Connected to Culture, Conformed to Christ: Exploring Alternate Forms of Worship

By G. T. Ng

Human language does not stay static, it is subject to change from time to time. For example, no one sleeps in church anymore. He is just "rationing consciousness." No one is tall anymore. She is said to be "vertically enhanced." No one is short anymore, just "vertically challenged." Worship isn't dull anymore. It's "liturgically challenged."

The mode of worship is a pressing issue in the Seventh-day Adventist Church today. Since the office of Global Mission was established, the Adventist Church has grown by leaps and bounds. The emphasis has been to reach the unreached, especially the people groups located in the 10/40 window.

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When the Global Mission office was established in 1990, there were 2,300 groups of one million people without an Adventist presence. In 2001, however, most of these people groups have been penetrated, and only 460 groups remain in which there is no Seventh-day Adventist presence. In 1990, twenty-seven countries were yet unentered. In 2001, however, there are only nine unentered countries.

The exponential expansion of the church has brought about great rejoicing on one hand, and growing pains on the other. One major task has been the challenge of making the gospel meaningful to new converts. In many parts of the world, Christianity is still equated with Western culture because local cultural expressions of Christianity have often been rejected in favor of the more "enlightened" Western forms. Converts are often ostracized from their families or tribes. The newly planted churches have not had the know-how to adapt, modify, or replace the foreignness of the gospel. How should the Adventist Church respond to the fact that churches around the world are often copies of the

churches that planted them? Since these churches are foreign within their own contexts, what can be done to reduce the discontinuity between culture and the gospel?

The purpose of this article is to discuss issues pertaining to contextualization with special reference to corporate worship.

Facing the Challenge

The need to contextualize the gospel in each local culture has been a growing emphasis in the Christian churches during the past four decades. For example, the All Africa Conference of Churches in Ibadan in 1958 affirmed that "while the church cannot give Christian content to every African custom, we believe that the church throughout Africa has a very rich contribution to make to the life of the world church" (Ariarajah 1994:12). In other words, not all culture is bad. Cultural considerations should become part and parcel of the life and ministry of the church.

Scholars look at contextualization from different perspectives. Pobee examines it from an African point of view and appeals for the contextualization of the gospel in such African ritual forms as using drums, songs, and xylophones in liturgy. He believes that a contextual approach to worship that emphasizes not only the intellectual, but also the emotions and values will greatly enhance the effect of worship on worshippers (1996:39, 40).

Pobee suggests three preliminary guidelines for the discussion between the gospel and culture. First, it must be biblical. It must begin with the revelation of God, that he has revealed himself through Christ and through the Bible as the primary source for instruction and correction. Second, it must be apostolic. Seeking to contextualize the gospel does not mean a discontinuity with the apostles. Much can be learned from the disciples who have gone before us. Third, it must be catholic. It must be universally applicable throughout the globe. It must transcend time and culture (49-51).

Many agree to the need of contextualization, but not all agree on what constitutes the "right" approach. Issues relating to contextualization are complex. Discussions on such matters are likened to the opening of a

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"Pandora's box" of vexed hermeneutical issues much debated today.

This article will first discuss the three approaches to contextualization described by leading missiologist Paul Hiebert (1988:184), followed by a study on the process of critical contextualization. Attention will then be paid to the characteristics of biblical worship as informed by Scripture. The relationship between worship and contextualization is deliberated next, followed by practical suggestions on making worship more culturally relevant and biblically authentic.

Rejection
of Contextualization

Hiebert describes a first approach which is often a rejection of any type of contextualization. Some missionaries tend to reject most of the old customs and label them as pagan. Funeral rites, modes of worship, dress, food, dances, and ceremonies are often condemned because they are related to traditional religions.

The wholesale rejection of the old creates serious theological and missiological problems. First, such rejection is based on the presupposition that the missionary's culture is superior to that of the host culture. The assumption is that the imported Christian culture (Western) is the normative culture and should therefore serve as a yardstick by which other cultures are measured.

In many Asian countries, however, it is almost impossible to separate culture from traditional religions (Schreiter 1985 and Whiteman 1997:2-7). Giving up cultural practices means to live outside the culture. Hence, to become a Christian implies that one becomes an alien in one's own culture and a stranger in one's own homeland.

