

THE TRUTH IS CONTEXTUALIZATION CAN LEAD TO SYNCRETISM: APPLYING MUSLIM BACKGROUND BELIEVERS CONTEXTUALIZATION CONCERNS TO ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND BUDDHIST BACKGROUND BELIEVERS IN A CHINESE CULTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Contextualization issues have received much attention in recent years related to evangelical mission work. Phil Parshall who has written extensively on seeking to reach Muslims with the gospel has expressed some concerns in his book *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization* related to contextualization among Muslim background believers. These concerns specifically address particular practices such as the encouragement to remain permanently in the mosque.

This article uses Parshall's concerns about Muslim background believers as a starting point to assess how the practice of ancestor worship and the worship of Buddha in a Chinese culture by Christians can be evaluated. The hypothesis is that the continued participation of Christians in these religious practices in a Chinese culture would be viewed as syncretism. Another concern relates to changing references to Jesus in Scripture as the Son of Man in a translation. The practice of using biblical passages to justify a strategy of remaining in a religious group outside of the Christian community will be discussed.

An analysis will be given of how contextualization can lead to syncretism. The dangers would apply to Chinese believers who come out of a background of ancestor worship or Buddhist worship, as well as to those who are Muslim background believers.

WORSHIP OF ANCESTORS AND BUDDHA

The author was privileged to live in a region of East Asia where those who became Christians often came from a background of worshipping ancestors and Buddha. The blending of these two distinct religious systems is an example of syncretism of religious systems resulting from an apparent adaptation by those spreading Buddhist beliefs.^{2,3} A large

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²Terry Muck observes that "Buddha's teachings proved adaptable to local cultures without losing their essential features." An example cited is Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Terry Muck, "Buddhist, Buddhism" in A. Scott Moreau, et al., eds. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Religions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 149.

temple across the street from where the writer lived for several years was dedicated to Kannon, the bodhisattva called the “goddess of mercy” and who could be portrayed with multiple arms “to symbolize her countless acts of mercy in answer to the prayers of this world.”⁴ When one enters the temple grounds one can view how religious beliefs have been combined. There are rooms in the temple dedicated to Kannon and others devoted to Buddha. Furthermore, the same temple also contains rooms with tablets bearing ancestral tablets, records, pictures, and places for worship of the ancestors.

The same individuals who might go to the temple to worship Kannon, Buddha, and their ancestors usually perform acts of worship in their homes. Often an apartment has a small altar by the door which is dedicated to the door god. One enters to find a special table called in the local language ‘the god table’, which normally contains burning incense in a bowl of sand; fruit, which is attractively arranged—often oranges; and pictures of deceased relatives—especially parents. The home altar may also contain two or three ceramic figurines, such as a small replica of Buddha, and one or two images of traditional gods from the people group.

Persons in this particular culture would not think it unusual to offer worship to the door god, their ancestors, Buddha, and one or two traditional gods such as the kitchen god. Many side streets also contain altars where residents can offer incense. Certain trees may have incense sticks placed among the roots. In addition to the worship of all the above, a local resident may go to temples dedicated to other gods on their special festival days in order to seek special blessings such as for their business to prosper.

This multi-religious setting provides a rich context in which to examine the potential for syncretism. Scott Moreau observes that syncretism refers to a “blending of one idea, practice, or attitude with another. Traditionally among Christians it has been used of the replacement or dilution of the essential truths of the gospel through the incorporation of non-Christian elements.”³ Syncretism may easily occur in a culture with the blending of various religious beliefs. What happens when someone becomes a follower of Christ in such a culture? Does the possibility of syncretism exist in a culture for a Chinese coming from a background of ancestor worship and Buddhism? Although other religious traditions such as the worship of local gods can be found in such a culture, this paper focuses on believers who come from the ancestor worship and Buddhism background. Although the Muslim religion would be called monotheistic in contrast to ancestor worship and Buddhism, the concerns for potential syncretism apply to a variety of religious traditions including ancestor worship and Buddhism.

⁴Robert S. Ellwood, Jr. *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: An Introduction to the Religious Life of Mankind* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 128.

³A. Scott Moreau, “Syncretism,” in A. Scott Moreau, et al., eds. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 924.

