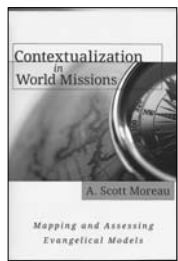


Book Reviews

Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models, by A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2012, 432 pp.)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill



If evangelical mission were considered a sport, it would need a referee. Indeed, as the contest over certain concepts and practices has sharply intensified over the last few years, certain bodies have been asked to fill an umpire role (witness, for example, the recent controversy over translation practice¹).

Most of the tension surrounds the practice of contextualization, a concept that represents such an array of meanings, models and methods that it defies simple explanation. Admittedly, such complexity often makes it difficult for us to find our missiological bearings—there’s just too much to consider, too much going on, too much being said on the matter. In the confusion, our tendency is to shut down and harden our positions.

Into this fray has stepped Wheaton College professor of intercultural studies Scott Moreau with his new book, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*. In it Moreau offers a way for evangelicals to situate themselves along the vast spectrum of contextualization. Yet he’s more than an umpire. Moreau steps back and helps us see the game we’ve been playing in a more complete fashion. He wants us to understand the diversity of practice in contextualization by identifying the various models we’re using. In so doing he may also help reduce the misunderstandings and misrepresentations that seem to fuel dysfunctional debate. By providing a map (what he calls a “travel guide”), he provides a constructive perspective that might allow us to move forward together as evangelicals in mission. And perhaps we won’t need an umpire as much in the future.

Contextualization is a relatively young term in evangelical mission, having only been coined in 1972. Its continued evolution as a concept in subsequent years has shown patterns typical of adolescence (involving lots of individuation and venturing). The term actually emerged within ecumenical discussions, so Moreau quickly sorts out what he means by evangelical contextualization. He must begin with the work of two Catholic mission scholars, Bevans and Schreiter, who provided the earliest mapping of different models of contextualization (pp. 36–44). But the term

quickly took on force in evangelical mission circles, where it generated yet other map-making (pp. 325–59), and it’s this evangelical mission stream that Moreau wants to chart for his readers. His encyclopedic skill is apparent throughout the book, and it’s tested in the first chapter where he tries to capture the essence of contextualization. For Moreau, contextualization is

the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith so as to communicate it to the minds and hearts of people with other cultural backgrounds. The goal is to make the Christian faith as a whole—not only the message but also the means of living out of our faith in the local setting—understandable. (p. 36)

With this definition in hand, Moreau probes the evangelical mission literature to determine the models we use in contextualization. He’s studied over 5000 sources, identified 249 examples, and distilled it all into six contextualization models. Following the mapping analogy, he compares the whole subject of contextualization to the earth’s surface, with his models representing the different landmasses (p. 31). Models are writ large, as ways to identify broad theoretical categories of contextualization. His models, therefore, are more comprehensive than any one method or proposition. Quoting Bevans,

A model is a case that is useful in simplifying a complex reality, and although such a simplification does not fully capture that reality, it does reveal true knowledge of it. (p. 31)

In the second part of the book Moreau describes his six models or complex realities. A quick scan of the six titles he’s chosen immediately indicates how evangelicals in mission might “lean into” contextualization: facilitator, guide, herald, pathfinder, prophet, and restorer. This typology can certainly help us both appreciate and negotiate diversity, but it also gives us a way to identify our place within a broad spectrum of possibilities. As Moreau has admitted, this mapping is kind of like a Myers-Briggs personality profile for contextual roles,² which can help each of us more easily assess where we are in the debate.

Moreau fits his 249 examples under six models, which initially seems nice and tidy. But the resulting density within each model required further sub-categories, and such variety can confound any reader who skips the first part of the book. Resist that temptation, for it’s actually in his early chapters that Moreau explains the conceptual history that has shaped these models of contextualization. And it’s there that he illumines the deep structure of contextualization, those assumptions and presuppositions which underlie “the process whereby Christians adapt the forms, content and praxis of the Christian faith.”

