

The Imperative of Appropriate Hermeneutic In the Development of Contextual Missiology for Africa

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Abstract: *This paper argues that hermeneutics is central in evangelism, that evangelism and contextualization are indispensable duo in the evangelization of Africa, it proposes that missiological hermeneutics is appropriate in this process. Contextualization did not take place in a vacuum but in cultures, culture as the defining medium for the gospel mediated its birth. Contextual hermeneutics involves more than one text, and one interpreter. In terms of contextualization, missions means affording every culture the opportunity to understand the gospel, irrespective of the difference in language. Two contexts are important, that of the text and that of the interpreter, there is a context of the receiving culture that relies on the mediation of the sending culture, and this receiving culture is the context of the mission field. As culture encompasses all contexts and the factors within, context encompasses all aspects of culture and more than culture. The African church is already a contextual church engaged in a contextual interrelatedness with plurality. For Africa, missiological hermeneutics is the new hermeneutics for the future.*

Keywords: *culture, contextualization, missiological hermeneutics, Africa, Christianity, text, Bible.*

I. Introduction

The evangelization of Africa is presumably the second oldest project of the churches of Europe and America. It is second because Asia takes precedence and yet undone. The interesting development of the African dimension is the dawn of mission consciousness on the African church to reach its neighbours. The account of the Samaritan woman and her brethren in the fourth chapter of John's gospel has become a regular experience among Africans today. Africa is used with particular reference to the sub Saharan region.

However, time has changed and the multiplicity of culture, the plurality of religion and the complexity associated with communication are significant factors in the evangelization project. This calls for a search for how to communicate the gospel effectively within cultures and retain the integrity of the Scripture, it requires an examination of how to retain the fidelity of the gospel within indigenous church planting communities, the view here is that hermeneutic serves as the bridge between what is written and what is preached. Therefore, missiology in Africa deserves a quest for appropriate hermeneutic that will propel evangelization, develop spiritual communities and maintain the cycle of church ministry.

This paper argues that evangelization and contextualization are inseparable in planting indigenous churches in Africa, and that contextualization depends on hermeneutic, which also holds the potential for sustainable church ministry cycle. It proposes that missional or missiological hermeneutics can be a normative form, and that it has the criterion of contextuality, it posits that contextuality sufficiently sieves any interpretative method in order to ascertain its appropriateness as an evangelization tool. The logic here is that the contextuality of theologies arose from the contextuality of the interpretative model.

This is a descriptive essay based on critical thinking, it applies bibliographic research to the field of practical theology. This is a relevant contribution to the development of thought on missiological hermeneutics; it enriches church planting movement and the development of church ministry cycle. Church ministry cycle refers to the complete life cycle of the church, which involves the making of disciples, who go out to win others so that worship will be offered in a biblical way to God. This cycle is repeated when the testimony of the church emanates from those outside, who also join in the worship of God, winning more, ever worshipping, and ever growing in discipleship. The church refers to a group of people called out of the spiritual world of enmity with God, to join in the demonstration of loyal obedience to God.

The first task in this quest for appropriate model of contextual hermeneutics is to draw a relationship between contextualization and evangelization, and then examine the mediatorial place of hermeneutics. The third assignment is the argument for missional hermeneutics as contextual. The final lapse is the future of evangelism and hermeneutics in Africa.

Contextualization and Evangelization

Africa in 'reverse and converse' missions needs to examine contextualization in the light of her mandate to evangelize her plural context. the caveat raised by early African scholars like Byang Kato with regard to contextualization (Kritzinger and Saayman 1994), and the ferment generated by the debate on the

Gospel-Culture interaction (Carter 2007) are central to the evangelization of Africans. Evangelization and contextualization are missiological processes that cannot be fully explicated within the confines of this paper; however, contextualization requires further clarification because of its connections with contextuality.

Mission from the global North to its South in the 17th and 18th centuries was synonymous to transformation; it began by converting people, their language and culture. Thus, the rapid change in language due to conversion of the South to Christianity led to loss of identity (Walls). The case of Christianity converting culture was a trend that persisted from Medieval Christianity. In preliterate society, the solution to cultural resistance was civilization, it was a tool to wipe out and replace culture. This experience is apparent in the lingua franca of most former colonies, not to mention their economies and political structures. The loss of culture became the loss of identity; this approach is legitimized in traditional Islamic missions (Sanneh).

Contextualization first appeared as a term in 1972, as a new word for entrenchment of the gospel in a culture. Its functional definition is “to enable [...], an understanding of what it means that Jesus Christ the Word is authentically experienced in each and every human situation.”(Gilliland 2000, 225). Contextualization did not take place in a vacuum but in cultures, culture as the defining medium for the gospel mediated its birth. This synchronous relationship of (a cultural) context and (the biblical) text is still relevant in Africa today.

