches of the Arab World are in many respects (culturally, socially, religiously, linguistically) closer to Islam than the Protestant Churches of the Arab World. Non-Arabic Protestant missionaries must be careful to not be too quick in assuming that a Church that is distant from their own denominational model and that uses a different religious language, is therefore not able to communicate the Gospel to Muslims. The Churches of

the Arab World may not be all that Western missionaries would like them to be, but they ought to be respected for having developed the basis of Christian theology and for having kept the faith during 14 centuries of Islamic domination. During those years, they have learnt precious lessons about how to relate to Muslims socially, and also about how to present the Gospel in a manner that is not self-destructing. It is therefore a sign of *hubris* for foreign missionaries to think that they 'know better' than these Churches. This is not to say that missionaries cannot be instrumental at times in serving to awaken Churches of the Arab World to the need to present the Gospel in a more appropriate manner to their Muslim compatriots, and it also does not mean that missionaries do not have their own role to play in mission in the Muslim World. That role must, however, be closely related to the Churches of the Muslim World.<sup>37</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Proper contextualization is an ongoing, purposeful *dialogue* between the local Arabic church-communities, local Arab culture and the biblical Scriptures. It must be done by Church communities, not just by individuals in that Church, let alone by *lone rangers* who are outside the Church community of the targeted context. This does not mean that expatriates cannot play a role in that process, but it must be in the context of the church community. This entails that if the churches of the targeted context disagree with certain forms of contextualization, missionaries should heed the advice of the church. If they then desire to challenge these churches they must do so as participants in the *koinonia* of those churches, and not as outsiders. The primacy of the existent national Churches must be respected.

## 7 Suggested questions for further discussion:

1. Is the cultural difference between Arab Christians and Arab Muslims larger than, for instance, the cultural difference between a Southern Baptist Church in Texas (USA) and secular Americans in New York? What implications does this have for our understanding of mission in the Arab World?
2. In what circumstances is it acceptable that non-Arab missionaries to the Arab World, ignore the Churches in the lands where they work in regards to mission methodology?
3. To what extent does the mission work that you see around you, entail the societal aspects of the Gospel? What prophetic aspects of the Gospel do you see enunciated in the mission work in relationship to society?
4. How can the C1-C6 scheme of John Travis still be used meaningfully?
5. Why do you think missionaries have gravitated to using the mosque as the locus for contextualization?

34. Ibid.

35. It is interesting to note that it is not uncommon for missionaries to be strongly outspoken against what they perceive to be the faults of the historic Churches of the Arab World, while they are at the same time arguing that it is a good thing for Muslims to stay within the confines of their own Islamic culture as followers of 'Isa.

36. The idea is often repeated: See for instance Jim Leffel, in 'Contextualization: Building Bridges to the Muslim Community', published on [www.xenos.org](http://www.xenos.org) (2 September 2006): 'C1 and C2 models represent little accommodation to Muslim culture, other than the C2 use of indigenous language. These models import much of traditional Western culture into the Muslim context, including Western-style buildings, denominational affiliation, and worship. While we must respect the courage of the few Muslim converts to these churches, we consider the models inadequate for two reasons. First, imposing unnecessary cultural forms to the non-Western context inhibits long term efforts to found a truly indigenous people movement from taking root. The church will always be seen as a cultural outsider. Second, the distance from Islamic culture to these churches is an unbiblical constraint on conversion and Christian discipleship. In effect, it erects extra-biblical cultural roadblocks to the Gospel.'

37. In the Arab World, these church-communities vary in size. They may be as large as the Coptic-Orthodox Church in Egypt or as small as house groups in Yemen.