

The Role of Contextualization for the SWM Faculty:

Gilliland's *The Word Among Us*

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The faculty in the School of World Mission (SWM) at Fuller Theological Seminary began to set the standard for evangelical missiological reflection on contextualization in the 1970s and 80s. To date The School of Intercultural Studies (formerly SWM) “has graduated more missiologists than any other U.S. Seminary” (Moreau 2012, 149). The publication of *The Word Among Us* (WAU) in 1989 was the faculty’s collective statement endorsing contextualization for evangelical missiology. WAU was an important endorsement of contextualization at the time since some Evangelicals were still cautious about the concept, fearing it overly emphasized culture to the detriment of the gospel.¹

Of course the faculty did more than simply endorse contextualization. WAU deals with many aspects of contextualization including examples of contextualization in the Old Testament (Glasser) and the New Testament (Gilliland), a “biblical theology of covenant as a model for knowing God in multiple contexts,” (Van Engen, 77), the relationship between form and meaning (Hiebert), person centered communication (Kraft), translation (Shaw), contextualized media (Sogaard), cross-cultural leadership (Clinton), social transformation ministries (Elliston), contextualization in American society (Wager), nominalism as a western contextual problem (Gibbs), the ethical particularism of Chinese culture (Che-Bin), and contextualization for Muslim contexts (Woodberry). Dean Gilliland, the book’s editor, was “the only professor on a seminary faculty with the term contextualization in his official title” (Kraft 2005, ix), underlining how important SWM felt the problem and opportunity of human culture was for Christian faith. Even before WAU was published several SWM faculty had published significant works on contextualization, including Charles Kraft (1979), Paul Hiebert (1985) and R. Daniel Shaw (1988).

In this article I reflect on how the SWM balanced its ideas about contextualization by affirming the supracultural nature of the gospel with a position of epistemological humility. I hope to show that SWM’s view of contextualizing theology was both progressive and traditional in that Evangelical, idealist notions of culture and truth shaped it. This

1 Moreau uses Gilliland’s map of contextualization models in his own mapping and assessing of Evangelical models (2012, 327ff, 355ff).

combination opened up the promise and challenge of theological diversity that asks questions about ecclesiastical authority in the face of the conflict of interpretations. The contextualization theories of SWM were emblematic of a larger evangelical focus, on how culture shapes understanding, that often neglected social analysis of how local and global social systems and institutions frequently dominate cultural beliefs and values. Today the power of contemporary global social forces makes it necessary for missiologists to find theories of culture that allow missiology to more fully describe and study these social influences on local theologies and Christian practice.

My reflection on WAU and the work of SWM faculty on contextualization is intertwined with my own academic journey. I have been deeply influenced by the authors of WAU. I read their books and articles in seminary (1982 – 1985) and later studied with seven of the book's twelve authors while earning two academic degrees at SWM (1996 – 2002). Like most evangelical missionaries I found that their insights affirmed the Evangelical concern for faithfulness to scripture and were progressive with regard to serious engagement with culture. The thinking of SWM honed my skills in cross-cultural communication of the gospel and liberated my understanding of how to do theology in context. While not everyone in the evangelical world endorsed Fuller's ideas on contextualization, even the disagreement led to insightful discussions and debates. Evangelicals today think differently than they did in 1989 and I suspect that most would endorse the ideas in WAU more easily than when it was published. Whether we agree or disagree, the missiological world owes a large debt to the careful and creative thinking of the SWM faculty on contextualization. In celebration of this rich legacy I would like to invite my former SWM professors to respond to some questions about contextualization that reading WAU in our present context forces to the surface.

First, in proposing the supracultural nature of the gospel together with a critical realist epistemology, have Evangelicals been willing to fully address the resulting conflict of theological interpretations and resulting questions about ecclesiastical authority? The term supracultural was used by evangelical missiologists to argue that the gospel is independent of culture and should not be compromised for the sake of cultural relevance. This term

emerged in a context in which Evangelicals were fighting to maintain the authority of scripture and resist abandoning biblical truth to personal and cultural preference. For some time before *WAU* was published Evangelicals had been energetically arguing against theories that would relativize biblical truth and in missiology this translated into the idea of the supracultural gospel.²

SWM regularly endorsed the concept of the supracultural nature of the gospel and at the same time moved past an epistemology characterized by naïve realism. According to this view the Church cannot triumphantly declare that it possesses or can articulate absolute truth. This qualified the concept of the supracultural by admitting that no one's perception of truth was absolute or free of the limits of her or his cultural point of view. SWM articulated this epistemological humility as critical realism (Kraft 1996 and Hiebert 1994).

