

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUES RAISED

by P. B.

John Mansour's article in Seedbed 10/3 and Warren Chastain's response to it raise a number of interesting points.

My own sympathies lie more with Warren. I would agree with him that John does not really describe what he is trying to sell us. It is not enough to talk vaguely about contextualized churches without describing precisely what is on offer.

On the other hand, I did detect in John's article a recognition of the continuity between Christian and Muslim Arab culture that is often lacking in contemporary Evangelical missiology. While Christian and Muslim Arab cultures do differ, there is not a radical discontinuity between them. Often our studies of necessity focus on the differences, but this should not blind us to the shared presuppositions, language, social mores and institutions of the two communities. Christian and Muslim Arab families are more alike than different. Any contextualization theory that makes absolute the differences fails to recognize that cultures are not well-bounded, static phenomena.

In the light of this, any claim that Christians and Muslims have little in common and that real communication between them is impossible is patently absurd. Muslim and Christian Arabs often share the same social space and occupy similar noetic universes. The amount of inter-communal exchange will of course vary from country to country and from class to class, but it exists nonetheless. For this reason we would expect contextualized Arab churches to exhibit common features regardless of the background of their members.

I think that we need to be more careful about our labels--*Jews for Jesus*, or *Muslims for the Messiah*. Why not Christians for Christ! Seriously, the first two slogans are not equivalent. The term 'Jew' points to both ethnicity and religion, while the terms 'Muslim' and 'Christian' do not carry this same ambiguity. As Warren points out they define religious orientation and allegiance. Thus the phrase 'a Muslim Christian' is a contradiction in a way that a 'Jewish Christian' is not.

Not that I am entirely happy with the phrase '*Jews for Jesus*'. I do not share the assumptions of many Evangelicals who seem to think that Jews are in some sense 'anonymous Christians.' The adoption of the name 'Christian' makes clear my allegiance. That it may carry other connotations may be an embarrassment, but I cannot turn my back on two thousand years of history. Belonging to Christ entails identification with his Church. The only churches we know are human and fallible. Identification with a kind of idealized Church is not really an option.

This raises more acutely the whole issue of the nature of the Church. Because the word 'church' is used to translate the Greek word *ekklesia*, our 'biblical' view of the Church will inevitably begin with the idea of the Church as a congregation or assembly. But if that is all, we are failing to be fully biblical. The Bible speaks of God's people in other terms; 1 Peter 2:9 comes readily to mind, where the church is described as "a chosen race

(*sulāla*¹), a royal priesthood, a holy nation (*ummatan karrasahā*), God's own people (*sha'b*)". The connotations are quasi-ethnic. Just as Muhammad sought to replace Arab tribalism with a Muslim *umma*, Christ offers us an alternative *umma*. It is more than a mere assembly. It seems to me that you cannot be a part of the Muslim *umma* and the Christian *umma* at the same time. Forgive me if the statement sounds glib. The implications of this for our brothers and sisters from a Muslim background are serious, and should not be dismissed lightly.

The Church has other dimensions also. Avery Dulles, if I may be allowed to cite a Catholic writer, gives five models for the Church: the *institutional* (Church as a perfect society), the *communal* (Church as community, the body of Christ), the *sacramental* (Church as a sign to and sacrament for the world), the *kerygmatic* (Church as herald), and the *diaconal* (Church as servant).² Each model has some biblical warrant, although the scriptures point more frequently to the kerygmatic and communal models. Protestants have accordingly emphasized these, while Catholics have perhaps stressed the institutional and sacramental dimensions of the church. However a fully biblical view of the church should try to embrace all these aspects; and must do so in a way that does not ignore the past. It is not being biblical to simply plunder the text of the new Testament for sociological models and attempt to transplant them as if society has not changed. Are some of our contextualized approaches too shallow?

In this context the issue of Christian unity is important. John Mansour's reference is surely not accurate, and somewhat out of touch with the current tenor of WCC thinking. As I understand it, the goal of organizational unity has been replaced by one of fellowship between culturally diverse churches. It is an aim with which we can all identify, even if we do not allow quite the same theological latitude as is found in some WCC circles.

The Bible stresses unity. It is an important attribute of the Church (John 17:11). We are to act and behave in a way that fosters such unity. We cannot be content with second best (Eph. 4:3ff). Churches may be culturally diverse, but that does not mean that we should erect artificial barriers from the outset. I am not against diverse Christian groups adopting culturally appropriate forms of worship, but I do question approaches that seem to decide what is culturally appropriate before the event. As outsiders we need to sit and observe a bit longer.

The essence of contextual theory is that the same solutions are not always and everywhere appropriate. It is therefore good that we can debate these issues openly, and I welcome the opportunity this gives for discussion.

¹The Arabic terms are from the Living Arabic Bible.

²Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 1976, Gill and Macmillan.