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CONTEXTUALIZATION: NO PASSING FAD¹

Roger Hutchinson

Contextualization is a timely theme for Canadian Christians for a number of reasons. Until recently, white, male, European and North American males assumed that their *theology* was *universal* and *objective*, while the *theologies* of Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, American Blacks and feminists were *partisan* and *subjective*. Theologians who can now hear those previously muted voices know that all of our theologies reflect their locations in space and time.

The changing social role of the churches also promotes a greater self-consciousness about how each church relates to our public values and institutions. Formerly mainline denominations such as the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Lutheran and United churches can no longer take for granted a dominant role as the articulators or arbitrators of public values. Smaller groups such as Mennonites and Quakers, or denominations formerly thought of as ethnic or immigrant churches, have moved in the opposite direction. They now feel more responsible

1. An earlier version of this paper was prepared in response to an invitation from the Canada-China Programme. I was asked to discuss Protestant resources for involvement in the struggle for social justice at their October, 1981 conference on the churches and China. Although I am not an experienced "China watcher," I knew that participants at the conference would have differing attitudes towards the Patriotic Church in China and that the Chinese delegates would have interesting things to say about liberation theology in a post-liberation context. I decided to focus on the process of contextualization itself, and to relate the Asian discussion of that process to some aspects of our Canadian experience. I appreciate this opportunity to re-think what I said on that occasion for the readers of *Consensus*. I am particularly grateful to Dr. Threinen for catching some of the misleading references I made to Lutheran developments. Since I am not an experienced "Lutheran watcher" either, his help and patience were greatly appreciated.

for public values and institutions than during the earlier sectarian or immigrant stages of their development.

Also, there is a reawakened concern about the direction in which Canadian society as a whole is moving. The struggles of formerly colonized peoples to become subjects of their own history has created a new interest in Canada's role in the North-South debate. Conflicting proposals for dealing with inflation, unemployment, resource depletion, pollution, etc. have forced more and more Canadians to ask which trends should be resisted and what goals should be pursued.

THE ASIAN DISCUSSION

In Asia the first step towards contextualization was indigenization. As Shoki Coe pointed out in an important article, "Contextualization as the Way Toward Reform," it was particularly important for younger churches in formerly colonized areas of the world to take seriously their own cultural milieu.² The problem with indigenization as a metaphor was that it tended to refer to the adaptation of Western Christianity to traditional Asian cultures. Not only was this a past-oriented approach, it implied that what came from the West was superior and normative and what was already in Asia was inferior and to be adapted. The awakening Asian peoples needed a more dynamic concept more in tune with their desire to be subjects of their own history rather than objects of someone else's empire-building, missions or charity.

Contextualization is a more future-oriented notion. It more adequately symbolizes the experience of the rapid social change which is transforming all cultures — Western and Asian. Contextualization, or contextuality, involves more than taking a particular context seriously. All aspects of a context are "not equally strategic for the *Missio Dei* in the working out of his purpose through history."

"Contextuality . . . is that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of the *Missio Dei*. It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate in it . . . It is the conscientization of the contexts in the particular, historical moment assessing the peculiarity of the context in the light of the mission of the church as it is called to participate in the *Missio Dei*."³

OUR CANADIAN EXPERIENCE

Since most Canadian churches were transplanted from Britain, Europe or the United States they have dealt with the question of indigenization and have made the transition to contextualization in one way or another.⁴ An interesting recent example is provided by the Lutheran Church in America—Canada Section. The United Lutheran Church in America had established Canadian synods in Ontario in 1861, western Canada in 1897 and Nova Scotia in 1903. When the Lutheran

2. Douglas Elwood, ed., *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), pp. 48-55.

3. Coe, p. 52.

4. John W. Grant, "Religion and the Quest for a National Identity: The Background in Canadian History," in Peter Slater, ed., *Religion and Culture in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University, 1977), pp. 7-22.