With communication as a central issue in evangelization, contextualization is thoroughly reviewed in *Translating the Message*. Written by Lamin Sanneh, it covers the impact of missions on African language and culture. Translation according to Sanneh was a paradigm for indigenizing Christianity and a process for developing the society. African pluralistic culture is a matrix of religions, made up of its indigenous religion, Christianity and Islam. For language as the emphatic element in culture, Lamin Sanneh discloses that the evangelization of culture depends on the success of the logic of mission as translation. For example, Islamic mission obliterates indigenous thought forms; replacement of language also makes Islamic Africa hard to evangelize.

To prove the power of language, Sanneh submits that the primacy of Arabic language in pre-Christian Islamic societies of West Africa inhibits vernacular translation of Christian categories, and renewal of the Christian faith. Islamic faith weakens the vernacular and limits translation as mission. This could become the experience in Europe’s emerging cultural pluralism (Hiebert 1994, 75) and the phenomenon of ‘untranslatability’, which according to Norbert Hintersteiner (2007), is a limitation to cross cultural and interreligious engagement.

Lamin Sanneh opines that the history of mission cannot overlook “the specific and unique manner, the gospel was concretized” (158). The concretization process involves the text of the Bible and the context of the receivers on one hand, then the communication by the missionary in language and thought forms on the other hand. Since Lamin Sanneh’s context is the African culture and Western Christianity of the 16th century, he posits that the pluralist ethos of the gospel can be deepened by including the role of African religion. That means people’s lived experience can find meaning in the gospel in any culture.

This is achievable through the translation of the message to the people; he summarized the elements in the contextualization process as language, Scripture translation and assimilation. In terms of contextualization, missions means affording every culture the opportunity to understand the gospel, irrespective of the difference in language. The cultural assimilation of the gospel is determined by the resistance or abuse to translation, to resist translation is to ignore the language, symbols and signs of the receiving culture, which is the same as presenting the ‘true; Christianity. He affirms that the success of mission is measured by the credibility of the vernacular, the translation of the missionary and vernacular as an instrument for the renewal of African society.

African Traditional Religion with its own symbols and language provided the basis for functional equivalent in the evangelization of Africa. Though Sanneh did not state clearly the difference between evangelization of Africa and the contextualization of Christianity, it is normal to imply that entrenching Christianity must be preceded by evangelism, and that contextualization must embrace discipleship based evangelism. The translation project as a process of interculturality could not have accommodated the missionary’s Western notion while aiming at converting the natives and winning their commitment and loyalty. Sanneh states further that the “familiar medium of the vernacular” as “a point of convergence” provided the natives an opportunity to “appropriate(d) the gospel without running it through the Western filters first” (Sanneh). Culturally speaking, it was also a “process of development of Christian religion” (Sanneh), and the “integration of Christian personality and identity” (Bediako 1992, 33), within the receiving culture.

In addition to Sanneh, Bediako has also stressed the implication of contextualization on cultural identity and assimilation; logically it determines the identity of the new cultural mosaic, often referred to as African Christian culture. There is the question of whether there can be a pure complete assimilation or a new culture by the merging of the two. This question portends a great implication for the future of contextualization as Africa evangelizes Africa; a hermeneutic of contextuality is advanced as a way of responding to the dilemma of complete assimilation or birth of a new culture.

The Mediatorial Role of Hermeneutics

In approaching hermeneutics, contextuality if taken as the philosophical foundation for contextualization suffices for the present as the working term. Contextuality with other variants would be examined against terms like interculturality and cross-cultural, and then the reason for contextuality as representative of all variants.

The relationship is such that when contextuality takes place, it can only be understood hermeneutically. This is often approached in form of cross-cultural and intercultural hermeneutics arising whenever Christ encounters any culture through the preaching or teaching of the Bible as Christian text. Therefore, hermeneutic provides the method for understanding both text and contexts. Biblical texts come with historical, linguistic and cultural contexts as an intricate whole. On the surface, culture as deriving from textual context, may not sufficiently represent the other contexts (Patte 1993). Two contexts are necessary in this regard, that of the text and that of the interpreter, there is a context of the receiving culture that relies on the mediation of the sending culture, and this receiving culture is the context of the mission field.

The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches describes contextuality as the practical implication of the interpretation or exegesis and preaching (teaching, explanation, kerygma) “of the Gospel” on “the life and culture of a specific people and community”. Practically, the Gospel connects to the culture, in terms of its codes and symbols, and “addressing their needs and awakening their creative energies” (1998,30). From the foregoing, understanding and exegesis come forth as hermeneutical imperatives on the Gospel in any context.

