

ISFM Orlando 2009: "Best Practices in Frontier Mission"

Exploring the Process of Contextualization: A Panel Discussion

Brad Gill (Moderator)

Brad Gill, Moderator

As we conclude our sessions, we'd like our panel of our speakers to handle questions pertinent to their ISFM plenary sessions. We realize that some subjects are quite sophisticated. Other issues may have been tackled in our journal intensively, subjects like syncretism, contextualization, and insider movements. Some of you may not have been following these topics in all of their technical detail, so we would like to open it up in this roundtable for you to ask the speakers any questions you may have about things they said that might need clarification. We can have our panel flesh out or explain certain things, or continue our discussion in any direction you desire. From the 3x5 cards we distributed, quite a few questions came in on the area of "contextualization" and the conversion process where believers are sorting out what's biblical and what's cultural. And just who's doing the contextualization, the missionary or the indigenous population. So, let's begin with this rather broad subject.

Question

Doesn't it seem that contextualization is kind of a Western theoretical model exported and imposed on the unreached populations?

Would anyone like to respond to that?

H. L. Richard

Yes, I would. I have an Indian co-worker who says it exactly that way, but not that contextualization is an imposition. He says "Contextualization is for you guys. For us it's about 'being who you are.' We don't want to contextualize; we don't have to contextualize. For us it's an issue of who we are and how we should live this thing out. And don't get us into the whole translation kind of thing. It's actually for us about being natural." The place where the accusation of Western imposition comes in tends to be with the established churches. They say, "You (Westerners) are coming in, doing all of this and that, telling us we did it all wrong and we need to do it right." And in some ways that is

This is the condensed version of a panel discussion between speakers at this year's ISFM, who responded to questions raised by participants. The discussion, moderated by Brad Gill, took place on the final day of the 2009 meeting of the International Society for Frontier Missiology in Orlando, Florida, September 15–17, 2009. Due to space limitations, the comments of some of the panelists and some questions from the floor were not included. For a complete list of speakers, see the ISFM report on p. 157.

true. Sometimes we try to go in and find ways to do things better, and we have done a poor job of it. And sometimes we're doing a good job and the church is not as mature as it should be. But that is a good question, those are my views.

Moderator

Anyone else?

Eric Adams

Yes. I would just go back to what [an earlier speaker] said, and I think it is very important to point out that all the insider dynamics and principles that we are seeing are descriptive. People are describing what's going on, what has actually happened. When we turn around and make them prescriptive, "we think you should do this," I think that's where a lot of the problems come in.

H. L. Richard

Can I follow up on that once more?

Moderator

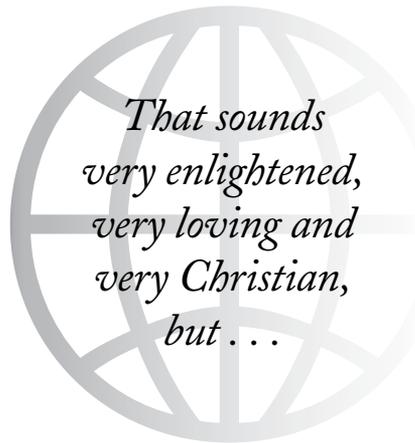
Yes, the speakers should feel free to ask their fellow panelists questions as well.

H. L. Richard

That sounds very enlightened, very loving and very Christian, but in application amidst the Hindu world, there are those who say that when the Hindu is coming to Christ, you must not impose, but let them make their own decisions, just let it happen.

The problem is that there is a default in every Hindu understanding that blends Christ, Christianity, church, and Western civilization. It is a package, and that is why they are so slow to come, because there is this whole Christian package. And when they are finally getting through that, and they say "I am going to go with this Jesus whatever the cost," you have to stop them and say "Wait! Jesus for you is not packaged together with denominations, the United States of America, etc. You need to work this out as a Hindu."

Now, if one doesn't stop them, if you just let them do what they think, they have all kinds of wrong understandings of this package of Christianity versus the evils of their Hindu civilization. That's not what they really think, but that's how they know we Christians think. And they think that's what is necessary for them to accept as they come to Jesus. So, we have to be interventionists in these things, or it may take a decade for someone to figure this out on their own and by then irreparable mistakes may have been made.