Church in America was formed in 1962, these three synods continued to exist as the component parts of the Canada Section.⁵ The issue which caught my attention when I was examining Lutheran involvement in inter-church coalitions was the struggle of the Canada Section for permission to hire its own staff.⁶

The LCA-Canada Section participated in the Canadian Lutheran Council which had been created in 1952, and in the Lutheran Council in Canada which was formed in 1966. However, efforts to convince the parent church that the Canada Section should have a full time Executive Secretary prompted the U.S. parent to worry that its Canadian offspring was becoming too nationalistic. In his 1972 report, the President of the LCA-Canada Section pointed out that "A church cannot help but be influenced by the country in which its people live, nor should it escape the responsibility of speaking to the forces of the country within whose border it functions."⁷

He pointed out that since only 4% of the membership of the Lutheran Church in America resided in Canada, United States domination of the larger body was inevitable. He insisted that, "What we are talking about here has nothing to do with "nationalism", but it has everything to do with a real situation in which we find ourselves, in which we will forfeit our opportunities and fail to meet our responsibilities as Lutherans in Canada unless we pursue an aggressive course by which we, together across Canada, can address ourselves to the Canadian situation".⁸

Although the U.S. head office finally agreed to the appointment of a full-time Executive Secretary for the Canada Section in 1973, President Olson felt called upon to defend the Canada Section once again in his 1975 report.

"There are still occasional voices raised questioning the need for the Canada Section and for the expenditure of funds that enables the Canada Section to function. It is my conviction that the Canada Section, or something equivalent, is an absolute necessity for us. Far from being an extravagant frill for our church life, the Canada Section gives validity and integrity for us in Canada as we seek to be the Lutheran Church in America in this country. It is essential that the ministers and congregations of our church in this country have a structure that unites them organizationally far more closely and directly than is possible through three synods along with thirty other synods being united in the whole of the Lutheran Church in America. The desire for identity as a Canadian constituency within the Lutheran Church in America is sometimes spoken of derogatively as "nationalism". According to my dictionary, the first meaning of nationalism is "national character, nationality"; the second meaning is "an idiom, trait, or character peculiar to any nation"; the third meaning

5. Norman J. Threinen, "The American and European Influences on the Canadian Lutheran Churches: An Historical Sketch," in Norman J. Threinen, ed., *In Search of Identity: A Look at Lutheran Identity in Canada* (Winnipeg: Lutheran Council in Canada, 1977), pp. 1-18; and in the same volume: Vincent E. Erickson, "Rationale for an Indigenous Lutheran Church in Canada," pp. 33-48. I am grateful to Dr. Threinen for drawing the existence of this volume to my attention.

6. The following comments about this issue are based primarily upon reports contained in Synod minutes. I am grateful, however, for help received at various points in my larger study of the churches and the Mackenzie Valley pipeline debate from Clifton Monk and Jack Zimmerman.

7. Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Convention of the Western Canada Synod, LCA (April/23-26, 1972), p. 15.

8. Minutes (1972), p. 15.

is “devotion to, or advocacy of, national interests or national unity and independence”. Certainly if nationalism is understood as the dictionary defines it — in the first two meanings at the very least — it is hardly a trait unworthy of Christians. If we as members of the Lutheran Church in America living and working in Canada are going to be responsible citizens corporately as well as individually, we need the Canada Section.

“We need the Canada Section in order that we may have our own corporate identity as Canadians in the Lutheran Church in America — so that we can be as much a Canadian church in this country as the Lutheran Church in America is an American church in the United States of America — in order that we may relate responsibly to our fellow Lutherans and other fellow Christians in this country”.⁹

As long as its attempt to develop indigenous structures was frustrated by the parent church, the LCA—Canada Section had to fight the battle for indigenization. However, the activities undertaken through its Canadian structures reveal that indigenization was not an end in itself. It was a future-oriented attempt to relate responsibility to the issues confronting Canadian society. In terms of the Asian discussion, the Canada Section moved beyond indigenization to contextualization. The decision to support inter-church projects such as the Coalition for Development, GATT-fly, Project North and the Task Force on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility revealed a particular interpretation of the Canadian context.¹⁰ In Dr. Coe’s terms, it reflected “that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of the *Missio Dei*.”¹¹

Attempts of Canadians to develop indigenous structures, to make the transition from indigenization to contextualization, and to discern the really significant aspect of our context could be illustrated in many ways. I will focus on two aspects of the debate in the mid-1970s over a proposed Mackenzie Valley natural gas pipeline. The Canadian churches supported the native peoples’ demand for a moratorium on pipeline construction until native land claims were settled.¹² The position articulated by the Dene Nation illustrates their struggle for indigenization and contextualization. Criticisms of this position, and of the churches’ support for it, illustrate conflicting assessments of what makes the context in northern and southern Canada really significant.¹³

The position developed by the native peoples and supported by the churches passed through a series of stages as they became clearer about “what made the context really significant.” Initially their position was characterized by the slogan: “Land

9. Minutes of the Seventh Biennial Convention, LCA-Canada Section (1975), p. 9.

10. For a discussion of the origins and nature of these inter-church coalitions see my article, “Ecumenical Social Witness in Canada,” *International Review of Missions*, (forthcoming).