Contextuality refers to the understanding, hermeneutically speaking of the socio-political environment of the church and its theology. It is hermeneutic closely examining cultural and religious traditions in order to address its complex demands of its present circumstances (Fahlbusch and Bromiley (1999-2003), 539). Contextuality therefore is a hermeneutical inquiry into culture and the factors that shape it historically and presently. Such inquiry produces a responsive and reflective continuum of change. In the process, both the culture and text assume dialectic of subject/object posture. Thus, the content of the text passes through cultural changes producing a new text in the process (Henry 1999).

The Willowbank Report of 1978 refers to the interaction that takes place between the Gospel and culture as contextual hermeneutics, “in which the biblical text and the historical situation become mutually engaged in a dialogue whose purpose is to place the Church under the lordship of Jesus Christ in its particular context”(Padilla 1983, 87). This is the same process referred to by Choo Lak and Vroom as a prominent feature of New Testament missiology.

In an attempt at resolving the semantic problem associated with contextuality, cross-cultural and intercultural are compared in terms of connotative meaning and effect on the contextualization activity. Yeow Choo Lak¹ and Hendrik Vroom² are brought into dialogue on this matter.

Contextual, Cross-Cultural Or Intercultural?

Unlike Vroom, Choo Lak did not set out to define terms, but the use of cross-cultural hermeneutics to describe the process of the Gospel “crossing [...] and in culture” (13). However, Vroom doubts that culture can be crossed successfully, for the fact that the culture gap cannot be fully covered, and that understanding cannot be complete and final (226). Both scholars agree that these terms point to the method of understanding the Gospel in culture. Choo Lak chooses ‘cross-cultural’ instead of contextual or intercultural, whereas Vroom expresses a bias to context, he applies intercultural and cross culture as synonyms. The question must be asked, if these words are variants or synonyms. If variants, then which is normative, if synonyms then any alternative will suffice as appropriate terminology that describes this particular practice or process.

‘Cross-culturality’³, according to Choo Lak, entails interpreting and communicating signs, messages and codes inspite of the complexity and diversity in culture and tradition globally (14). Culture is all that is learnt and participated in to form historical, social and religious experiences (15), it is also the medium of contextualizing theology and correcting the violence done to (Singaporean) culture, when western civilization invades the(ir) religio-cultural life (16). Choo Lak’s broad description of culture is summed by Vroom as a philosophical and methodological problem. Vroom argues that hermeneutically, cultures cannot fully integrate into each other, this is because cultural context “codetermines... (the) understanding of the Gospel”(226). Interculturality according to Vroom suggests a possibility of merging or meeting point for cultures. If this is possible then an intercultural arena arises (226). This arena may be likened to when one culture imbibes the other’s practices, forms, celebrations, beliefs and needs albeit partially.

¹ Yeow Choo Lak. *Christianity in Southeast-Asian Metropolis: Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics in One Gospel-Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*. Amsterdam, (New York: Edition Rodopi BV, 2003)pp 13-37.

² Hendrik M.Vroom. *Contextual Theology Revisited in One Gospel-Many Cultures: Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*. Amsterdam, (New York: Edition Rodopi BV, 2003) pp 225-234.

³ Coinage mine, in order to create similarity in suffixes.

Therefore, interaction rather than encounter takes place in a permanent form as one culture enters the other, accepting and becoming at home with the 'foreigner'. Such 'becoming at homeness' reflects acculturation or concretization in the pragmatic sense due to one moving and crossing, this movement should be seen as both ways in order to be a complete movement, and thereby becoming inter cultural in terms of what is in the new culture.

Cross-culturality addresses the social, political, religious and economical needs of the day by giving hope and promise. Choo Lak based his analysis on the Christ culture motif in the contextualization process. He concludes that Christ and indeed God are present in any culture. Therefore, the cultural individual encountering the Gospel only comes to the realization of a new self within the same culture in a 3-step process (19-26). Notionally, cross-culturality does not improve on the (as if superior to the other) culture but acculturates the new faith by taking both "the cultural context and biblical text seriously" (28-29).

Yeow Choo Lak has spoken loud and clear that cross culturality as hermeneutical process describes Christian faith entrenching itself in a culture and responding to the socioreligious and economic challenges present in that context. It also provides hermeneutical tools for understanding the theology and missiology of the new context. The motifs in the above terminologies include the Christ or Gospel versus culture, Christian faith versus reality and old culture versus new culture.

