In the mid-70s “Cross-Cultural Contextualization” came crashing to the forefront of missiology.\(^1\)

Notable efforts at “indigenization” were in evidence in much earlier missions efforts, of course (and they had their critics!). The growth of the modern Messianic movement coincides with wider contextualization efforts in the last quarter of the 20th century. Indeed, my first conversation with Phil Parshall (widely praised or blamed promoter of what was seen early on as a radical approach in Muslim evangelism in Bangladesh) took place in our home in Miami in the late 70s, when, as a novice field worker, I sought to gain understanding on that still-elusive question, “Where does cross-cultural contextualization end and syncretism begin?”\(^2\)

Those gathered in this forum need no reminder of the ongoing debates – sometimes heated, sometimes divisive – in Jewish ministry circles about the effectiveness, appropriateness, and boundaries of contextualized ministry. In our continuing effort to see less heat and more light

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\(^1\) Wheaton professor A. Scott Moreau begins his soon-to-be published-by-Baker chapter on contextualization thusly: “Contextualization was first used to express the tension between two realities: 1) the Bible expresses universal truths and 2) we live in a world of diverse and ever-changing cultures. These realities are deeply connected to a central concern all Christians face: what is the relationship between the Christian faith and my own culture? Contextualization is the process in which we wrestle with this and related questions. It is of crucial significance for all Christians—even those who never cross a cultural boundary—for every one of us lives in a cultural setting and has to incarnate the Word of God and the Christian faith appropriately into that setting.

\(^2\) As initially used in 1972, “contextualization” was intended to go beyond the traditional terms such as “adaptation” and “indigenization” (Kinsler 1978). Its coinage was a natural result of the multiple shifts in mission thinking that had taken place during the 20th century” [Scott Moreau, “Contextualization: From an Adapted Message to an Adapted Life,” in The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging Contemporary Issues and Trends, forthcoming].
added to our discussion, it may prove helpful to widen the lens to see what workers among other people groups have been discovering in their endeavors to “make disciples of all nations.”

To that end, I surveyed some of the more recent literature and those working in ministries in various places. As a starting point, Stan Guthrie’s excellent volume, *Missions in the Third Millennium: 21 Key Trends for the 21st Century*, includes a chapter on contextualization. Methodologies mentioned include: story telling (vs. Western cognitive teaching), adapting communication to fit non-Western sensitivities (e.g., “shame cultures”), use of indigenous music, and understanding community decision-making processes in designing evangelistic approaches.

Guthrie commends much of what is taking place in contextualized ministry today, but also shares his – and others’ – concerns. “Gary Corwin, a former missionary to Ghana and the editor of *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, has noted the development of ‘super-contextualization,’ which he defines as ‘a new willingness to push the envelope of cultural and religious accommodation way beyond its current practice.’”3 How can we discern where the dangers lie?4

Much can be gleaned by following the ongoing dialogue between proponents of various views as chronicled in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. While *EMQ* has substantive articles dealing with contextualization prior to 1998, in keeping with our “current trends” theme we’ll pick up the thread with Phil Parshall’s “Danger! New directions in contextualization” October 1998 *EMQ* article.5 As noted above, Parshall was an early proponent of what is now referred to in missiological shorthand as “C4” contextualization.6 As he observes contextualization moving toward “C5” and “C6” he raises concerns on several levels, based on results of the “Islampur” study (survey of 72 key people of influence after 15 years of ministry in a remote Asian region

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4 Gary Corwin in his July 2004 *Evangelical Missions Quarterly (EMQ)* article “Telling the Difference” asks, “What’s the rule-of-thumb definition for the difference between contextualization and syncretism? Simple: it’s contextualization when I do it, but syncretism when you do it!” (p. 282).