11. Coe, p. 52.

12. In the fall of 1975, the Anglican, Roman Catholic and United Churches created Project North to assist the native peoples in their struggle for justice and to stimulate southern churches to examine the ethical implications of northern development. These original sponsors were soon joined by the LCA-Canada Section, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and the Mennonite Central Committee (Canada).

13. A more detailed analysis of the pipeline debate can be found in the paper I co-authored with Gibson Winter, “Political Ethics and the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry.” Prepared for the World Council of Churches Consultation on Political Ethics, Cyprus, October 18-25, 1981.

not money." The first Joint General Assembly of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories and the Metis Association in Fort Good Hope in 1974 claimed 450,000 square miles of land in the name of the Indian people of the Mackenzie Valley. Looking back on this claim in March, 1980, Bob Overvold, Direction of Aboriginal Rights for the Dene Nation, admitted that at the time not much thought had been given to the social and political implications of basing their claim on the racially exclusive notions of special status and aboriginal rights. He acknowledged the fact that their initial concern was to protect the traditional way of life and to honour the concerns of the elders. The young people were attached to this position only "in a romantic, self-denying way. It did not reflect either their reality or experience."¹⁴ This emphasis on the land and on aboriginal rights represented, in Dr. Coe's terms, an indigenization phase which was transcended but not rejected. The natives moved beyond a past-oriented, indigenization struggle to a future-oriented contextualization of their position.

The shift in focus from past traditions to future hopes was accompanied by a deeper grasp of what the natives were up against and what they must do about it. As Bob Overvold said, "The threat of the pipeline, and the commencement of the Berger community hearings, raised the vital political issue of decision-making authority over Dene land." There was also "a clearer identification of colonialism as the primary northern reality." The Dene Declaration released in July, 1975, linked "these developing strands in the assertion of the political rights of the Dene as a colonized nation of original people."¹⁵

Responses to the Dene position reveal differing assumptions about the Canadian context. Supporters affirmed the Dene definition of their situation as "a colonized nation of original people." Many critics objected to the claim that the pipeline would represent a continuation of colonial patterns of development. The Federal Government rejected the charge of colonialism and appeared to be quite tone deaf to the notion of peoplehood. Under Prime Minister Trudeau, it has reacted aggressively and negatively to the aspirations of francophone Quebeckers and of the Dene to achieve a degree of sovereignty within the Canadian state.¹⁶

The pipeline debate also brought to the surface conflicting assessments of southern Canadian society and differing evaluations of the legitimacy of its energy demands. Churches and environmentalists agreed with the Dene that southern Canadians should re-examine their way of life. Is a life style based on conspicuous consumption, planned obsolescence and the enormous waste of nonrenewable resources justifiable or sustainable? Those who accept this characterization of Canada as a consumer society and who support the idea of a conserver society believe that it is not. Whichever side of the debate one is on, it is impossible to escape the demand to clarify the assumptions one is in fact making about the Canadian context.

14. "Address to the Ninth Assembly of the Northwest Territories" (March 11, 1980), p. 2.

15. Overvold, p. 4.

16. For a superb analysis of the Federal Government's 1969 proposal that special status for Indians be terminated, see Sally Weaver, *Making Canadian Indian Policy: The Hidden Agenda 1968-1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).

It is in that sense that contextualization is a sociological and theological necessity, not a passing fad.

THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

My final task is to consider the theological implications of contextualization by asking how a preoccupation with context relates to traditional concerns about catholicity, universality and transcendence. One vociferous critic of the churches' opposition to the pipeline suggested that church leaders had abandoned theology. In response to the church leaders' claim that Canadian theology was not as strongly influenced by Marxist analysis as the theology emerging in other contexts, this critic retorted, "So political theology has one message in one country, another message in another country. What ever happened to the everlasting, universal word? Well, there are no universal truths, says political theology, truth is what you see from your own perspective.