Robert Priest

I do think we need to help indigenous Christians to critique past ways that Christian mission has engaged their culture. If missionaries tell a Hindu convert that he must start eating beef to prove he is a Christian, this may well signal a whole paradigm of cultural engagement which is problematic. Historically missionaries have insisted on approaches to culture which really do cause problems for subsequent conversions.

Just one example, there were missionaries in many points of history that said in order to become a Christian you have to take a Christian name. They often pointed to the name change of Saul to Paul in the New Testament, claiming that it was a mark of conversion. "You can't have an African name like Nzuzi, you need a Christian name like Paul." But since a lot of the missionaries had names like Charles or Helen, those names

could count as Christian names, too. If you look at the New Testament carefully the switch from Saul to Paul does not occur at his conversion, but it occurs as Saul is on his first missionary journey going from Jew to Jew to Jew. Then another man with the same name as his, Sergius Paulus, calls him, there's a crisis, Paul explains the message, and this man believes. There's a pivotal point in the narrative where Saul clearly is coming to a clearer understanding of what an independent mission of the Gentiles will involve. The text shifts from "Barnabas and Saul" to "Paul and Barnabas." The only place it switches back is when they are back in the Jerusalem Council. The names Saul and Paul are kind of like Guillermo and Bill, they are tied to different ethnic identities, so that Saul, as a missionary to the Gentiles, begins to go by Paul. Rather than requiring new converts to change their names, it is Saul the missionary who makes a tactical shift, an accommodation, in becoming known as Paul. But, in fact, in mission history some missionaries did the exact opposite. Paul never said to Apollos, "Oh, you've got to get rid of your pagan name and adopt a Christian name." But if you start a Christian tradition where to be a Christian you have to change your name, or if you as a Hindu have got to start eating beef to prove you are a Christian, these signal a whole paradigm of cultural engagement required for those considering Christ. So, it does seem to me that there needs to be a critique of prior patterns if we are going to rethink the new ones.

Moderator

One of the questions regarding contextualization referred to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the fear of a kind of Christo-paganism that you see amidst Latin American Catholicism. While this is a very different context historically, there is this fear of this syncretism when we lose control of how the gospel is to be perceived. How do we both engage

culture and huge religious societies, remain within them, but guard at the same time against this kind of Christo-paganism?

John Ridgway

I recommend that people don't attempt enculturation until they have the Scripture in their language. You must have Scripture in a way that allows them to interact with the text and have that injection of biblical information. So let's take the situation of the Virgin of Guadalupe. There's a lot of interesting discussion even on that religious mixing. I've read articles that talk about how this represents some seriously good contextualization. Now, an outsider going into that blend would say, "How can that possibly be true?" Our defense shield rises up right away because of the whole concept of Catholicism and Mariology. But if they have Scriptures, just how are they grappling with this process? So to say, "How do we defend against that?" is pretty tricky. I think what you have to ask is, "What kind of information do they have with which to process it?" If it's inadequate, then that's something that has to be addressed before you start talking defensively.

Moderator

So we're asking what's critical in this process of discernment?

Gilles Gravelle

More biblical information.

John Ridgway

We find that as you walk through the Scriptures from Matthew through Revelation and, of course, the Old Testament as well, that people's process of faith is actually growing all the time. People start to respond and things start to make sense. It's sort of the same with our journey here in the States. We don't have it all figured out. Christ is becoming bigger and bigger in our lives, so it's an ongoing process. And I think it's very helpful in that process that people really

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grapple with the Scriptures and we just walk with them.

For example, as you read I Corinthians, you find what would feel like a lot of syncretism. They were wrestling with idols, and temples, and food offered to idols.

These are just questions that were coming up maybe several years after they had found some kind of faith in Christ. So the Scriptures are always describing this process of growth. For many of us who don't come from backgrounds where there are temples, we feel that they should just get this all figured out, black and white, done. This is not our own familiar syncretism. It's not messy to us.

I was recently in Japan and my wife and I spent four days with a very distinguished Japanese couple. I actually recommended that we study I Corinthians because so much surrounds Paul's thinking concerning the temple. He's helping them try and figure out their faith in a messy situation around the temple.