6 The “C-Scale,” developed by pseudonymous missiologist John Travis (“The C1 to C6 Spectrum: A Practical Tool for Defining Six Types of ‘Christ-centered Communities’ Found in the Muslim Context,” *EMQ* Vol. 34, Number 4 [October 1998], pp. 407-408), is as follows:

- C1 - Traditional Church Using Outsider Language
- C2 - Traditional Church Using Insider Language
- C3 - Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Religiously Neutral Insider Cultural Forms
- C4 - Contextualized Christ-centered Communities Using Insider Language and Biblically Permissible Cultural and Islamic Forms
- C5 - Christ-centered Communities of “Messianic Muslims”
- C6 - Small Christ-centered Communities of Secret/Underground Believers
where mosque attendance was encouraged by the outside Christian workers). Areas of concern in the Muslim setting (with application elsewhere in missions) include:

**Authoritative texts (holy writings):** “96 percent [in the survey of Islampur Muslim Background Believers (MBBs in the literature)] say there are four heavenly books, i.e., Torah, Habur, Injil, and Qur’an. (This is standard Muslim belief, i.e., Law, Prophets, Gospels, and Qur’an). 66 percent say the Qur’an is the greatest of the four books. 44 percent feel peace or close to Allah when listening to the readings of the Qur’an” (Parshall, October 1998.) *EMQ*, p. 406.

**Christology:** “The mosque is pregnant with Islamic theology. There Muhammad is affirmed as a prophet of God and the divinity of Christ is consistently denied” (p. 409).

**Prayer:** “Uniquely Muslim prayers (*salat*) are ritually performed as in no other religion. These prayers are as sacramental to Muslims as is partaking of the Lord’s supper for Christians. How would we feel if a Muslim attended (or even joined) our evangelical church and partook of communion... all with a view to becoming an ‘insider’” (p. 409).

**Syncretism:** “Bob (pseudonym), a very intelligent, productive, and spiritually oriented missionary to Muslims... openly and dogmatically affirmed Mohammad as a prophet of God. Perhaps his motives were pure, but this progression of identification with Muslims had gone much too far” (pp. 409-410).

**Conversion:** “. . .two Asian Christians who have recently undergone legal procedures to officially become Muslims. This was done to become a Muslim to Muslims in order to win Muslims to Christ. Actually taking on a Muslim identity and praying in the mosque is not a new strategy. But legally becoming a Muslim definitely moves the missionary enterprise into uncharted territory. I address this issue with a sense of deep concern” (p. 404). Parshall underscores his concern with these words: “Personally, I can only put conversion (or reconversion) to official Islam as high syncretism. . . regardless of motivation” (p. 405).

**Deceit:** “After worship (in the mosque), the Muslim villagers all came up to Harry (the western missionary who wanted to experience Muslim worship firsthand) and congratulated him on becoming a Muslim. Embarrassed, Harry explained that he was a follower of *Isa* (Jesus) and that he just wanted to learn about Islam. Immediately, upon hearing these words, the crowd became very angry. Harry was accused of destroying the sanctity of the mosque. Someone yelled that he should be killed. A riot was about to break out” (p. 409).

And, “Even C4 is open to a Muslim charge of deceit. But I disagree and see it as a proper level of indigenization. We have not become a ‘fifth column’ within the mosque, seeking to undermine
its precepts and practices. C5, to me, seems to do just that and open us up to the charge of unethical and sub-Christian activity” (p. 409).

As might be expected, Parshall’s article touched off a flurry of responses, including one from John Travis, author of the “C Spectrum.” Among Travis’s points in his October 1998 EMQ article, “Must all Muslims leave ‘Islam’ to follow Jesus?” are these:

1. Study of Islam’s writings can be a useful tool in building bridges. “Holy Book reading sessions” begin with “reading a Qur’anic passage in a respectful manner. . . Unserved Muslims are more likely to attend Bible reading sessions where they also contain some Arabic Qur’anic passage. Achmad is careful to read Qur’anic passages which do not conflict with the Bible” (p. 412).

2. Theology must be lived, not just assented to: “. . .we need to assess the quality of the new believers’ lives in Christ and not just their theology. Is the fruit of the Spirit evident and do they now show a deeper love for others? Scripture is clear that by qualities such as these we will recognize true followers of Christ (Matt. 7:20, John 13:35)” (p. 412).

3. Sentiment is a secondary concern: “Regarding how Muslims would ‘feel’ about such an approach, I think the question is a bit irrelevant. The majority of Muslims that I have talked to object to any activity they perceive as an attempt to attract Muslims to Christianity. However, the C5 approach, which communicates the message of salvation in Christ without the intent to persuade Muslims to ‘change their religion,’ might in fact be the one most appreciated by Muslims” (p. 413).