Second, the rejection of the old ways creates a cultural void which is often filled by foreign elements familiar to the missionaries. The outcome is that mats are thrown out in favor of pews, drums and cymbals are rejected in favor of piano and organ, and traditional customs and costumes are discarded and replaced by imported ones.

Third, attempts to abandon old traditions often fail. "Many missionaries have come to realize that an attempt to eradicate an undesirable custom may merely drive it underground or result in an undesirable reactionary behavior" (Paun 1975:208). The fact remains that traditional religions die hard. When suppressed, they merely go underground. Many times they are practiced alongside of Christianity, resulting in a syncretistic mix of Christian and non-Christian beliefs and practices. Believers see nothing wrong with attending church and seeking advice from fortune tellers. Many Latin Americans routinely combine the worship of the traditional African gods with the veneration of the saints.

Uncritical Contextualization

Hiebert describes a second approach as uncritical contextualization. Traditional practices are accepted into the church without prior examination. Such uncritical contextualization is based on the assumption that local cultures are good and desirable. Another assumption is that the Christian religion often comes in its foreign garb, and in order to minimize the dislocation and ostracism of new believers, local cultures should be retained and practiced.

Uncritical contextualization brings about two weaknesses. First, it overlooks the fact that not all cultural practices are biblically acceptable. Missionaries cannot turn a blind eye to such social ills as slavery and female circumcision. The gospel is an agent of change, but uncritical contextualization denies the prophetic function of the church.

Second, uncritical contextualization also leads to syncretism. Since local culture is not scrutinized under the spotlight of biblical truth, chances are that some of the practices are combined with Christian beliefs, thus forming a syncretistic religion.

Critical Contextualization

Hiebert's recommended approach is critical contextualization. Old beliefs and customs are neither rejected nor accepted uncritically, but are to be objectively assessed against the norm of biblical truth.

How should critical contextualization be carried out? Hiebert suggests a four-step process (1988:186, 187). First, recognize the need to contextualize on the basis of biblical norms. The attitude should be one of impartiality, either to the host culture or the Christian culture.

Second, identify the areas of contextualization. These include rites relating to birth, death, and marriage and also include ceremonies, music, and songs. The purpose is to understand the deep meaning in the cultural elements, not to pass value judgment on them or on any aspect of the cultural heritage (at this point in the process).

Third, conduct Bible studies on the areas under consideration. Sound hermeneutical principles should be employed to ensure an accurate rendition of biblical texts as they apply to present contexts. In seeking to develop a missional hermeneutic that is multicultural, Brownson

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argues that the presence of God is potentially available in any given culture. While the gospel calls all people to repentance, it does not obliterate the contours of specific cultures. Since categories derived from Hellenistic philosophy were used to express the essence of the gospel in its context, he concludes that "there is a powerful line of development within the canon of Scripture that sanctions and encourages diverse expressions of Christian faith while maintaining a sense of coherence surrounding certain core assumptions regarding the character and purpose of God" (Brownson 1996:2).

Fourth, make a decision to stop or continue certain practices after critical appraisal of the practice in the light of biblical texts.

This four-step process of critical contextualization should involve the people concerned. They have an intimate knowledge of their culture and under the guidance of trained missionaries, are in a position to critique their cultural practices. Local people are the ones who will make the decision and enforce the decision. Changes cannot take place without their approval. What happens when missionaries do not agree with the choices the people have made? Hiebert's suggestion is that the people should be given the benefit of the doubt and the freedom to make mistakes since such freedom is really part of the process for growth and development of a indigenized church.

The ownership of local people in the process of contextualization is in line with the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. God's people make up the church. Each is accessible to God and is accessible by God through the Holy Spirit. Norman Kraus argues that ultimately the task does not solely depend on the missionary or the people, but on the church as a "discerning community." Hermeneutically the missionary is better trained, but culturally, the people have the edge. It is a joint venture between the two.

The outcome of the evaluation exercise may have different consequences. One possibility is to retain beliefs and practices not antithetical to the Scriptures (example: wearing Western attire). Other practices may be rejected as unchristian (example: prenuptial living together of the engaged couple). Still other practices may be modified to give Christian meaning (example: substituting secular lyrics with Christian ones in popular songs). Sometimes new rituals that are not biblically offensive may also be added.