Vroom describes 'context' in the light of early and later meanings of the hermeneutic circle. He recalls that the immediate and subsequent context of a text produces new meanings (or new contexts), and as the text (Bible) is interpreted, it discloses the reader (culture) in front of the text (Bible). This meaning of the hermeneutic circle "conveys (the) crossing" in order to understand the matter (issues, Gospel, message) in the text (229). He notes further that the social and political environment of the interpreter affects the exegesis of a text; these factors dictate the function of the text. The function of a text as stated by Choo Lak mimics the role of a hermeneutic of suspicion expressed in feminist hermeneutics, liberation hermeneutics, post colonial hermeneutics, to mention a few (310).

From the foregoing claims, one can surmise that the use of cross-culturality risks cultural erosion as it assumes the crossing of cultural gap. It also suggests a non-dynamic movement limited to two cultural contexts. Intercultural risks universality and it is inclined to a hermeneutic of coherence, (attempting to achieve a common understanding). It relies on terms of references existing between and within the culture.

Contextuality therefore, unveils the dilemma of a contextual and a cultural understanding of the Bible in an intercultural process. One other point implicit in this dialogue is that practically, intercultural is the end-product of a cross-cultural. As culture encompasses all contexts and the factors within, context encompasses all aspects of culture and more than culture.

For the possibility that one new contextual meaning is the new text for another context within a hermeneutic of confidence (that reckons with each new understanding), contextuality abhors particularity and selectivity, as it also imperils any definite textual production, interpretation and transmission

Contextuality as a term of preference accommodates ecumenical and interreligious contexts. Contextuality accommodates every new meaning as it considers the *sitz im leben* and the meaning "it has for people where they are" (Vroom 2006, 21). The point made by contextuality from an African perspective is that the biblical text in its historic transmission is not free from androcentric, Eurocentric and colonial interpretation. Therefore, understanding such text requires that it be freed from these contexts, as well as its original linguistic, historical and cultural contexts.

A Case for Missiological Hermeneutics as contextually appropriate

Can Africans understand the Gospel in the light of later hermeneutical circle? In other words, is contextual understanding of the Gospel possible? On the other hand, does the Gospel speak to the people where they are? Does it respond to their social, political and economic needs, with all its aspects? (Vroom 2006). This summarizes the criteria for contextual hermeneutics, and by extension missiological hermeneutics.

The answer depends on what understanding is. Within the hermeneutical framework, understanding means empathic movement of the interpreter at first, then of the author, thereby forming new horizons of understanding and plurality of meaning in a process of continuous reinterpretation. Understanding is limited by context, and 'prejudgment' (Henry 1999) or 'preunderstanding' (Vroom 2003) of the interpreter, but does not foreclose new understanding by the same or some other interpreter of the same text.

Contextual Hermeneutics

The question for contextual hermeneutics is not whether the text is read, but whether it is understood. It is about communication in language forms. Language as the mode of communicating historical reality in words (Fahlbusch and Bromiley (1999-2003)), is central to understanding. For example, communication is determined by successful or unsuccessful misunderstanding, this according to Gadamer depends on the interpreter overcoming the historicity of the text (Henry 1999).

Contextual hermeneutics put in Ricoeur's way, suggests that a text is decontextualized, recontextualized and contextualized by the interpreter (Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of the Human Sciences* 1981). By application, the Gospel brought by the missionaries to Africa is decontextualized of its Hellenistic forms and symbols. The Europeanized form has also recontextualized on African soil, for Africa reaching other nations within the same continent it must be contextualized. The multicultural and multilingual nature of Africans presents plurality that contextual hermeneutics explicates and accommodates. The plurality of African context requires phenomenon that can adequately respond to the questions arising from it.

Contextual hermeneutics as embracing other variants that describe the contextualization process must therefore be cross-cultural and intercultural. Contextual hermeneutics involves more than one text, and one interpreter. A text is capable of being interpreted and reinterpreted by many interpreters, who disclose meanings to other interpreters through methods of writing or speaking. Speaking includes the act of preaching and writing as in Bible study.

For example, Bible study design is a hermeneutical principle pointing to the text, the author and responding to a series of culturally relevant questions (Steffen 1996). It is often characterized by exegesis, interpretation and explanation. Exegesis and interpretation are core hermeneutical principles that form a whole system of the hermeneutical process. While exegesis says what the text "means in its own historical, theological, contextual, literary and cultural setting" (McArthur 1992, 118), interpretation is shaped by the cultural setting of the reader, which is neither immune to the "problem of preunderstanding" nor "excludes the possibility of true understanding" (Carson 1984, 15). This kind of environment considers hermeneutics purely from the perspective of the Christian community whose goal is to arrive at coherent, corresponding and consistent meaning of biblical text. It is concerned with meaning for 'fruitful' theologizing (Tienou 1983).

