

CONTEXTUALIZATION IN ISLAMIC SOCIETY:
ISSUES AND POSITIONS

By S. S.

Many groups have struggled to find a clear position on the question of contextualization. Perhaps they fear compromise, or they find that the substantive issues are clouded by a multitude of related questions. In either event, the tensions between socio-cultural forms and the unchanging nature of the gospel must be adequately resolved. My purpose is to attempt to clarify the picture by briefly outlining what I consider to be the main issues involved, the principal positions on each, and the principal problems that remain. I include both contextualization on the socio-cultural level (also called indigenization) as well as on the theological level. It should be noted that the issues are interconnected, the position taken on one often affecting how one views another.

I. The causes of Islamic resistance to the gospel and to the church. While there are recognizable secondary factors (e.g. the Palestinian issue and Western support for Zionism--see Anderson 1976:283-288), many attribute the lack of missionary success to one or two primary causes.

A. Some hold that the theological differences between Christianity and Islam are the primary reason results are so few. Important as these differences are, many today question that they are the primary cause.

B. In recent years, it has become popular to lay the blame on the missionary, and especially the policy of "extracting" the convert from his culture and imposing "western" cultural forms (e.g. Anderson 1976:288-290; Parshall 1985:21). Missionary extractionism by itself, however, hardly accounts for the centuries of rejection that we see.

C. A third view holds the principal cause to be the ideological nature of Islamic society which requires structures for segregating non-Muslims from the Muslim majority that are intrinsically unjust (see IV below). This has generally given rise to a secondary cause: the minority Christian communities have erected linguistic and social barriers as a protective measure against the inroads of the Muslim majority. These two factors explain the paucity of results as well as extractionism itself.

II. The theological evaluation of Islam, especially the criteria used. This determines the way the receptor culture is used in the contextualization process, and the forms that are actually used. Views on Islam have varied widely over the years, from those which are basically negative (e.g. the 19th C. polemic) to those which are mostly positive (e.g. the fulfilment doctrine). This is because Christians are not agreed as to the criterion by which religions should be judged. The various approaches may be classified as:

A. Those which approach evaluation from a supposedly "neutral" standpoint, such as the "marks" of the true religion (Pfander & Tisdall 1910:9-39), or the "essence of religion."

B. Those which use a "theological" criterion, the most popular being the historic Christian message on the person and work of Christ (e.g. Zwemer 1920). This criterion is variously understood, however (see e.g. Cragg 1977:63-64).

C. An alternative view, based on Romans 1-2, holds that religions should be judged by what they have done with the intuitive knowledge of God and of His law received via general revelation. On that basis, they see in Islam both the "Divine approach" (general revelation) and "human rejection," expressed in the repression of that knowledge and the substitution of distortions and half-truths (Bavinck 1966:117-127).

III. **The goal of contextualization in relation to Islamic society.** The planting of the church is generally recognized to be one of the goals of Mission. But how should this goal be understood in relation to Islam in particular? Opinions on the subject differ considerably.

A. Some have understood the goal in terms of the more or less radical destruction of Islam and its territorial displacement by Christianity (e.g. the 19th C. polemicists).

B. Others view the objective in terms of the "fulfilment" of that which is incomplete by that which is complete (Jones 1959:245-6). In recent years, the program of inter-religious dialogue of the ecumenical movement has espoused a concept of mutual fulfilment; it envisages the emergence of a global "community of communities" in which each religion and culture has a part (W.C.C. 1979:6, 9f). This latter idea would seem to have abandoned the idea of church planting altogether, at least for the Muslim World.

C. In evangelical circles, stress is placed on winning Muslims to allegiance to Christ, training them in discipleship, and gathering them into churches rooted in some way in Islamic society. There is disagreement as to whether the goal should include social involvement as well as evangelism.

IV. **The place of the Muslim Convert Church in Islamic society (the Ummah).** The question of the relationship of the church to society has always been somewhat controversial, but the issue is of critical importance in the Muslim world. The relationship of Muslim converts and convert churches to Muslim society constitutes a major missionary problem.