THE C1 TO C6 SPECTRUM AND CONCERNS

The author, Phil Parshall, has raised awareness of the need to reach Muslims with the gospel for over two decades, beginning with his book *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* published in 1981.⁴ The second edition of the book was published in 2003 with the title *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization*.⁵ Parshall uses the church planting spectrum of C1 to C6 developed by John Travis with C1 being a traditional church which uses language unfamiliar to the local Muslim community. The C6 identification refers to small Christ-centered communities of secret and underground believers. Parshall notes that since 1975 he had been an advocate of C4 which are “contextualized Christ-centered communities using insider language and biblically permissible cultural and Islamic forms.”⁶

Concerns are raised by Phil Parshall about the C5 category, which is described by John Travis as “Christ-centered Communities of ‘Messianic Muslims’ who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior. C5 believers remain legally and socially within the community of Islam. . . . Participation in corporate Islamic worship varies from person to person and group to group. . . . C5 believers are viewed as Muslims by the Muslim community and refer to themselves as Muslims who follow Isa the Messiah.”⁷ He raises concerns about the varying interpretations of C5 such as Muslim Background Believers (MBBs) being called “Muslims” with no reference to Isa or Messiah or their continuing to perform *salat* (Muslim prayers) in the mosque.⁸ Parshall does affirm the aim of C5 advocates: “C5 advocates have worthy goals. Their great desire is to produce a community of MBBs who remain in their own society as productive, respected citizens.”⁹ He expresses concerns about several C5 practices which include:

⁴Phil Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981).

⁵Phil Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism: Contemporary Approaches to Contextualization*, rev. ed. (Waynesboro, GA: Gabriel Publishing, 2003).

⁶John Travis in Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 62.

⁷John Travis, “The C1 to C6 Spectrum” in Ralph Winters and Steven Hawthorne, eds. *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, A Reader, Third Edition* (Pasadena:

William Carey Library, (1999), 659.

⁸Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 68.

⁹*Ibid.*, 70.

1. Encouragement for MBBs to remain in the mosque permanently.
2. Affirmation of the Shahada, either implicitly or explicitly.
3. Use of the term Muslim without a qualifier.
4. Biblical passages used to authenticate C5.
5. “Son of God” becomes “Isa-Al-Maish.”¹⁰

APPLYING C5 CONCERNS TO ANCESTOR AND BUDDHIST WORSHIP

How would the concerns that Parshall raises fit a culture where believers have a background in ancestor and Buddhist worship? The first issue, remaining in the mosque permanently, relates to continuing religious practices done before one becomes a follower of Christ. Applying that suggestion means ancestor worshipers would continue to participate in religious activities related to ancestor worship. This would immediately create problems for the individual believer and the Christian community of which a believer belongs. One of the key ways of showing allegiance to Christ in a culture where ancestor worship is practiced would be to stop participating in the rituals associated with it in both public and private ways. Members of a local church may be invited to join new believers in a family for a ceremony in which they remove from their home the god table where they had burned incense and offered fruit to their ancestors. The public ceremonies related to ancestor worship might include a Christian going with other family members to the location of tablets with records of ancestors; however, they would not bow, burn incense, nor offer food offerings to ancestors.¹¹

A Christian who insisted on continuing private and public expression of ancestor worship would not be considered a genuine believer by others in the Christian community. Phil Parshall warns that Muslim background believers who continue to worship in the mosque are viewed as Muslims. “MBBs who continue to worship with Muslims are vulnerable to Islamic theology. . . . Everyone in the prayer line is regarded as a true believer in every aspect of Islam.”¹² Parshall in an earlier writing warns that identification with Islam results in syncretism. Using a chart, he shows what he calls “the great divide” that demonstrates contextualization can have a low risk of syncretism. However, once a certain point is passed, the danger of syncretism goes from low to high. He observes: “C5 can be placed anywhere along the syncretism spectrum, depending on how each issue is presented and understood by the Muslim community. Personally, I can only put conversion (or

¹⁰Ibid., 73.

¹¹One missionary shared about Christian friends in Hong Kong who said that they would bow, but verbally say while bowing that they did not believe in doing this. The author realizes that some interpret the bowing as showing respect instead of worship. Nevertheless, bowing in this context would be viewed as an act of worship.