In African context, missiological hermeneutics might suffice for the Christian community's goal to arrive at coherent, corresponding and consistent meaning of biblical text, which is concerned with meaning for 'fruitful' theologizing (Tienou 1983). C. René Padilla⁴ has noted that the Third Worlds deserve missiological hermeneutics for contextualized, biblical and socially relevant theology. He argues for an African interpretation of the Bible that is both missiological and contextual. That means a system of hermeneutics that responds to the praxis of its own peculiar ministry. The church in African as one come of age must evangelize its immediate contexts, it must realize the mission of the church in the light of God's global agenda, and promote a communal theologizing that will mobilize and motivate evangelization.

David Hesselgrave must have considered contextuality in the early definitions of missiological hermeneutics by according preunderstanding its role in the contextualization activity. Missiological hermeneutics according to him includes "a preunderstanding (of 'the missionary purpose of God') for the interpretation of the whole Bible" (Hesselgrave 1993, 17). He envisions a cross-cultural encounter that 'accommodates a 3-way conversation between the reader, 'the other' and the text itself' (Brownson 2008, 2). It also considers the 'reader's social location', 'the historical context of the text' and 'the world of the text' (Russell 2010, 1). 'Preunderstanding', misunderstanding and understanding are recurrent themes in the contextualization, anthropology has been on how to avoid misunderstanding as missionaries communicate, theology want to achieve maximum understanding that produces christian vitality, hermeneutic wants 'successful misunderstanding' (with preunderstanding) as a way of achieving effective communication of the gospel.

Missiological hermeneutic is a method of interpretation that seeks to hear the Scripture as an authoritative guide to God's mission in the world. The mission of God revolves round the motif of sending, reflected in the sending of God's son, God's spirit and His church. A hermeneutic that communicates, that molds, forms and propels the mission of God through the church is necessary in explicating the role of the church in the world (Goheen 2006, Russell 2010).

The Future of Mission and Hermeneutics

The African church is already a contextual church engaged in a contextual interrelatedness with plurality. The impact of missions has produced a multinational church and multicultural hermeneutics, which is a tacit admission to many contexts and thus plurality of context that warranted multicultural readings in the first instance. It is against this background that churches in Africa must find a legitimate platform for hermeneutical reflection as a catalyst for theologizing and missionizing.

The future of missions is the future of the church, the centrality of the Bible in missions requires holistic understanding thereof. Holistic understanding does not connote absolute understanding, but a complete picture of the whole scenario by understanding a part, and translating that understanding into faith. The

⁴ World Evangelical Fellowship. Theological Commission (1983). *Evangelical Review of Theology: Volume 7* (electronic Ed.) (84–88). Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Periodicals.

continuity of the Christian faith expressed in different traditions must derive from the fact that no context is imposed or dominated by the other.

Every new meaning given within basic exegetical rules, which responds to contextual questions, should pass for hermeneutics, but the future of evangelism is the future of Christianity. For Africa, missiological hermeneutics is the new hermeneutics for the future. David Bosch represents the early voice, as Ralph Winter represents the later voice of missiologists who demonstrated missiological hermeneutics as an interpretive framework for understanding the mission of God in the world. Winter went further to prove that the church has the mandate to sustain this mission. Both of them have universalized missiological hermeneutics.

The church in Africa through its mission leaders, scholars and practitioners have a role in giving God and the Bible in their proper place in global missions, today and tomorrow. How to incorporate this new hermeneutics into seminary curriculum requires further study and may enhance its application at all levels of the church.

Conclusion

Hermeneutics and preaching are independent aspects of missiological proclamation, the Great Commission as comprising evangelism, missions and discipleship cannot be accomplished without a proper adoption of contextual hermeneutics. African nations and people are not equal in terms of development and educational advancement. Missiological framework designed contextually but rooted in biblical narratives would speak to any nation and people irrespective of the language of communication.

The challenge moves from the classroom to the field missionary, who is in daily interactions with the context, it is here that missions as a theology and praxis differs. The armchair theologizing in the seminary gives the framework but the church theologizing produces the kingdom work, led by the missionary to realize full potentials. This full potential is in Africa reaching her contexts successfully and avoiding errors of cross-cultural miscommunication. An appropriate hermeneutic must overcome aforementioned problems associated with contextualization and indigenization.

Testing this idea gives it the litmus value required of any developing paradigm. Missiological hermeneutics still underdeveloped could be tested on the field of missions, in the church for discipleship and bible study as a principle or a variant of contextual hermeneutics.