The author apparently needed to do some digging and interpreting to discover these presuppositions, for many of his sources failed to indicate their philosophical or methodological

orientation. We as evangelicals tend to push methods without giving much thought to our underlying assumptions, so Moreau examines the different understandings hiding beneath terminology and method. He spends a whole chapter on the development of “concepts that shape and constrain contextualization,” and his historical material, while brief, is crucial. Moreau is careful to specify that hinge period in the 1950s when mission anthropologists punctured the settled notion of “indigeneity” (pp. 123–26) and a new vitality in evangelical missiology emerged from a fresh engagement with the social sciences. Missiology discovered that there was more to the indigenous church than the popular “Three-Self” formula had projected, and further aspects of indigeneity began to be identified and promoted (e.g., self-actualization, self-theologizing, self-missilogizing). Moreau shows how these reconsiderations led into the fertile 1970s when other concepts fundamental to contextualization—such as holism, transformation, syncretism, incarnation and praxis—began to be emphasized. Different schools of thought would emerge, each giving greater focus to one or two of these concepts, and you would seldom hear all these concepts in one conversation. Moreau skillfully shows how these seemingly disparate concepts actually represent different sides of a prism we now call contextualization. Indeed, his masterstroke is to weave them together into one broad conversation.

Throughout the book Moreau draws attention to the activism that characterizes evangelical mission. Evangelicals stand ready for any new tool that can help them get on with the mission and in chapter 6 Moreau presents some of the “tools of analysis” that have caught the imagination of evangelical mission. Conceptual tools like worldview, orality, redemptive analogy and set theory we use and publish widely. Other tools of analysis have been more controversial, and Moreau doesn’t shy away from taking on two of them in this chapter: dynamic equivalence and insider movements. He presents some of his finest skill in unpacking the conceptual underpinnings of these two orientations, and he is characteristically Moreau in his fair and balanced representation of the different sides of each debate.

Once again, to capture all that Moreau suggests about these conceptual tools, the reader must reach back to an earlier part of the book. Naturally, the use of any tool requires discernment, an ability to sort the good from the bad, and so he outlines how our predecessors have discerned “the marks of good contextualization.” (Chapter 4) Yet all such sorting is rooted in two presuppositional concerns: revelation (Chapter 2) and interpretation (Chapter 3). Moreau knows that any map of evangelical contextualization will ultimately boil down to one’s assumptions about the Bible

(or what he calls “biblical congruence”), thus he begins his book with the deep structure of revelation and interpretation. It’s my conviction that the entire debate on contextualization can advance decisively if we simply absorb Moreau’s analysis (and his manner) in these initial chapters.

The author’s gift for fair and balanced critique is no more apparent than in his comparison of the contributions of Charles Kraft and Paul Hiebert, two mission anthropologists who have dramatically impacted how we understand the roles of knowledge, communication and culture in more recent efforts at contextualization. The comparison of these two missiologists actually carries over several chapters, popping up where Moreau cites the different perspectives on contested concepts. Kraft and Hiebert intersect in their treatment of analytical tools like “worldview” and “dynamic equivalence” (Chapter 6), as well as in epistemological discussions of “truth and knowledge” or the communication of “form and meaning” (Chapter 3). Both men have together helped evangelicals appreciate a “critical-realist” orientation to truth (vs. the “naïve-realist”), but Moreau’s precision allows readers to recognize a finer theoretical distinction between their two positions, one which makes a big difference in contextualization practice. Any attempt at contextualization seems to boil down to our understanding of message and meaning: is the meaning in the message itself or is it in the mind of the receptor? Can form and meaning be clearly separated? Kraft and Hiebert handle these questions differently, and how one answers such questions will determine where one lands along the spectrum of contextualization. Moreau’s years of experience teaching younger minds shines through in the way he carefully distills the mission anthropology of Kraft and Hiebert.

The clutch that allows Moreau to move from a missiological gear (Part 1) to an actual map of evangelical contextual models (Part 2) is his “rubric,” which is his selection of “the criteria and rules for categorizing each model.” (p. 174) In Chapter 7 Moreau describes how he shaped this instrument for mapping his models. He wants this rubric to include all approaches, clearly distinguish each model, and accommodate new categories in the future. While his models identify different “initiator roles,” he is quick to offer disclaimers: he doesn’t wish to “imply that the individual never takes on other roles or that the method is constrained by that role [but each model should simply] indicate the role of the initiator(s) that the particular example portrays.” (p. 175) Moreau is careful to avoid any inflation of his results. His is an inductive approach drawn from living examples, and those examples are limited to his broad experience and his impressive search

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of publications. As he himself admits, the examples available to him are not a complete picture, for quite often enterprising missionaries just don't choose to write for one reason or another. Moreau may seem technical and scientific in describing this rubric, but he is so characteristically transparent and collegial in manner, that he seems to invite participation. His spirit of open communication is in itself a model for all future discussions of contextualization.