The authors of *WAU* had a different, nuanced, understanding of culture and contextualization yet they shared a common commitment to the supracultural truth of the gospel when doing contextualization. Yet in almost every SWM published work that discusses the supracultural gospel the reader cannot help but notice hesitancy. Consider this comment by Peter Wagner in his contribution to *WAU*,

I myself hesitate to draw up a catalog of supracultural truths lest they be successfully challenged by someone who knows something about some of the world's cultures that I do not and shows that I have guessed wrong. Nevertheless, there are certain concepts that emerge from Scripture which *probably* would be universally recognized as supracultural principles of Christianity, . .

2 While the term only appears a few times in *WAU* the concept was I believe assumed by all the authors. According to Kraft the term, "supercultural" was coined by William A. Smalley and Marie Fetzner in "A Christian View of Anthropology." F.A. Everest ed. *Modern Science and Christian Faith*. Wheaton, IL. 1948. Linwood Barney spoke of "supracultural" in "The Meo – An Incipient Church." *Cultural Anthropology*. 1957.

He then lists a number of general Christian principles that might qualify as supracultural but then comments, “But as words, they are so abstract that they have very little intrinsic meaning.” (Gilliland, 230-31).³ Kraft and Hiebert used the term supracultural numerous times in their writings and this same epistemological humility can be seen.⁴

Though the differences do not appear in WAU, Kraft and Hiebert defined the relationship between the supracultural and critical realism somewhat differently. Kraft understood supracultural to identify the functions and meanings behind the forms of the gospels that are the “constants of Christianity” (1979, 118). He focused on the function and impact of the gospel in a person’s life through encounters with truth, allegiance and power (Kraft 2005). These functions and meanings fill the gap between the ideal supracultural gospel and specific cultural contexts. God overcame the gap through the revelation of His life-transforming message, which is personal, interactional, and receptor oriented. Receptors receive messages but create their own meanings.⁵ He states clearly that human perceptions of the supracultural are adequate but never absolute (Kraft 1979, 129). This bold and honest observation was partly responsible for a number of evangelical objections to his approach to contextualization (e.g. Hesselgrave and Rommen 1989, 192ff).

In Hiebert’s famous article “Critical Contextualization” he wrote, “...if the gospel is contextualized, what are the checks against biblical and theological distortion? Where are the absolutes” (1994, 84-85)? In an article discussing his concept of metatheology, Hiebert commented that, “The goal of theology is not simply to apply the gospel in the diverse contexts of human life. Theology’s nature also revolves around the goal to understand the unchanging nature of the gospel – the absolutes that transcend time and cultural pluralism” (1994, 102). Hiebert seemed to feel that it might be possible to achieve some consensus on the supracultural through

3 I am sympathetic with his frustration but perhaps these Christian principles seemed too abstract because they were missing the social context needed to be translated into Christian behavior.

4 See Kraft (1979, 116f; 2005, 96) and Hiebert (1994, 102-103).

5 See Moreau’s helpful discussion on Kraft’s view (2012, 80).

international dialogue (he mentions conferences) that would agree on the essentials of the supracultural gospel (1994, 103). Later, in a more qualified comment he states that it is not possible to know the gospel absolutely and that knowledge is always connected to social power which must be taken into account (1999, 74). Showing even more concern for the tension between the supracultural and epistemological humility, Hiebert defined metatheology as a set of procedures. This procedure included the test of scripture, humility and willingness to be led by the Spirit, and the hermeneutical community seeking consensus on theological issues (1994, 101-102).

These two claims – that the gospel was supracultural and that no one had access to the supracultural gospel – have always created an uneasy tension. It is a parallel argument to the one that Evangelicals have made about the inerrancy of scripture as originally given. While the effort to protect the authority of scripture is a worthy one, it seems odd that in this argument scripture's authority is based on original manuscripts no one has ever seen. Evangelicals would do better to simply confess faith in the authority of scripture on religious grounds. In both cases however the goals in these arguments are worthy ones even if they seem to use faulty rational arguments to defend what are ultimately religious convictions.