4. Tensions are inevitable: “Can individuals be a part of the community of Islam and not affirm standard Muslim theology? Yes, so long as they remain silent about their unorthodox beliefs. . . However the goal of C5 believers (unlike C6 believers) is not to remain silent about their faith, but rather to be a witness for Christ. As they share, eventually the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad and the inerrancy of the Qur’an will arise. A follower of Jesus cannot affirm all that is commonly taught about the Qur’an and Mohammad. Certain aspects of the role of Muhammad and the Qur’an must be reinterpreted. This will perhaps be the most challenging task of C5; to not do so will in time cause these believers to move toward C4 (contextualized, yet not Muslim) or C6 (underground/silent believers)” (p. 413).

5. C5 may be transitional. “Yet, would it not be much better for Muslim followers of Jesus to share the Good News over months or years with fellow Muslims who may eventually expel them, than for these new believers to leave their families and community by the own choice, being seen as traitors by those whom they love?” (p. 414).

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7 Mark Williams of the Society for International Ministries in the Philippines writes in a letter to the editor of EMQ, “I know of a pastor in one area of Southeast Asia who is convinced that he should ‘become a Muslim to the Muslims’ (cf. 1 Cor. 9:20-22) by going on the hajj (pilgrimage) in Saudi Arabia! Of course, in order to do this he will have to ‘prove’ that he is a ‘Muslim’ – probably by reciting the Shahada (creed) that affirms that Muhammad is a prophet of God” (April 1999, pp. 236-137).
C5 contextualization works: “Last, were it not for the C5 approach used in this [Islampur] church-planting ministry, would there be these many thousands of new believers to analyze in the first place?” (p. 412).

As alluded to by Travis (point 2, above), and several authors, contextualization concerns touch both praxis and theology. Which of these is the greater concern is in itself a reflection of one’s world view. Preserving and passing on the “faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) is a vital part of disciple making everywhere, but developing systematic theologies may be more of a Western concern.⁸

While we passionately desire to communicate biblical truth in ways that are easily assimilated by our audiences, we are familiar with what happens when theology becomes diluted, or worse, polluted. SIM Director Steve Strauss helps frame the issue in his paper prepared for the Evangelical Missiological Society: “If we admit that all theology is contextual, won’t the entire theological process be thrown into a swamp of relativity? Some of the most prominent contextual theologians seem to base their theologies more on culture or political ideologies than on the Bible. The theologies they develop appear to contradict historically accepted orthodoxy and seem to have strayed into syncretism, further confirming that the whole idea of contextual theology is suspect.”⁹

While the concerns are real, Strauss spends the bulk of his paper advocating for contextualized theologies within the safeguards of a high view of Scripture and a solid biblical hermeneutic. [Elsewhere, Strauss reminds us that having to deal with alternate theologies is both an old issue in church history (witness the divide between Eastern and Western churches because of disagreements over creeds such as Chalcedon) and a very current issue (evangelicals “doing theology” amidst an Ethiopian Orthodox culture).¹⁰] Making biblical truth understandable while remaining true to the Scriptures within each societal context is central to our task.

That moves us to another area of current controversy in missions: Bible translation. A brother who is coordinating translation efforts in a significant Muslim area recently communicated the following:

When it comes to translation we do our best to contextualize the text – both the outside (format) and inside (words used). We design our covers to look attractive

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⁸Note, for example, the emphasis on practical theology by a brother from the Mid-East: “A Middle Eastern theology will provide a comprehensive understanding of life. Perhaps it will involve writing a Christian Talmud or a Mishnah, that will help Middle Eastern believers apply biblical teaching to their daily lives.” [Ziya Meral, AToward a Relevant Theology for the Middle East, EMQ (April 2005), p. 212.


to Muslims, and make sure the text has a border around it to give it a sense of authenticity. We replace the Christian terms with Muslim terms (Jesus =&gt; Isa, Abraham =&gt; Ibrahim, etc.). In some languages over here the word “to crucify” has become synonymous with “to Christianize” and the idea of “take up your cross” to a Muslim means to wear a gold cross around your neck on a chain. So we have to change and explicate those overtly Christian words (crucify =&gt; to put to death on a wooden cross beam) to get away from the negative connotations/meanings they have acquired. [Many] Christians in the US don't go to Halloween parties anymore, but to Fall Harvest parties because Halloween has taken on a negative connotation. So we explicate the meaning of the term and call it something else – a Fall Harvest party which is neutral and can then take on positive new meaning through teaching. However, in all this translators are very careful to retain the original theological meaning of the text so that the right meaning is understood in the receptor language. That's the foundation of what we do in meaning-based translation.