So consider *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* the next textbook on contextualization. The author has tried to map it all out for us by introducing different models, but in so doing he has introduced a comprehensive manual on the subject. He is consistently readable and clear even in such murky waters, and you can expect to see it in many classrooms. More importantly, however, it must be used in our fields of ministry. This book can greatly enhance our ability to partner together as evangelicals on the frontiers of mission—the place where most of these innovative controversies initially emerge. The need for umpires or referees could become obsolete.

Endnotes

¹ The World Evangelical Alliance was asked by SIL/Wycliffe to mediate the controversy surrounding the translation of familial terminology into Muslim contexts. See <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/translation-review> for more details.

² Moreau made this comparison in his address at ISFM 2012.

Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City, by Timothy J. Keller (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 400 pp.)

—Reviewed by Brad Gill



A new urban frontier confronts the church in late modern society. A culture shift has widened the gap between church and culture, and it has forced the church to consider new forms of contextualization. Terms such as *missional*, *emergent*, and *post-evangelical* attest to the church's attempt to fill this cultural breach. Fresh streams from the global South offer simpler and effective alternatives to the over-institutionalized Western church models. And accompanying all this innovation is a not-so-subtle reaction to the shifting theological emphasis behind some of these new philosophies of ministry. Orthodox theology can seem marginalized or warped by any new model, and one can feel the pressure to choose between sound theology and cultural relevance. But especially when we consider the cultural and religious mix of Western cities, it has become increasingly apparent that the challenge of contextualization typically encountered on foreign fields has boomeranged back on the urban church in post-Christian societies.

With the publication of his new book, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, the prolific Timothy Keller has waded into these missiological waters. *Center Church* is essentially the “theological vision” that propels his Redeemer Church in New York City, but this comprehensive philosophy of ministry requires a manual of nearly 400 pages to unpack. Keller's fusion of orthodox theology and cultural contextualization provides clear evidence that missiological principles born in more foreign contexts have now come home to roost. If, indeed, the American city represents a new cultural frontier for gospel and church (Western, late modern, multicultural, post-Christendom), then Keller provides a thorough primer on the process we call contextualization for this particular frontier.

Keller believes that the urban cities of the world are underserved by the church, and he is “seeking to use all . . . biblical, sociological, missiological, ecclesial and rhetorical resources . . . to address this deficit.” (p. 166) His interdisciplinary breadth is impressive, as you can see from the thorough footnotes. He has integrated many missiological contributions into how we should expect “fruitfulness” in the urban context, but one particular voice rises above all the others. Keller was a colleague of Dr. Harvie Conn at Westminster Theological Seminary in the 1980s before he stepped into his ministry in New York City, and their weekly interface seems to enrich much of the book.¹ Conn was a unique mission theologian within the Reformed perspective, and a ground-breaker in urban missiology—and it appears that insights from their discussions have been forged on the anvil of Keller's urban pastorate. Keller is no mere reformed pastor, but a reformed *missiological* pastor. Oh, that our pulpits were filled with them.

Theological Vision

From the outset Keller wants to frame his entire approach as a “theological vision,” and his choice of terms make the reader step back and reconsider the scope of this task.

A theological vision is a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history. (p. 20)

The late modern city is Keller's own “type of culture at a moment in history,” and he spends over 160 pages unpacking this contextual challenge. One of the things I love about the book is how Keller models the necessity of thinking long and hard about context. He's a contextualizer *par excellence* who engages in the heavy lifting required to sort out his urban culture; yet, at the same time, he prioritizes a study of the gospel. For Keller contextualization seems too narrow a term for the broad challenge of fusing gospel and culture, so he chooses to deploy Richard Lints' term “theological vision.”² This is his way of bridging the typical divide between theology and the practical methods of ministry, creating more of a middle zone that he believes is critical to fruitfulness. His entire book explores this zone by examining each of the three

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dimensions (axes) of gospel, city and movement, integrating them *theologically* as one philosophy of ministry and one broad process of biblical contextualization.