This dual argument moved contextualization theory ahead. Yet it is my observation that many missionaries and students who embrace it have consequently concluded that the task of contextualization comes down to overcoming cultural bias in order to ascertain God's truth. While becoming culturally aware is important for increasing cross-cultural communication it simply does not lead to objectivity in theology. I fear that the idea of the supracultural has left many focused on the wrong problem. The incarnation, (a doctrine frequently used by SWM faculty as a model for contextualization) demonstrates that it is God who comes into our social worlds to reveal Himself in the midst of culture.⁶ God does not ask us to critically fight through biases to finally see a cultureless, supracultural truth. If the incarnation tells us that

6 There are ten uses of the term incarnation as the model for contextualization in WAU and it is routinely referred to as the ultimate model for contextualization in the faculty's writings. For example see Gilliland (2005, 493ff), Hiebert 1985, 91ff), Kraft 1979, 173ff), and Shaw (1998, 14ff).

God's revelation comes in the midst of cultural and social life, then perhaps culture is as much an asset as it is a problem in theology. "In all situations the gospel seems to find its natural congruence within the cultural stream while at the same time encountering there its most serious obstacles" (Sanneh 1995, 49). This is not because God is equal to nature or culture but because God is the prior and primary category before both. Culture does not feed on itself "to produce a sacral category" (1995, 51). The SWM faculty would agree with this and yet rightly remain concerned about the question of validity in the diversity of local theologies.

Clearly the faculty of SWM has supported the ever-widening insights of new theologies. In support of theological diversity Van Engen writes, "As the gospel continues to take root in new cultures, and God's people grow in their covenantal relationship to God in those contexts, a broader, fuller, and deeper understanding of God's revelation will be given to the world church" (Gilliland 1989, 95). Hiebert affirmed the right of all local churches to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own cultural contexts and urged the west to face the fact of theological diversity (1999, 97). But he also felt it important to identify the supracultural gospel. He continued to argue that, "there is objective reality and objective truth (reality as God sees it – as it really is)" (1994, 98). By acknowledging that cultural bias could be an obstacle in cross-cultural communication the faculty clearly did not intend to say that culture was the primary problem in doing theology. Our only chance of understanding God is in terms of what God has revealed to us in the biblical texts that are embedded in ancient cultures. I have two observations to offer about the tension of affirming an objective gospel while admitting that it cannot be objectively known.⁷

7 I have other misgivings about the notion of the supracultural and speaking about objective truth in relation to the gospel. If truth emanates from God as revelation then it is by its very nature subjective truth. God is God in three persons and the source of all personhood, and thus the primary subject before all others. Rather than speaking of objectivity in theology Christians above all people should be taking up the subjective view of Christ. In this sense Christian commitment should be characterized by a self-aware bias in that we intentionally seek to have the mind of Christ.

First, once we say that the supracultural gospel cannot be known outside of culture, we cannot escape the problem of cultural relativism no matter how many times we affirm the existence of supracultural (absolute) truth. SWM and those who do not believe in the existence of absolute truth at all are both faced with the problem of a “conflict of interpretations.” In other words, once there is no standard, or a standard that cannot be known, all interpretations may rightly compete for validity. Contemporary hermeneutics has taught us that to read is to interpret, so pointing to the Bible as the standard only postpones the problem. It seems that there simply are no meta-perspectives from which we can judge and validate theology.

Looking back it is ironic that the battle Evangelicals were fighting for the authority of the scripture and theological absolutes on an intellectual level has largely been lost in the west due to social and economic shifts. These shifts vastly increased personal autonomy and eroded institutional, and especially ecclesiastical, authority. It may be that propositions of absolutes are only effective when a community’s institutions have the power to bring human behavior into compliance. The battle in the west has been lost because the authority of personal choice is now a social fact (in the way Durkheim meant social fact). Heresy was only an operational concept when the Church had social authority to judge competing views as invalid. Consequently appeals to absolute truth today have little relevance for Christian or non-Christian social life. This does not mean that they are not made every Sunday. But today Churches in the west possess only market appeal and influence but very little actual authority in the lives of Christians.⁸ In the west only impersonal bureaucracies have the power to coerce individual behavior against the consumer culture of individual preference and belief.

8 Today there is still lip service given to the notion of absolute truth but little evidence that Christians would submit to its demands on their lives. I recently asked a class of 35 evangelical students if they believed that the gospel represented absolute truth. Most of them said they believed this was true. I then asked if they could think of any issue that they would allow a local church authority to overrule their own convictions or behavior. No one could think of any circumstance at all in which he or she would submit to a church ruling. Of course this does not prove that there isn’t a supracultural gospel but it does show us how social forces have shaped the way we actually appropriate faith and practice.