Of course, the real hot one is how we translate “the Son of God.” [Continuing to] insist on a literal translation does much harm around the Muslim world because of the Muslim worldview and limited understanding. That is, in many languages, including Arabic, the word “son” can only be used in the physical sense and not the figurative sense, and so Muslims think we believe that Jesus is the offspring of God and Mary.

Again, these issues are not just academic. Here is an illustration of reaction to the use of common Christian terminology in a hostile-to-Christianity setting:

Missionaries who live with our special audiences, who are fluent in their languages and culture, and who watch them react to the Jesus film, note that the people misunderstand word-for-word translations of these terms, especially “Son of God”, and that many of them react quite negatively. The result is that the translation of these terms spoils the potential impact of the film and discourages people from sharing it with others. It also discourages people from reading the Bible. Hundreds of examples could be given, but two will suffice. Three years ago a cable television company in the 10/40 window decided to air the Jesus video on one of its channels; viewers were so upset at the film script that nearly half of all subscribers canceled their subscriptions to the cable service. In another country, a multi-agency team sold someone a copy of a Gospel. The buyer wanted to read the Gospel but became enraged when he read the term ‘Son of God’. He told others and a riot ensued. The team’s practice had been to leave locations before trouble arose, but on this occasion they were caught and taken at gunpoint to the police station. They feared for their lives, but the police protected them until the angry mob finally dispersed—after three hours of shouts and threats. This
happened because the phrase “Son of God” was translated word for word instead of according to its meaning.\(^\text{11}\)

Those who are committed to “verbal, plenary inspiration of Scripture,” and who have labored long over textual criticism, know firsthand the challenge of finding the right word or symbol to correctly represent a biblical concept in another language. At what points would a translator be tempted to “soften” a biblical truth that is sure to meet with opposition in the culture for whom the translation is intended, if only for the purpose of gaining a further hearing? How often are we faced with similar decisions when orally sharing our faith?

Even with the best of intentions, careful attempts at contextualization often meet with strong opposition. An anonymous correspondent serving with a ministry reaching Muslims reports, “In the Arab world, an Islamic-sounding translation of the Bible is considered subversive and dangerous to Arab governments. It’s okay for Christians to have their Bibles but if you use an Islamicized translation, they know you are targeting Muslims. This becomes inflammatory. Also, the more translations, the more Muslims accuse Christians of changing the Bible.”

Another core issue in contextualization is that of identity – surely one of those hotly debated areas where we will continue to see sparks fly. Joshua Massey, pseudonymous cultural anthropologist, linguist, and missiologist in Asia, joins the running \textit{EMQ} debate by saying, “C4 surely paved the way for C5, whose major difference is one of identity. Whereas C4 allows any biblically permissible Islamic form or practice, C5 does not claim to go any further, except in the area of self-definition.”\(^\text{12}\)

Further, “C5 practitioners insist that – even as Paul argued tirelessly with Judaizers that Gentiles don’t have to convert to Judaism to follow Jesus – Muslims don’t have to convert to ‘Christianity’ to follow Jesus. C5 believers surely are genuine disciples of Jesus (Acts 15:8,11), but they do not desire to align themselves with what they perceive as that godless Western institution called ‘Christianity,’ where (from a Muslim perspective) homosexuals enter the clergy, immodest women worship in scantily clad summer dresses, and people put the Holy Scriptures on the floor right next to their dirty shoes” (p. 191).

And yet again, “C5 workers point out that Jesus commanded us to make disciples, not converts. If Muslims drawn to Jesus commit to obey all his commands, bearing witness that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and that only his death on the cross can pay the price for man’s sin, what does it matter what they call themselves?” (p. 191).

\(^{11}\) Excerpted from a paper submitted by an anonymous linguist.