Keller takes six chapters to introduce his understanding of the gospel and how it applies to the issues surrounding spiritual renewal. He pulls from the perspectives of Francis Schaeffer, D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, C.S. Lewis, John Piper and Martin Lloyd-Jones in his attempt to balance the gospel on an axis between two poles: "The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, but something else entirely—a third way of relating to God through grace." (p. 27) His perception is that the gospel is found between legalism (religion) and relativism (irreligion). Keller is masterful at showing how the gospel gets bent out of shape in our familiar American turf, and his initial chapters help us navigate the dangerous waters of our own Christian religious world. His first section, "Gospel Theology," explains the essence, themes and narratives of the gospel. He then offers a refreshing review of how the gospel of grace, redemption and atonement allow us to negotiate the straits of religion and irreligion, which he understands to be fundamental to any "Gospel Renewal." (chapters 4–6) This third way of grace requires a gospel that can break through the idolatries particular to this post-Christian world.

Keller's framing of the gospel is informative, but one suspects that the American urban context has shaped his axis of religion/irreligion. Throughout the book Keller will attempt to find balance between different polarities, but this first axis (religion/irreligion) seems descriptive of how religion manifests in a Western postmodern context. The gospel will always confront religion in any context, but on other socio-religious frontiers and across other geographical locations it primarily confronts other religious worlds, introducing more of a comparative religious challenge. In his own review of *Center Church*, Mark Pickett rightly points out that Keller's use of the word "religion" is pejorative, ambiguous and therefore difficult for those who minister in other religious contexts.³ Keller's axis of moralism (religion) and relativism (irreligion) may be relevant where we're seeing the challenge of late modernity, but it may fail to describe the gospel axis where religion and culture are fundamentally different. His axis is therefore more particular than universal. But one still can appreciate how this American pastor illustrates the process of gospel contextualization in a late modern, post-Christian, urban, American religious context.

Engaging Culture

Keller's view of contextualization becomes more explicit in parts two and three of his book. Part two, called "City," is divided into three sections: Gospel Contextualization, City

Vision and Cultural Engagement. Keller hasn't left theology behind with his initial study of the gospel, but rather continues his "theological vision" throughout the whole book. In part two on contextualization he begins to synthesize and apply the seminal work of numerous missiologists. Balance is big with Keller, and here, in his view of contextualization, he tries to balance the tension between Scripture and context, which I believe he achieves to a great degree. This section, which demonstrates his entire reasoning process, is a fine introduction to contextualization for the young American Christian who isn't particularly interested in strange and distant frontiers. It also provides the basis for the next section, "City Vision," where Keller takes four chapters to introduce what together forms a set of corrective lenses through which to view the city. His biblical, historical and contemporary perspectives are a positive affirmation of the urban context, a belief that "the city is an intrinsically positive social form with a checkered past and a beautiful future." (p. 151) Keller, who began his ministerial career in a more rural context, cuts through agrarian and suburban sympathies and appeals for an urban sensibility that will guide the church in a culture of late modernity.

From his perspective on contextualization and the urban context Keller then poses a critical question: how are we as Christians to *engage* culture? More particularly, how should we engage urban culture? In this third section, "Cultural Engagement" (and in particular, chapter 15, "The Cultural Crisis of the Church") Keller explores the contemporary culture shift that has left the church struggling to respond. He recognizes that since the 1960s, when the vernacular of church and culture held more in common, the church's jargon has increasingly become alien—morally, socially and intellectually distinct from the cultural vernacular. The "stained glass barrier" of church and culture is getting more daunting, and Keller takes a section to map out how the church is responding to it.