This leads into my second observation. Once we take a critical realist view and give freedom for a multiplicity of theologies we must then ask who will validate theology and by what standard? We are now on the doorstep of the deeper issues of social and ecclesiastical institutional power that lies behind efforts to define truth. WAU and the faculty of SWM did not fully address this issue. For Kraft the standard for validity is theology functioning in our lives in dynamically equivalent ways to the way the gospel functioned (impacted) in Christian lives in the first century. It is unclear however who will evaluate the level of equivalence in our theologies.

Hiebert went the furthest by suggesting that hermeneutical communities seek consensus on theological issues. On the other hand he was not necessarily comfortable with local churches doing this work. He seemed to prefer international conferences where dialogue about a meta-theological grid could take place (1994). He was well aware that critical realism invited multiple theologies and that in practice “most evangelical missionaries and sending churches are deeply threatened when national leaders begin to develop their own theologies” (1994, 97). This default tendency to standardize western theology has of course quickly given way to the expanding global independent church movement. These churches, birthed without dependency on, or obligation to the older churches, are now free to explore God’s revelation in the Bible as they read it in their contexts. In the wake of the expanding diversity in theology, Sanneh makes the following comment.

[While religious people] employ culture to represent God as transcendent being, the God who is so represented may not be identified with some cultural manifestations to the exclusion of others, so that partial cultural representation does not become the comprehensive criterion of God. Such a Christian position would allow cultural access and utilization without making end and means synonymous... This may sound at once threatening and inconclusive, threatening because it rejects cultural systems as in any sense definitive of truth, and inconclusive because it perceives culture as inseparable from the truth (Sanneh 1995, 51-52).

Sanneh argues that cultural pluralism lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. “No culture is the exclusive norm of truth and...no culture is inherently unclean in the eyes of God” (1995, 52). If this is true, are Evangelical churches and mission organizations able to embrace the social and ecclesiastical freedom that this implies? But even if they are not ready, is ecclesiastical authority strong enough to resist the global marketplace of churches where members are consumers who choose? Sanneh challenges us to come to a deeper understanding of incarnation; one in which plural understandings of the gospel reflect the nature of the gospel itself. We continue to face the temptation to use social power to silence theologies that understand the gospel differently than we do.

Some might reply that this kind of freedom can lead to false gospels and confusion. While there are many valid interpretations of scripture, not all interpretations are valid. We should recall however that alternative readings of the gospel have always been with us and today more than ever the Church lacks the social authority to silence alternative interpretations. In this situation our peaceful and loving response to diverse gospel understandings can become one of the greatest means by which we validate our adherence to the first century gospel. We will be known as Jesus’ disciples by the fruit of our interpretations and our responses to the interpretations of others (Matt. 7). It may be that the influence of a well-lived Christian life is more effective than trying to resurrect ecclesiastical authority. Like headmen in small-scale communities we must now persuade and impress without the authority to make people act.

This leads me to another important question. Has Evangelical missiology adequately considered how social systems and institutions impact how the gospel is interpreted and practiced? Did our American distaste for communism and liberation theology’s close association with it, leave us with distaste for social analysis? More than twenty-five years after its publication, I read WAU very differently than when I first read it. My view of culture and contextualization has undergone a change that began even before I left SWM. Daniel Shaw talked to me about the social anthropology of Mary Douglas

and the inference communication theory of Sperber and Wilson (1995).⁹ Charles Kraft was saying, “After all we have said about contextualization it may be that social issues may be more important than cultural issues.”

While the missiological world focused on SWM’s culture theory in contextualization, the articles in *The Word Among Us* do in fact wrestle with social realities. Gilliland reminds us that theology is done in “time and place” (11), Van Engen describes the covenant as “historical contextualization” (83), Hiebert criticizes asocial and ahistorical views of symbols (106-107), Shaw insists that, “History cannot be ignored or passed over” (152, 156), and Kraft argues that “God’s messages need to be conveyed through life not simply words” (135). In one provocative moment Che-Bin writes, “...any alternative that is offered as a solution to the Chinese problem [of achieving a universal ethic for the nation] must include options for a new political system” (278). Regardless of their attempt to remind us of the importance of social forces, most Evangelicals missionaries have focused on how to translate theological concepts and worship forms cross-culturally. This tendency agrees with the Evangelical bias in favor of cultural study over social analysis.