What Contextualization Is Not

While contextualization is acutely needed in new churches, I-to Loh cautions that it can be misunderstood by those who do not fully understand its nature. For example, he maintains that contextualization is not revivalism (1990:293-301). Contextualization is not a revival of native

culture without evaluation. It is not a flaunting of tradition and its value system. It is not a pretext to vent nationalistic sentiments. It is also not an attempt to force others to accept old traditions. Proper contextualization is retaining native culture agreeable with the Scriptures, capitalizing the elements relevant to its modern context, and identifying points of agreement for the communicating of the gospel message.

Loh also maintains that contextualization is not exclusivism. Contextualization does not

the world worship in many different ways. The Indian style of worship music, for example, may sound strange to people from Latin America. The more flamboyant and upbeat form of Caribbean worship may make believers from a high-church tradition uncomfortable. The great diversity of worship styles elicits questions on the relationships between culture and worship. Is worship culturally conditioned in the first place? Is there such a thing as a biblical core in worship that transcends time? To answer these questions, one

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necessarily reject anything and everything "foreign." Rather, it is an effort to open one's mind and heart to other cultures and appreciate other forms of Christian expression of faith and music in those cultures.

Worship and Culture

As a diverse church with many cultures, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has prided itself as an international church. People from different parts of

needs to examine the history of worship in the Old and New Testament eras.

Characteristics of Biblical Worship

A perusal of sacred history brings out four characteristics of worship: diversity, continuity, particularity, and liberty.

First, biblical worship was characterized by diversity. The notion of a uniform worship pattern in the Bible is a myth.

The Old Testament worship, for example, was typified by the interplay of four institutions: the exodus, the temple, the synagogue, and the festivals (Webber 1982:24, 25). The exodus and the subsequent events in Sinai highlighted worship in which God entered into a covenant relationship with the Hebrew people (Exod 19-24).

Exod 24:1-8, in particular, outlines the characteristics of authentic worship. First, God initiated the call to worship and the people assembled before him. Second, worship was a participatory event in which God and people interacted. Third,

The Jewish temple worship called attention to the presence of God as well as the sacredness of time and ritual. Temple worship also signified a separation of the Jews from the surrounding nations and was a symbol of God's relationship to his unique people. The synagogue was an intertestamental institution that became the center of religious, educational, and social life of the Jews. It had no sacred ritual but focused on prayers and the reading and understanding of God's word (Millgram 1971:89-120). The Jewish festivals provided assurance of God's continued provisions and presence.

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worship was depicted by the proclamation of God's word. God spoke to his people and made his wishes known. Fourth, worship involved personal commitment. The people accepted the covenant with all its conditions. They were committed to obedience. Fifth, worship was rectified by a blood sacrifice, pointing to the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. This rectification precipitated in the Lord's Supper in the New Testament.

Second, biblical worship was characterized by continuity. The Jewish festivals provided a sense of continuity of God's work from the past to the present. The New Testament worship was influenced by temple worship in that Christians continued to keep the temple hours of prayer (Acts 3:1) and to use the temple as a place for preaching (Acts 3:11-26; 4:12-13; 19-26, 42). Christians also transferred the basic elements (word, prayer,

and sacraments) of synagogue worship to Christian worship, thus maintaining the legacy of synagogue worship.

Third, biblical worship was characterized by particularity. Though worship was diverse in nature while maintaining continuity from past history, it was nevertheless unique in each time period. The Old Testament worship was centered on Sinai, but the New Testament worship was rooted in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. The New Testament worship was distinctive in the sense that Christ reinterpreted temple worship as pointing to himself. The cleansing of the temple, for example, signified the end of temple worship.

The early Christians worshipped in continuity with the past until they were caught in the tension between being Jewish and Christian. Then changes gradually occurred (Martin 1974 and Werner 1970). The Hellenistic Christians in particular, were keen to abolish Jewish rituals in favor of a new emphasis on the fulfilled meanings of those rituals. For example, Jesus the Passover Lamb had been sacrificed (1Cor 5:7), and the Temple was replaced by the Body of Christ (1 Cor 3:16, 17). In addition, house churches appeared, especially among Jewish Christians (1 Cor 16:19, Col 4:15), thus signifying a further break from the past (Cullmann 1973:9, 10).

Fourth, biblical worship was characterized by liberty. The Hellenistic Christians preferred the freedom of expression and brought worship to new heights by speaking in tongues. Paul had to caution them that freedom of worship should not become unbridled chaos to the derision of unbelievers. Rather, it should be balanced with the necessity of order (1 Cor 14) as well as content by way of exercising large varieties of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12, 14).