Traditionally, as a "protected" people ("Dhimmis"), Christians are segregated into subject ghetto communities ("Milletts"). The Muslim community imposed segregation on the church as a means of realizing the ideal of ordering every aspect of life by Islamic law (Moffett 1987:481-483). With its legal barriers to the conversion of Muslims

to Christianity and its inducements to Christians to become Muslim (Law of Apostasy, Family Law, etc.), Islamic law has been able effectively to hinder the church from exercising its normal "yeast" function in society (Gibb & Kramers 1953, articles "Dhimma," "Djizya," "Kharaj," "Murtadd," and "Talak [VII]"). In this century, the inequalities of the Millet system have been mitigated somewhat by the adoption of Western-style constitutions in many Muslim countries. The structure is still intact, however; with the rising tide of fundamentalism and increasing inter-communal strife, we may well see a hardening of attitudes and a return to the letter of the law.

The conversion of a Muslim usually triggers a rejection mechanism which reminds one of the "transplant rejection" phenomenon in medicine. Converts are cut off from the family and society, and if the traditional sanction against "apostasy" (i.e. death) is not applied, they are forced either to return to Islam, to join one of the ghetto communities, or to immigrate to the West.

In response, the Christian community has attempted to preserve its identity by using a distinctive religious language and by raising social barriers. (I am describing the Arab World especially at this point, but Christians have responded in similar ways elsewhere.) Christians are often suspicious of Muslim converts and slow to accept them as true Christians. This response is understandable and perhaps necessary, but is nevertheless a major hindrance to the evangelization of Muslims. The principal approaches to the problem are:

A. Traditionally, Muslim converts were either integrated into existing churches, or formed into churches which still rely on the traditional ecclesiastical language, forms and symbols which tend to cause misunderstanding and alienate Muslims. In either case, the result has been the "extraction" of converts into ghetto churches.

B. Some apparently feel that the solution is to push for the acceptance of the principle of religious pluralism in the Muslim world (see e.g. the interesting discussion in W.C.C. 1976:444-452). This may be ideal, but does not seem to be very realistic, given the intensity of the Muslim desire for an Islamic State and the growth of Islamic fundamentalism.

C. Recent missiological thinking has focused on finding ways to circumvent the Millet system and keep it from thwarting Christian penetration of Islamic society. The theory is that if Muslim converts learn to express the Christian faith and life in Islamic terms and are gathered into churches which use Islamic cultural forms (see V and VI below), this just might deactivate the rejection mechanism and permit such churches to take root within Islamic society (Wilder 1977; Parshall 1985).

Others, however, reject the idea as a contradiction in terms and a compromise of the gospel. They feel that the gospel itself requires the rejection of everything associated with Islam, even if it involves extractionism. To keep the controversy in perspective, we

must acknowledge that the theory has not really been tested. We simply do not know if Christians of Islamic culture will be tolerated in Muslim society any more than other Christians. Moreover, if this approach is to succeed, it must "sell" itself to the existing churches in the Muslim world which resist anything "Islamic," tending to feel threatened by such efforts. The churches of Muslim culture must have fraternal relations with those churches if they are to take their rightful place in the Body of Christ. On the other hand, can we afford to simply continue as before without trying to break the strangle-hold of the Dhimmi system of Islamic Law?

V. **The use of Islamic cultural forms in the Muslim convert church.** (By "cultural forms" I mean rituals, customs, institutions and material objects, as opposed to theological forms which will be treated in VI.) This issue has generated considerable controversy in recent years. Positions vary immensely.

A. As we have seen, some adamantly oppose the idea of using Islamic forms as a compromise of the gospel.

B. Others feel it is possible to circumvent the Millet system by planting churches of Muslim cultural expression (e.g. Parshall 1985). They accept the principle of Muslim converts using Islamic cultural forms, but often have very different ideas as to how they may be used, and which forms may be used and which must be rejected. The translation model--the idea of a "dynamic equivalence church"--has been proposed as a solution (Kraft 1979a:315-327; 1979b:114-128).

The idea is interesting, but the use of Islamic forms raises hermeneutical questions to which completely satisfactory solutions have not yet been given. Just how is the form to be interpreted in the Muslim convert church? When a form is used, how can one be certain that a Christian, not a Muslim, meaning will be communicated? Islam and Christianity have a long history of using religious symbols and practices that are similar in form but have different, and often conflicting, meanings. Bible translators at least have an objective standard against which they may measure the faithfulness of a translation--the original text. Church planters have no original church to use as a measure of "dynamic equivalence." All they have is the New Testament which only gives the broad parameters of how the church should be organized and should function. As a consequence, the concept of "dynamic equivalence" as a model for church planting makes for considerable subjectivity. The problem is that there is no criterion for distinguishing those uses of Islamic forms which communicate authentically Biblical meanings from those which are syncretistic. Theological ambiguity may accompany the use of a form, or the wrong meaning may be unwittingly communicated, unless further attention is given to these questions (1).