Yet in today’s globalized world social and economic systems and institutions are overwhelming cultural beliefs and values. Meanwhile postmodern thinkers have powerfully critiqued the hidden agendas and ideologies latent in metanarratives and institutions that shape cultural ideals. Today many postmodern thinkers find metanarratives impossible to accept given their suspicion that they are Trojan horses laden with hidden agendas that benefit the powerful. While many of us recoil from these critiques, missiology must begin to more fully address the challenges of social analysis in contextualization. Marshal Sahlins suggests, “We have to talk about the way that cultural meanings are put at risk by [social / historical] events” (2014).

The social forces of globalization and the critique of institutional linkage between power and ideology should reframe discussions on

9 See Shaw’s excellent article on this, “Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first-Century Model for Enabling Mission” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 34, No.4 (October 2010): 208 – 215.

contextualization. Rather than propose how contextualization should be done, it might be prudent to first *describe how theology is being done* in order to analyze patterns being practiced. We might consider doing an ethnography of contextualization. In a sense this is what Andrew Walls (1996, 2002) and Sanneh (1989) have done in studying the cultural transmission of the gospel over time.¹⁰ How have various peoples received, resisted and contributed to reshaping the gospel even as the gospel transformed them and their societies. We must learn from their ability to analyze both the structures of power and the resistance of those “from below.”

While globalization makes the study of social power and resistance urgent, these dynamics have always been in play. Lamin Sanneh argues that recipients of the gospel were never passive audiences. Missionaries might have been receptor oriented but the receptors were always pushing back, shaping and at times resisting the gospel in pursuit of their own cultural projects. Both messenger and audience mutually influenced each other and the message, and this happened while being part of larger complex social processes (2003, 18). As Shaw and Van Engen have pointed out, the contextualization of the gospel has always emerged out of the dialogue and interrelationships of missionary and local audience (2003). Sanneh expands this view to include the interaction between larger institutional, social structural and geo-political processes in which local people participate.

My final question is, do we need a broader understanding of culture; one that takes into account the social environment of global and institutional constraints on people’s cultural pursuits? The school of culture as agency (or practice) articulated by Marshall Sahlins (2005), and especially Sherry Ortner (2006), may be useful to Evangelicals in thinking about contextualization. Ortner describes human agency in the pursuit of cultural projects lived within social constructs of power and resistance. Her theory of culture attempts to link culture to social structure, power and the agency of individuals (Ortner 2006, Loc 2714). As she explains, culture as practice is

10 At SWM Kraft was always more concerned with the process of contextualization than other Evangelicals writing on contextualization (Moreau 2012, 150). But his work focuses mostly on the social encounter between messenger and receptor rather than the individual in the midst of social systems and forces.

“...the framework of practice theory within which neither ‘individuals’ nor ‘social forces’ have ‘precedence,’ but in which nonetheless there is a dynamic, powerful, and sometimes transformative relationship between the practices of real people and the structures of society, culture, and history” (Ortner, Kindle Locations 24912493). Furthermore,

... the point of making the distinction between agency-in-the-sense-of power and an agency-in-the-sense-of (the pursuit of) [cultural] projects is that the first is organized around the axis of domination and resistance, and thus defined to a great extent by the terms of the dominant party, while the second is defined by local logics of the good and the desirable and how to pursue them (Ortner, Kindle Locations 2725-2728).

Here individuals pursue cultural projects (such as I want to be Christian, or I want to reach the world for Christ) as members of groups who have status and relative amounts of power (e.g. within a local Christian community and society). These projects are selected from a group’s cultural menu of desired projects. The pursuit of these projects is subject to their place within the network of social relationships, local and global, and in this network they both exercise and resist power. These social networks present people with opportunities and constraints that shape their pursuit of cultural projects.

Missionaries did not simply hand off the good news to local people. They were participants in larger social networks of relationships and institutions that included Christian and non-Christians, local citizens and foreign expatriates, all with different statuses, degrees of influence, power and social obligations. This situation requires that missiologists use a culture theory that accounts for social power and individual agency as cultural projects are pursued. The fact that the gospel is received in the midst of social relationships and institutions seems to be at least as important as the way meaning is conveyed through forms.

I recognize that my questions are not particularly new. Yet the social conditions of our global situation – a situation characterized by the contradictions of neo-liberalism on a global scale alongside religious

fundamentalism, obscene wealth alongside desperate economic inequality, expanding individual freedom alongside dominating bureaucracies - make the questions of the social implications of our epistemological choices and the role of social power in shaping Christian faith urgent ones.

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