Some may say, "Well, don't even go into the temple. If you're a Christian and not a Buddhist there's no point in you going to the Buddhist temple." But if one is from a Buddhist background, one who has grown up in that context, then that's one's natural place of relationships. It's social, it's religious, with festivals, marriages, all that's going on as it does in and around local churches here in America. So to suddenly say "that's entirely wrong" doesn't make much immediate sense.

I would say I Corinthians is an unusual but very good place to start with my Japanese friends, to help them sort through a biblical perspective on idolatry. Isn't it interesting that Paul deals with the very thing that

everyone worries about, those pagan religious settings, that touchy area of worship in the temple. What do you do with that stuff? Well, it's interesting that Paul goes right to the heart of it all in I Corinthians.

The reality is that Scripture teaches us how to live righteously in an unrighteous place. So with my Japanese friends I need to help them sort their fear of what I call the "physicals." It's not the physicals but the spirituals that are the issue. So in the temple, if you are afraid of the incense, have you really understood and appropriated the gospel? If a person is not free of Buddhism, they can never live in and around Buddhism. Likewise, if a person is not free of religious Christianity, they can't live under the Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox flag or whatever. So until a person experiences the gospel in that sense and experiences that freedom, by grace alone, not by what I do or don't do, but only through my relationship with Christ, a spiritual relationship, then all the physical aspects of worship can be a real problem.

So why should I ever go to the temple? Why should I be involved in what my Buddhist friends are doing? The only reason you should be there is for the sake of the gospel. It's for the sake of the gospel that we join them in their process of growing in faith, and then the questions will come from our Buddhist friends. "Well why do you believe in Jesus?" they might ask. In other words, I don't see the physicals in and around the temple as the primary issue. I see the issue of syncretism as one of having two commitments, being unequally-yoked with unbelievers. Syncretism is where you have a relationship with Christ and Buddha. You can't have a relationship with God and money, said Jesus to the Pharisees. So in your

life. There's only one relationship I can have with the Lord himself. But if I have another relationship that controls my life, whether it is Buddha or money or whatever it is, that's the syncretism. So be not unequally yoked with unbelievers means you can't have fellowship with light and darkness. That's what the verse is talking about.

So the essence of the Christian life, and staying clean in terms of the gospel happens in here, in the heart. The separation, being set apart for Christ as Lord, that's where the separation comes, not the physical separations that we are talking about here. And as we walk with our Buddhist friends and help them grapple with the Scriptures, they begin to sort this all out.

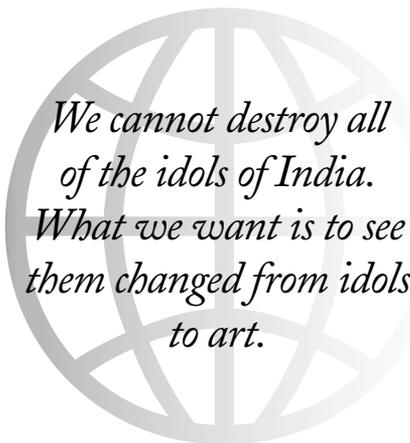
H. L. Richard

That's helpful. The bigger question that I think we must be constantly aware of is the complexity of the Hindu world, and I think in the Buddhist world as well. Everyone has a different theology of the Buddha. Read what's in the books, and you'll see that hardly anyone believes what's in the text. They all have a different way of understanding and working it out. Hindus don't have a single theology, and we're certainly not the ones to say "Well, this is the real Hindu interpretation." Any attempt at Hindu interpretation is more likely multiple interpretations of everything.

It's interesting that Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, who Parimal had mentioned in his plenary, he was a convert to Catholicism. As a Christ follower he was anti-idolatry. When he traveled to Europe for the first time, he was astonished to find the Greek gods were everywhere, in all the art and in all the statues. And he realized, this is the end that we, as Hindu followers of Christ, want to get to. We cannot destroy all of the idols of India. What we want is to see them changed from idols into art.