¹²Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 71.

reconversion) to official Islam as high syncretism, regardless of motivation.”¹³ In the same way, a person who claims to be a follower of Christ and yet continues to practice private and public worship of ancestors would be viewed as one who practices high syncretism.

Parshall does suggest that a new convert from a Muslim background have a transitional time in his adopted faith where he slowly pulls back from mosque attendance. However, he does note that a convert should disassociate from the mosque.¹⁴ Those who become Christians from the background of worshipping Buddha would need to disassociate from continued participation in public or private worship of Buddha. Otherwise, they would be viewed as syncretists.

The second concern of Parshall related to the affirmation of the Shahada, either implicitly or explicitly by believers with a Muslim background. The Shahada means “witness or confession; the first required pillar of Islam; there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of God.”¹⁵ Parshall raises concerns about calling Muhammad a prophet of God: “If one decides to elevate Muhammad to prophethood, then it is only logical to give allegiance to his greatest prophetic production, i.e., the Quran. Once one crosses that line, he or she becomes a Muslim in totality. At least that is the understanding of the on-looking Islamic community.”¹⁶

The rituals used in ancestor worship would not always have a standardized statement such the Shahada. There would be a ritual saying used by those who practice what is called “Pure Land Buddhism” who chant “Hail, Amitabha Buddha.”¹⁷ It seems logical that those who worship Buddha would interpret a person chanting to Buddha as a person who also worships and gives allegiance to Buddha.

The third concern raised by Parshall is using the term Muslim without a qualifier. The term Muslim may be defined as “one who believes in, belongs to, and performs Islam: ‘one who submits.’”¹⁸ Parshall warns, “No matter how much one does linguistic interpretation with the word *Muslim* the bottom line is what the receptor community is receiving. In this case, the average Muslim’s understanding is that the communicator is

¹³Phil Parshall, “Going Too Far?” in Ralph Winters and Stephen Hawthorne, eds. *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1999), 656.

¹⁴Ibid., 655.

¹⁵George W. Braswell, Jr. *What You Need to Know About Islam and Muslims* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 2000), 28.

¹⁶Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 71.

¹⁷Ellwood, 127.

¹⁸Braswell, 28.

saying he or she is totally within the Islamic *ummah*.”¹⁹ The Chinese dialect of Cantonese has distinct words for ancestor worship, Buddhists, and Christians. Those who declare that they worship ancestors or Buddha without qualification would not be associated with Christianity. Those who said that they are Christians but still practice ancestor worship or worship of Buddha would be considered practicing syncretism in a bold manner.

The fourth concern of Parshall would be using biblical passages to authenticate C5 practices. An example would be 1 Corinthians 7:20: “Each man must remain in the condition in which he was called.”²⁰ Parshall notes the words of a person who ministers to Muslims: “The context in 1 Corinthians 7 is addressing the issues of marriage and singleness; believers married to unbelievers; nothing to do with dictating that people from a false religion should remain in the false religion so as not to upset the apple cart. C5 proponents could be accused of isogesis here.”²¹

How would these issues relate to a believer with a background in ancestor worship? Scott Moreau notes that giving honor to ancestors, which could be seen as “ancestral veneration, may not be the same as giving homage to a deity.” He also notes, however, the problem in the Christian community is whether or not honoring one’s mother and father in a particular cultural context can be done without violating the biblical warnings about contact with the dead.²² One example would be a Buddhist funeral which the writer observed. A Christian went forward with his family to the picture of his deceased mother. While the other family members bowed before the picture, he stood there respectfully but did not participate in the bowing ceremony. He showed respect without publicly being viewed as giving worship to a dead relative. However, the Christian community in that local context would have viewed bowing to a picture of a relative as a form of worship, equivalent to burning incense to them. Even the argument that bowing to a dead relative simply represents respect would not pass the test of 1 Corinthians 10. The same passage notes that believers should not give offense to others outside or inside the church: “Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved.”²⁴

The final issue which Parshall raises about Muslim background believers is the practice of changing “Son of God” in the Bible to become “Isa-Al-Masih” or Jesus as

¹⁹Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 72. Braswell defines *ummah* as “the community of Islam; the solidarity of faith and prayer; the political incorporation of the Islamic religion.” Braswell, 29.