\(^{12}\) Josh Massey, “His ways are not our ways,” \textit{EMQ} (April 1999), p. 191.
Massey touches here on the reality that opinions differ as to the content/meaning of words. “While C1-4 workers may assert that following Jesus requires one to cease identifying themselves as ‘Muslim’ in name, C5 workers believe identity is not solely based on one’s theological position. For example, C5 believers, or ‘Muslim followers of Jesus,’ see themselves as far more ‘Muslim’ than ‘Christian,’ even though they disagree with the common Muslim belief that the Bible has been corrupted and Jesus was not crucified” (p. 192).

Massey does, however, make this distinction: “Every C5 worker I know sees a huge difference between someone from a Christian background taking a C5 identity and someone from a Muslim background becoming a C5 believer. In fact, one pro-C5 team I know has a countrywide policy disallowing anyone from a Christian background from becoming C5; their identity can go no further than C4. If someone from a Christian background goes around calling himself a Muslim, all they’ll do (according to popular C5 opinion) is either look like a total phony, or mislead Muslims into thinking they converted to Islam. So when I use the term ‘C5 believer,’ I am always referring to those who were raised Muslim by a Muslim family. This distinction becomes even more significant when considering the question of deceit in a C5 approach.”

Phil Parshall returns to identity issues by quoting Ramsey Harris [pseudonym], a long-term missionary among Arabs, who told him, “‘Most of those I have led to Christ do NOT identify themselves as Muslims anymore, but some do. I do not push them either way. . . For most people the word Muslim means “an adherent of the religion of Muhammad”. . . But there is one principle which must be universal: one must always identify oneself with the person of Jesus Christ’ (Mt. 10:33 and 1 Peter 4:16).”

Recalling Parshall’s earlier “alarms,” one must acknowledge that there is indeed a “slippery slope” aspect to contextualization. In the testimony of one cross-cultural worker, “Here in Africa. . . I clarify to Muslim friends, and other Muslims who ask, that when I do sallat (daily prayers) my shehada (confession) is a little different. At first, I said, ‘There is no god but God, and Jesus Messiah (Isa al-Masiih) is the Word of God.’ The immediate reaction was, ‘Why not Muhammad?’ and I could never get them beyond the subject of Muhammad onto the subject of who Jesus is and his work. But when I went more C-5 and said, ‘There is no god but God, and Muhammad is rasulullah, and Jesus Messiah is the Word of God,’ the immediate reaction is, ‘Why Jesus?’ Then the whole discussion is on a subject that can lead to faith and salvation.”

One might counter with the argument that, yes, the conversation may have gone further – but only because Muhammad was affirmed as God’s spokesman, in the manner of a devout Muslim. Scripture carries a high standard for one who purports to speak for God (Deuteronomy 13, e.g.);

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13 Phil Parshall, ALifting the Fatwa,@ EMQ (July 2004), p. 290.
14 Anonymous, AC-5 missionary response@ (letter to the editor), EMQ (July 1999), p. 270.
in what sense would a believer in Messiah Jesus acknowledge Muhammad as a prophet of God?\textsuperscript{15} In Parshall’s words, “I am a Muslim follower of ‘Isa-al-Masih’ is much more readily accepted by certain missionaries than just the designation ‘Muslim.’ The word ‘Muslim’ is defined as one who is submitted to God. In practice, however, every Muslim worldwide thinks of this term as referring to those who adhere to Islam’s theological tenants (sic). At this point the charge of deceit kicks in. Are we purposefully misleading? Is integrity at stake?”\textsuperscript{16}

The worker continues his account: “I keep honest by never pretending to be a Muslim instead of a Christian. When asked if I am a Muslim, I answer that I practice Islam, but I follow Jesus Messiah as my Savior. . . If they insist on a definition, I say they can call me a Muslim who believes in the *Injil* and in Jesus as Savior, or a Christian who practices Islam (fasts Ramadan, does five *sallats* a day, goes to Friday prayers at the mosque, and affirms belief in God, in his angels, in all his messengers, in all his books, and in the Last Day.) So far, I have encountered good will and many witnessing opportunities with this approach.”\textsuperscript{17}

For those who labor long among a resistant people group, surely the appeal of a strategy that gets results must be strong. But consider the reasoning of Sam Schlorff, retired Arab World Ministries missiologist, as he responds in a letter to the editor with the next salvo in the ongoing EMQ debate.