Stepping back a few decades, Keller uses Richard Neibuhr's "Christ and Culture" typology to introduce how the church has actually responded to culture, and then adapts his own models for what he sees happening today. In some of his best analytical work, Keller maps an array of four orientations that represent the church's engagement with culture: transformationist, relevance, countercultural and two-kingdoms. Together these orientations represent a matrix of different responses built around two questions: (1) Should one be pessimistic or optimistic about the possibility for culture change? (2) Is the current culture redeemable and good, or fundamentally fallen? The matrix frames such diverse orientations as the Seeker church, the Religious Right, the Amish and Liberation Theology, all of them around this issue of cultural engagement.

Exposing the anatomy of this modern worldview will require more than the new postmodern emphasis of narrative—it demands a robust apologetic of the cross.

Keller's biblical lens is constantly looking for balance, so he's able to affirm aspects of each model of cultural engagement (chapter 17, "Why All the Models are Right...and Wrong"). He feels that "each model tends to overlook the implications of the points in the biblical story line other than the one around which it finds its center for gravity [but] all of these points on the biblical story line are covered well by the sum of the four models." (p. 226) He points out that missiologists and theologians like Newbigin, Kuyper, and Neibuhr all seem to emphasize more than one side of any typology. Being a pastor, Keller notes that one's gifts and calling play a large role in determining which model one feels most comfortable with.

Movement and Institution

In his third and final section, "Movement," Keller jumps into the missional debate of the last fifteen years, and here he tries to find balance for the church as "structured organization" and "fluid organism."

Because the church is both a stable institution with inherited traditions and a dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, we minister with balance, rooted in our ecclesial tradition yet working cooperatively with the body of Christ to reach our city with the gospel. (249)

Keller wants to "center the missional church" (chapter 20) by integrating "a balance of ministry fronts" (chapter 22). He reaches back before Darrell Gruder's ground-breaking *Missional Church* (1998) to the foundational missiology of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, two missiologists who refocused us on the "missionary encounter with Western culture." (p. 254) During the 1990s the work of these two men helped us recapture *missio dei* from the disastrous secularization of the Enlightenment project evident in liberal churches, setting the stage for a fresh explosion of missional approaches. But Keller notes that each of the "dizzying variety of sometimes contradictory definitions of missional" fail in being comprehensive. (p. 256) He insists on a much-needed integration of evangelistic, incarnational, contextual and communal dimensions in any sound missiology.

Keller is clear that any biblically sound contextualization must confront "the baseline narratives of a culture," and he incorporates Newbigin's unmasking of the idolatry of human reason in late modernity. He insists that exposing the anatomy of this modern worldview will require more than the new postmodern emphasis of narrative—it demands a robust apologetic of the cross. It's here that Keller cycles back to his initial emphasis on "Gospel Theology," examining the potential for drift in the doctrine of salvation. The "Kingdom Gospel" corrective of missional proponents can often fail to

present the destructiveness of sin at the heart of the gospel. He insists that "a church can robustly preach and teach the classic evangelical doctrines and still be missional." (p. 271)

One of Keller's most helpful analyses is his examination of the relationship between movements and institutions. (chapter 27) He wants to see a movement to Christ across the "gospel ecosystem" of the city (chapter 30), but this requires churches to embrace partnership. He asserts that "no single form of church is intrinsically better at growing spiritual fruit, reaching nonbelievers, caring for people, and producing Christ shaped lives." (p. 267) He wants to cultivate a movement, but recognizes the inevitability of institutionalization. His comparisons and explanations of the interface between movement and institution will speak effectively to the anti-institutional bias of a younger generation struggling to find its place in the church today.

Tim Keller's *Center Church* is an attempt to center us missiologically rather than to convince us of any one model of church. It's really more like a model of the comprehensive reasoning required in frontier missiology. While his particular observations might not be applicable or reproducible in other global cities, he unpacks that common middle zone where a theological vision must be fashioned in every urban context. By focusing on the particular challenge of the American city, Keller might help a 20–30-something generation that struggles to fit into existing churches. His applied missiology might help them turn and embrace the creative process of contextualization. The increasingly specialized world of missiology should welcome such a fine primer for pulpit and pew. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Keller makes reference to these meetings with Conn in *Generous Justice* (New York: Dutton, 2010) pp. xviii–xix

² Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993)

³ Mark Pickett, Lecturer in missiology at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, offers a review at <http://www.affinity.org.uk/cms.php?page=115>