VI. **The use of the Qur'an and Islamic thought in communicating the gospel.** How this is done determines whether or not the theology of the church being planted will remain faithful to the Scriptures. There are two main positions.

A. The first holds that if Christians are ever to cross the tremendous semantic and cultural barriers separating them from Muslims and effectively communicate the gospel, they must start "from within Islam." They must seek out those gleams of "truth" that are on our side and build on this "Christian potential" to the truth of the gospel (see e.g. Cragg 1979:196-207). In sum, the approach uses the Qur'an and Islam as a theological starting point.

B. The second position holds that the Qur'an and Islamic thought should be used only as a linguistic and cultural vehicle for the communication of the gospel. Such a use is not only legitimate but is also necessary to help Muslims better understand the Biblical message. The only theological starting point which the Christian may legitimately use is the Bible. However useful it may be linguistically, the Qur'an cannot be used theologically; not only does it contain nothing that favors "our side" but such a use is basically syncretistic.

VII. The hermeneutical methods used to interpret the Bible and the Qur'an in the cross-cultural communication of the gospel. The receptor language and culture must be used to communicate the Biblical message if it is to be understood at all. The method used is crucial as it determines how the message will be understood and whether that understanding will faithfully reflect the meaning of the original. In Islamic society, the hermeneutical task is complicated by the fact that one must communicate the Biblical message in relation to a rival "scripture," the Qur'an, which is the single most important formative influence in Islamic culture. How we use the Qur'an in communicating the Biblical message impacts directly on how Muslims understand that message. Traditional methods of exegesis, being mono-cultural, have generally been unable to cope with the tremendous semantic gap separating the two communities. A method is required that is adequate to the interpretation of both books. Here again, we find two methods, comparable to the above two positions.

A. The first, which may be called the synthetic method, approaches the task by using the Qur'an theologically to attempt to bring Biblical and Qur'anic meanings closer together (see e.g. Cragg 1971). It is noteworthy that many who have taken an otherwise conservative stance on Islam have nevertheless sought to give certain Qur'anic passages "Christian" meanings (e.g. Tisdall 1904:104-167). Critics feel that this method tends to undercut the authority of the Bible, distorts its message, and is basically syncretistic.

B. The second may be called an analytic method in that it seeks to interpret each book in terms of its own language system and cultural context, avoiding the theological use of the Qur'an. As yet, however, nothing has been published applying an analytic approach to the special problems associated with interpreting the Biblical message in relation to the Qur'an.(2) What would be particularly useful to translators and communicators is a study of the semantics of Qur'anic language similar to what has been done for the Bible, which compares and contrasts the semantics of the two books.

To conclude, the issues involved in contextualization with reference to Islamic society are complex and the pitfalls enormous. Is it any wonder then that Christians have often fallen into one or another of these pitfalls along the way? I have sought to clarify the issues and highlight what we have learned so far about the basic problem, but unanswered questions remain (see IV and V) and above all there is much work to be done if we are to have a cross-cultural hermeneutic that is adequate to the task. Perhaps you have an observation or suggestion to add to the above, or a critique to make. All feedback is welcome and should be sent to the editor.

Notes

1. In a recent article, Paul Hiebert summarizes a promising methodology for obtaining answers to these and similar questions, which calls for working through the issue with the emerging church (1987: 109-111). What we now need instead of more speculation on this question is for those in a position to do so to consult with a group of Muslim converts using this methodology and write up what they learn.

2. Existing studies in cross-cultural hermeneutics are nevertheless still helpful (e.g. Padilla 1980).

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A CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR STYLES OF ARABIC BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

By David Owen

After many years of both reading and writing in the field of Arabic Bible translation, I have grown aware of the need for a system of more precise and unified terminology to adequately describe this activity. For this reason, I am offering the following graphic representation as an initial and possible solution to this need. An-