The main flaw in the C5 idea, and indeed in the entire “Spectrum,” is that it has been constructed without consideration of biblical or theological principles that establish parameters for legitimate contextualization. Without such parameters, one’s choice of mode becomes a matter of intuition or personal preference, rather than theological principle. In my own study of contextualization, I have found that there are at least four major theological issues that one must be concerned with in constructing a model. These are its theology of non-Christian religion, its understanding of the objective of mission, its starting point for contextualization,

\textsuperscript{15}Parshall addresses this by quoting Brian Armstrong [pseudonym for an early C5 theoretician and practitioner for many years in the Middle East]: “I believe that an MBB can repeat the creed with conviction and integrity, without compromising or syncretizing his faith in Jesus. . . .the recognition of Muhammad would be in his prophetic mission as a messenger proclaiming one god and submission to his will in the context of idolatrous seventh century Arabia, or, in the pagan pre-Islamic setting of any given people who have subsequently accepted Islam. Although Muhammad’s mission was chronologically A.D., we should not allow this to cloud the fact that the spiritual milieu to which he spoke was substantially B.C. . . .In a Jesus movement in Islam, Muhammad would be understood as an Old Testament-style messenger. For those Christians who may stumble at certain aspects of Muhammad’s lifestyle, I urge them to study more objectively the lives of the Old Testament prophets where both holy war, in a form more violent than Islam calls for (genocide in the book of Joshua), and polygamy were quite common” [EMQ (July 2004), pp. 290-291].

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid, p. 290.

\textsuperscript{17}Anonymous, AC-5 missionary response@ (letter to the editor), EMQ (July 1999), p. 270.
and its cross-cultural hermeneutic. These critical issues are interrelated – the position taken on one issue impacts how one responds to the others.18

In addressing the beginning point for contextualization, Schlorff illustrates this way:

The C-5 model, for example, considers Islam to be a “neutral vehicle” for contextualization. This entails viewing the objective in terms of a church in which “C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. . .” That is, they are committed to Christ and trusting him alone for salvation, but also in some sense still committed to Islam; one writer calls them “Muslim Christians.” As for starting point, the model begins contextualization from within Islam. That is, the Qur’an is used as a source of Truth for presenting the gospel, and certain passages are “reinterpreted” and “filled with Christian meaning.” Muslim cultural and ritual forms, such as the ritual prayer, are imported into the convert church and filled with Christian meaning. . . . Islam is certainly not neutral. And the very idea of a “Muslim Christian” is a contradiction in terms.19

H.L. Richard weighs in with a similar view regarding the importance of identifying beginning points in reaching the challengingly complex (and non-monotheistic) Hindu world. “The most significant point is that how one views Hinduism radically determines the way one thinks about contextualizing the gospel.” He continues the thought: “If Hinduism is an alternate religion to Christianity, one naturally shrinks from suggestions that the gospel should be introduced within the Hindu religion. This is the working definition of syncretism. But if Hinduism is understood as a civilization, the picture changes completely. The gospel of Christ must be incarnated within every civilization.”20

Sam Schlorff also addresses “reinterpreting” Muslim terms and religious acts. “The principle problem with the [C5] model is that it involves ‘reinterpreting Muhammad and the Qur’an’. . .and even many Islamic practices, to give them a ‘Christian meaning.’ . . .Reinterpretation involves what I have called ‘a hermeneutic of synthesis,’ where one interprets the Bible and the

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20 H.L. Richard, A New Paradigms for Understanding Hinduism and Contextualization, @ *EMQ* (July 2004), p. 311. Here also Richard argues for a new paradigm, seeing Hinduism as a civilization with an amalgamation of religions: “More significantly, the Supreme Court of India defined Hinduism in civilization terms. In a 1977 definition the court stated: ‘In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant, leaving others – including both Hindus and non-Hindus – whatever creed and worship practices suit them best. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion with ceasing to be a Hindu, and the Hindu is disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange Gods, and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than as objectionable. . . .Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and conglomerate of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.”
Qur’an, and their respective cultures, in such a way as to try to bring the two perspectives close together in meaning.”

“The practice of using select Muslim ritual forms (the ‘Pillars’) in Christian worship and ‘filling them with Christian meaning’ faces exactly the same meaning, but this ignores the fact that the medium – the ritual form – is the message,” Schlorff continues. “The ritual prayer, for example, acts out the Muslim concept of submission, reinforcing the notion that the act is ‘necessary to receive forgiveness of sins.’ In a word, the Christian and Muslim concepts of worship are incompatible; one cannot replace the one with the other without creating theological confusion.”