"In contemplating the progression of conservative, liberal, political and liberation theology, it may be helpful to contemplate the advice of the Scottish sage, Thomas Carlyle. He taught that 'a deep sense of religion was compatible with an entire absence of theology'."¹⁷

Dr. Coe argues that rather than being a threat to catholicity, contextualization is the key for its recovery. He welcomes black, yellow and liberation theologies for the sake of the true catholicity of the gospel. "There is no colorless theology. But there is all the joy of the multiple colors mobilized for the beauty of the new heaven and the new earth which God has promised. Or to change the metaphor, all the sounds must be mobilized in the great symphony of the Hallelujah Chorus, to be heard not only in heaven but on earth".¹⁸

In a similar fashion, Professor Letty Russell of the Yale Divinity School has argued that contextuality is the way to rather than a threat to universality. She maintains that it is a false dichotomy to place universality and contextuality in opposition to one another. "The universal proclamation of hope for all humanity is at the same time the concrete, situation-variable proclamation that the blind see, the lame walk, the prisoners are set free." Why then, she asks, did the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission assume that it was confronted with a problem when it received ten different accounts of hope from six continents? She blamed a style of theology which stresses deductive reasoning from universal principles. "In this thought pattern it is possible to deduct and apply answers from the general statement as long as no one in a particular situation challenges the answer as belonging to a question they did not ask."¹⁹

Now that Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, Blacks, women and youth are no longer content to remain silent this deductive method itself must be questioned. Professor Russell suggests that the more inductive approach of contextual theology is not relativistic, rather it is relational. It "seeks out the truth in relation to Jesus

17. Earle Grey, *Super Pipe: The Arctic Pipeline – The World's Greatest Fiasco* (Toronto: Griffin House, 1979), p. 172.

18. Coe, p. 52.

19. "Universality and Contextuality," *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. 30 (1979), p. 23.

Christ. The more deeply one seeks the presence of the incarnated Christ in a particular situation of witness and service, the more likely one discovers the one story of a God who is known in and through those who name the name in word and deed." She reaffirms the importance of the insight embedded in the shift from indigenization to contextualization. Although we struggle for peace and justice in particular contexts we face the future as a common project. She suggests that we should "focus our hope not on the Old Creation but on the 'something new' of God's promised new creation. With Isaiah 43:18 we hear the Lord say: 'Cease dwelling on things gone by and brooding over past events. Come close and look! Here and now I am doing something new!'"²⁰

Whether or not one fears that concentration on context will lead to a loss of capital "T" Transcendence will depend upon the character of one's spirituality and theology. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, insisted that God "transcends both the rational structure and the arbitrary facts of existence in the universe." In his understanding of the image of God in man, therefore, he stressed self-transcendence, that is the capacity to "stand outside of nature, life, . . . reason and the world."²¹ From the vantage point of his "Christ and Culture in Tension" stance, the tendency of scholars such as John Macmurray and Gregory Vlastos to attach theological significance to the experience of mutuality was "Christ of Culture" immanentism.²²

Vlastos, on the other hand, was prepared to treat the affirmation "God is love" as a reversible proposition. From his point of view, understanding the Gospel as the demand for increased mutuality demystified the Christian religion and recovered its essence. "The essential thing in this religion . . . is intelligible, reasonable service performed by every member of the community on his own behalf and on behalf of the whole community."²³ From this point of view, the direct experience of the otherness of other people is a more intelligible basis for belief in God's otherness than a narrow preoccupation with the self-transcendence of the isolated self.

I am suggesting that when contextualization leads to greater awareness that *mutuality* is the law of life, and the fitting response of creatures to one another and to the Creator, it can be a way to rather than a threat to transcendence. I should not, however, give the impression that other spiritualities and types of theology are not also compatible with the current emphasis on being contextual. It is for others to show how in those cases the link is maintained between faith and life, between the experience of the divine command and the discernment of what is going on in concrete situations.²⁴

20. Russell, p. 24.

21. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. I, p. 243.

22. Review of R.B.Y. Scott and Gregory Vlastos, eds., *Towards the Christian Revolution* (Chicago: Willott & Clark, 1936) in *Radical Religion*, 2 (1937), 42. I am using H. Richard Niebuhr's categories from *Christ and Culture* (Harper and Brothers, 1951). For a fuller discussion of the differences between Reinhold Niebuhr and Gregory Vlastos see my article, "Love, Justice and the Class Struggle," *Studies in Religion*, 10.4 (Fall, 1981).

23. *Christian Faith and Democracy* (New York: Hazen Books, 1939), p. 28.

24. William Werpehowski, "Command and History in the Ethics of Karl Barth," *The Journal of Religious Studies*, 9,2 (Fall, 1981), 298-320.