The *Ramayana* is a brilliant book from Hindu cultural history, very much

like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are in Western civilization. Have you read those (Homer's) works? If you read them as theology, they are a joke. Read as theology they are offensive and horrible. But if you read them as literature, they are brilliant. The problem is this: the *Ramayana* is read as Scripture. The Christian will read it as art and literature, but be careful if you say that casually to a Hindu, for it could seem offensive. But for our theological understanding I think it would help us to see it as art. It may reduce our knee-jerk reaction and indiscriminate



lumping together of everything Hindu as needing to be destroyed. I think that is the better way to view this.

In a Hindu family situation the idols are passed on for generations. As Hindus come to Christ, any advice pertaining to idols needs careful consideration. As long as some elders are around still worshipping the idols this cannot happen. But, when the authority of the family passes to disciples of Jesus, the idol needs to be moved out of the *Puja* room, out of the worship room, into another room where it is a family heirloom and a valuable piece of art, and in the *Puja* room now comes the Bible and whatever other kinds of symbols they want in there to show they are disciples of Jesus. The idol and art is an interesting idea, but in practice it's going to look Christo-pagan. The process of transformation is going to be Christo-pagan. And we have to keep wrestling with those issues.

Floor

How do we prevent them from looking at Scripture as art per se?

Gilles Gravelle

During the Reformation, one of Luther's associates went on a mission to get rid of all icons. He was pretty influential, "Get it out of the church, get it out of everything, it's idolatry." This has had a major impact on the church of the West to this day. Art was lost because of this very black and white dichotomy that says it's either "all pagan" or "all spiritual." This dualism, this Western Greek dualism, just got rid of it all. So we lost aesthetic theology.

It's only now that we see a younger generation coming in that's bringing art back. Just go to the churches. I'm in Seattle, and the new churches I visit are bringing back the Celtic stuff, poetry, singing the old songs; they want that. They're saying that today's church is a sterile dead church, and we need meaning. Some of us may think this is merely iconology. Are they going to worship this stuff? I don't think so.

So back to the question as to how others might view Scripture. They actually might view it as art, they might view it as high literature, they might have all sorts of views of it. Again, does our Lutheran Protestantism rush in and say, "You can't do that, that's not art." Well, I see a lot of art in the Scriptures. I see a lot of beauty and a lot of description. Others will see Scripture through different eyes. The key to contextualization is to understand what indigenous people are doing with the Scriptures when they have them, especially as they are shedding the controlling hand of Westerners. What are they doing with Scripture? I believe we have a great opportunity to learn Christ through them.

Andrew Walls has pointed this out in his observations of multi-cultural Christianity. We cannot possibly understand Christ adequately in one

language or one culture. We can only understand him through many languages and many cultures. So, start looking. How are these other peoples viewing Scripture, how are they viewing Christ? You'll enrich yourselves if you start reading theologies by Indians, Africans, Latin Americans. That's what I have been doing for the last seven years, and I am totally enriched by them, gaining insights that I never had before.

So we need to reverse our automatic tendency to label something "other" as iconology, devil worship, when we really don't know for sure. What are they seeing and how are they seeing it? That's the messy process we are in right now in this multicultural period. I think God wants the church of the West to start looking and learning and not reacting. So let's not react precipitously to the Virgin of Guadalupe, but let's first figure out what they are saying, and then we can react.

Moderator

Any other questions or comments?

Floor

I want to point out how there is room for Jesus in the Hindu pantheon, because there are a million gods and goddesses, so Jesus can be one of their gods. Of course we always are looking to give exclusiveness to Jesus. A couple of years ago I had an opportunity to share with my uncle and aunt, who are very religious Hindus, but I would say they're very culturally Hindu. So I was fortunate to share the gospel with them, and they asked for a Bible. I gave them a Bible on that occasion, and the following year, when I went to visit them, I found they had placed the Bible with the same place as the *Gita* and other [Hindu sacred books] in front of the family god. And, as you know, every Hindu family has their own family god. So, in front of *Lakshmi* [goddess of fortune and prosperity] they had placed the Bible.

I asked them why they were placing the Bible there, and they said "This is a sacred book, and we place it here." And I said "Yes, but you have to read it?" No, they had not, but at least it had opened a wonderful door for me. So I agree with H. L. Richard. So we have to use all kinds of things. **IJFM**

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