Jim Romaine of the Zwemer Institute for Muslim Studies concurs in his letter to EMQ: “What does it mean that a C5 believer ‘observes proper respect for the holy books like a Muslim’? A Muslim respects the Qur’an as the eternal word of God, his highest and final revelation, and the Bible as corrupt. What does a C5 believer say about the Qur’an? Is it the eternal word of God? And what about Muhammad? Is he a true prophet of God? Does a C5 believer say the whole creed? Keep the Muslim sacrifice holiday? Go on the hajj?”

And Schlorff’s final word regarding the kind of religious synthesis that leads to syncretism: “The passage most often cited in support of synthesis is 1 Corinthians 9:19-21, interpreted to mean: ‘become a Muslim to Muslims so that by all means you might save some.’ This is a good example of ‘eisegesis.’ . . .There is nothing about becoming an idolater to reach idolaters, as the argument implies. Indeed, in Chapter 10 he goes on to assert that while a Christian is free to eat meat offered to him without asking questions, when it comes to idol worship, ‘you cannot participate in the Lord’s table and the table of demons’ (v. 21). In a word, these chapters actually oppose synthesis.”

In bending our efforts to the expansion of the Body of Messiah around the world, we must think in terms of legacy: what kind of Church are we leaving to the next generation? Beyond contextualizing the gospel message so that it can be understood, we must face the challenge of making disciples who think biblically within their own culture. Edwin Walker of World Team emphasizes the need for a transformed worldview based on Romans 12:2, which connects personal transformation with the renewing of the mind. Walker addresses this in his non-published paper, “The Importance of Worldview Discipleship in Planting Healthy Reproducing Churches” (a copy of which was received from the author; the quote below is from page four).

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21 Schlorff, p. 395.
23 Jim Romaine, A Muslim followers of Jesus@ EMQ (October 1999), p. 398.
24 Schlorff, p. 396.
Worldview can be likened to colored glasses through which people see themselves and their universe. Everything receives the “tint” or “hue” of whatever particular “worldview glasses” the person happens to be wearing. Moreover, since the vast majority of people are used to one pair of glasses from early childhood, they are not predisposed – even if they were able – to lay those glasses aside (even temporarily) in order to look at the world through another pair.

The way people see reality can be termed their worldview or conceptual framework. When someone hears the Gospel even when communicated in their language with accuracy and clarity, their worldview determines to a large degree how they understand or misunderstand the message. In many contexts I find that the Gospel as presented in the New Testament can not be fully comprehended until Genesis and Exodus are taught and understood in such a way that a biblical worldview is grasped. The importance of establishing in the thinking of the disciple an authentic biblical worldview is essential to having an authentic grasp of the Gospel and their growth in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. Therefore to fail to do adequate worldview disciple-making produces weak churches which often lead to rapid recidivism when the church planter leaves the field of service.

Everyone surveyed agreed that, despite inherent challenges, the trend in evangelical missions is toward more contextualization. One field director in Latin America identified the following issues being addressed:

1) Identifying social patterns in a culture and communicating through those channels (social networks). 2) Identifying the communication styles that are native to a people, and adapting our communication to those patterns (especially in "body language" or nonspoken communication). 3) Understanding that manifestations of core spiritual issues may differ from one culture to another - i.e., pride in one culture is expressed in ways that are different than pride in other peoples.

Fuller Seminary’s Professor of Contextual Theology and African Studies, Dean Gilliland, offers a helpful corrective lens in looking at all of the issues considered above, though here he is speaking specifically of the Islampur survey results. “I must emphasize the critical issue of the context. While the context and contextualization are what this case is all about, too often conclusions about what is right or wrong are generalized without attention to a particular case. A practicable and fitting approach in one place will probably not be appropriate somewhere else.”

25Dean Gilliland, AContext is critical in the >Islampur= case, @ EMQ (October 1998), p. 417.
This seems a fitting exhortation with which to close our survey of current trends in cross-cultural contextualization. Obviously not everything being done in Muslim (or Hindu, or Buddhist) evangelism will find a corresponding value in Jewish outreach. Nor is every contextualized approach fitting in every setting. (Some of our internal arguments might abate if we applied just this one principle.)