²⁰Updated New American Standard Bible.

²¹Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 73.

²²A. Scott Moreau, “Ancestral Beliefs and Practices,” in Moreau, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, 59.

²⁴1 Corinthians 10:32-33. Updated New American Standard Bible.

Messiah.²⁵ Parshall observes that the replacement of Son of God as Jesus the Messiah is actually being encouraged. “This new translation is being promoted in a number of languages throughout the Islamic world.”²⁶ The writer questions how a translation can use words which would evoke a totally different meaning from the original text. It is acknowledged that the name, God, as used in the Bible could also refer to a god in the local language where the writer worked among ancestor worshipers and Buddhists. However, references to Jesus as the Son of God were not changed in translation for concern of being offensive. There is a warning in the Bible regarding the preaching of the cross as seeming foolish to unbelievers: “For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”²⁷ The apostle Paul does not indicate that believers should stop preaching the cross because those not believing think it foolish. He further adds, “For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and Gentiles, foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”²⁸ The apostle Paul acknowledges that certain cultures will find certain elements of the Christian message offensive. One cannot change the gospel simply to accommodate a particular audience. In this case one would be in danger of waving the banner of contextualization to justify what becomes a distorted gospel involving syncretism.

CONCLUSION

There certainly exists a place for properly applied contextualization in sharing the message of Christ cross-culturally. However, David Hesselgrave warns about accepting a new faith without discarding the old religion, which results in syncretism.²⁹ The participation by a Muslim background believer in the mosque or an Chinese believer in ancestor worship both represent contextualization that becomes high syncretism. There is no discarding of the old religion if one continues to worship as a Muslim at the mosque, as an ancestor worshiper or Buddhist while claiming to be a follower of Jesus. The continuing use of the Shahada by MBBs or chanting to Buddha by a believer is syncretism. Likewise, someone who claims to be a Christian but calls himself a Muslim, ancestor worshiper, or Buddhist without qualification has crossed the line from contextualization to syncretism. Scripture is misused when passages dealing with singleness and marriage are used to justify C5 strategy or someone as a believer acting like an ancestor worshiper or Buddhist. Changing the actual translation of “Son of God” to another term represents syncretism.

²⁵Parshall, *Muslim Evangelism*, 73.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷1 Corinthians 1:18. Updated New American Standard Bible.

²⁸1 Corinthians 1: 23-25. Updated New American Standard Bible.

²⁹David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 248.

The attempts by those ministering to Muslims trying to reach them in culturally sensitive ways on the surface can be commended. However, the line seems clearly to be crossed between contextualization and syncretism in the practices described in this paper. The author realizes that believers from a Muslim background face dangerous opposition as believers. A communication received by the writer conveys the story of a believer beaten by a family member opposing their faith to the point of the believer fleeing for protection and needing hospitalization. Likewise, believers from ancestor worship or Buddhist backgrounds may also become persecuted as a result of their allegiance to Christ. Perhaps some feel that they are helping believers in dangerous cultural circumstances avoid persecution by clinging to aspects of their old religion while embracing Christianity. However, David Hesselgrave warns about the appeal of syncretism and that missionaries should “communicate patiently but clearly the uniqueness of Christ and Christian revelation. After all, some of the most exclusivistic claims of all religious literature are to be found in the Old and New Testaments. Ultimately, syncretism is but another form of Christ-rejection.”³⁰

Proper contextualization can help present the claims of Christ in a culturally understandable way. However, there is a danger when contextualization is misapplied. The trustees of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention recently adopted a document on “Principles of Contextualization” which places limits at the C-4 level or simply expressed “C-4 and no more” in the work of their personnel. The article notes that “We advocate the learning and appropriate utilization of language and culture. Constant vigilance is required lest contextualization degenerate into syncretism.”³¹ The truth is contextualization can lead to syncretism.

³⁰David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally. Second Edition. An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 185-186.

³¹Don Graham, IMB Trustees Adopt Guidelines for Gospel Contextualization. Baptist Press, 11/15/2005. <http://www.imb.org/main/news/details.asp?StoryID=6197> & Language ID=1709. (accessed November 16, 2007)