One notes in reading missiological publications the not-infrequent references to the Messianic movement, as well as adaptation of terminology (e.g., “Messianic” mosques). At the October 2004 gathering of the Evangelical Missiological Society in St. Louis, where the theme was Contextualization, several illustrations were taken from current Messianic practices – positive and negative – a reminder that we are not only being shaped by, but in some ways shaping, the wider missiological milieu in which we minister. One Pioneers field leader working among Muslims notes, “My main reservations about inappropriate contextualization in our context are built on what I see as a fundamental error in the C5 approach: treating Islam as if it were Old Covenant Judaism, and Messianic Islam as if it were the same as Messianic Judaism. Messianic Judaism itself is obviously wrestling with slightly different issues.”

In Jewish ministry we have at once the advantage of reaching a people to whom God has revealed Himself in truth (the Jewish people “were entrusted with the oracles of God” – Rom. 3:2), yet at the same time a people who “not knowing about God’s righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3). This makes our task easier on one hand, but requiring even greater discernment on the other. Perhaps more work needs to be done on the “beginning points” (i.e., presuppositions) and contexts in which we minister – and perhaps especially by those of us who have been at the task the longest.

Issues of identity, theology, syncretism, lifestyle, evangelism, transition, sacred texts, creeds (“Christian” or otherwise), ecclesiology (forms and structures, including music and worship), terminology (and reinterpretations thereof), authority structures, and (for some, as with The Orthodox Jewish Bible) even translation are the very substance of what we must deal with daily in our ministries. Of special concern is the growing “conversion to Judaism” trend.26

May the Spirit give us wisdom, discernment, joy, and unity as we walk in obedience to His calling, “holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that [we] may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict” (Titus 1:9).

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26Ben Volman indicates that the forthcoming issue of The Messianic Times will document what appears to be an increase in Gentile believers converting to Messianic Judaism by undergoing conversion classes and rites. Are we in need of another Acts 15 council?
APPENDIX

1. God loves cultural diversity and established it for our good (to hinder our tendency to rebel against him).
2. No culture is neutral – all are subject to divine judgment for their conformity or lack thereof to God’s revealed will.
3. The church is (or ought to be) God’s counter-culture within any culture – affirming that which harmonizes with his revealed will, and contrasting starkly with what does not.
4. Contextualization occurs when the church in a culture gets this right; syncretism when it does not.”

Principles to be emphasized [Phil Parshall, *EMQ*, (October 1998), p. 410]:
1. We must be acquainted with biblical teaching on the subject of syncretism. New Testament passages on the uniqueness of Christ should be carefully observed.
2. Islam as a religion and culture must be studied in depth.
3. An open approach is desired. Careful experimentation in contextualization need not lead to syncretism as long as one is aware of all the dangers.
4. Contextualization needs constant monitoring and analysis. What are the people really thinking? What does the contextualized communication convey? What do specific forms trigger in the mind of the new convert? Is there progress in the grasp of biblical truth? Are the people becoming demonstrably more spiritual?
5. Cross-cultural communicators must beware of presenting a gospel which has been syncretized with Western culture. The accretions to Christianity that have built up over the centuries as a result of the West’s being the hub of Christianity should be avoided as far as possible.”

1. Jesus is Lord and Savior; there is no salvation outside of him.
2. New believers are baptized, meet regularly with other believers (this may need to be done with great discretion), and take communion.
3. New believers study the Injil (and Torah plus Zabur if available).
4. New believers renounce and are delivered from occultism and harmful folk Islamic practices (i.e. shamanism, prayers to saints, use of charms, curses, incantations, etc.)
5. Muslim practices and traditions (e.g. fasting, alms, circumcision, attending the mosque, wearing the head covering, refraining from pork and alcohol, etc.) are done as expression of love for God and/or respect for neighbors, rather than as acts necessary to receive forgiveness of sins.
The Qur’an, Muhammad, and traditional Muslim theology are examined, judged, and reinterpreted (where necessary) in light of biblical truth. Biblically acceptable Muslim beliefs and practices are maintained, others are modified, some must be rejected.

New believers show evidence of the new birth and growth in grace (e.g. the fruit of the Spirit, increased love, etc.) and a desire to reach the lost (e.g. verbal witness and intercession).”

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