These four characteristics of diversity, continuity, particularity, and liberty underscore the fact that the traditions of worship are historically and culturally conditioned. Worship did not evolve from a cultural vacuum, but was rooted in its respective context. Yet the contextual nature of worship should be recognized alongside with its transcendent quality. Authentic biblical worship transcends time and space. The challenge of contextualization is to determine which aspects of worship are transcendent and which are not.

Worship and Contextualization

Contextualization of worship appears to be a felt need in the Adventist Church today. For worship to be meaningful to believers, worship has to be relevant to the local culture. The challenge has been the localization of biblical worship. As noted above, biblical worship is not context-free. Biblical worship, as we understand it, comes with its

own cultural baggage. Is it possible to separate this cultural baggage from the core of biblical worship? If it is possible to do this, is it desirable?

Normative biblical worship involves several essential features: content, structure, and context (Webber 1982:56). The content of biblical worship is the life, death, resurrection, and second coming of Jesus Christ. The structure of biblical worship includes the centrality of Scripture, prayer, and the Lord's Supper, and the context in which worship takes

example, retained much of the basic structure of worship, but the meaning of worship to both the clergy and laity underwent fundamental changes. Worship became a mystery through the separation of sacred and profane and the use of Latin as the language of the Mass. The forms of worship became paramount and worship became an end rather than a means.

The context of worship varies according to locality. For worship to be meaningful to believers, worship should be

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place is the church called by God to worship and to witness to the contemporary world.

The content of worship is the non-negotiable part of worship. Without that content Christian worship becomes just another religious ceremony.

The structure of worship is another imperative, but the form in which the structure is delivered may be different from culture to culture. Caution should be taken to ensure that the meaning of the structure of worship remains compatible to biblical norms. The medieval church, for

packaged in a contextual mode familiar to them. However, worship is not to be accommodated to cultural norms. A rock band is a usual part of the cultural landscape, but would the presence of a rock band in worship constitute accommodation to cultural norms? Many Buddhist temples have prayer wheels—drums with the text of prayers written on the outside. In Buddhist thought, a prayer is said to be made by the simple act of spinning a prayer wheel. Would the installation of a prayer wheel in an Adventist Church

in Sri Lanka be considered an enhancement to prayer or an accommodation to prevailing culture?

Inasmuch as Christianity is often perceived as a Western religion, much can be done to contextualize the forms of Christian worship. For example, chanting is a way of life for the Buddhists. Japanese Buddhist ceremonial music includes the shomyo ritual based on the Vedic Indian chant similar to the Gregorian chant. Shomyo cantillations are sung in Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese. (See "Sacred Buddhist Chant of Japan," Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2001.) Chanting Koranic verses is also a daily occurrence for Muslims. Should Christian chanting be encouraged as a form of adoration in worship in place of the traditional Scripture reading?

Posture of worship is another concern. Believers with an Islamic background are more at home with sitting on prayer mats. Could prayer mats be used instead of pews and chairs? How about praying with uplifted hands like the Muslims or folded hands like the Buddhists?

How about musical instruments? Should local instruments be used? How about composition of hymns by indigenous artists? The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) is one of the foremost organizations pioneering contextualization of church music in Asia. Through the years the CCA has published hymnals in the local vernacular and style. However, it has found that while Asian hymns exist, many believers enjoy singing English hymns more than their own. Singing foreign-sounding hymns is perceived to be more "fashionable" than singing native hymns. Perhaps this is due to a low regard for non-Western culture and a lack of respect for third-world cultures. Local hymns, however, are more effective in expressing ethnic character and communicating the gospel to local people.

How about the time of worship? Adventist worship is more structured, quite unlike the traditional pattern of Hindu or Buddhist spirituality. Adventists have membership rolls and times and days of worship. Aside from these stipulated times of worship, our worship centers remain closed, quite in contrast to the spontaneous pattern of worship typical in India or Myanmar. In this respect, the Roman Catholic Church has structured itself more closely to the local cultural pattern than the Adventist Church. First, worshipers may come and go, even on a Sunday morning. Second, Roman Catholic Church buildings are often kept open during the day and worshipers have easy access to worship. Third, besides church buildings, Roman Catholic worship services are routinely conducted in such places as shopping malls and airports where people congregate.

Conclusion

Contextualization as a felt need of the church should increasingly become part of the consciousness of Adventist mission. The remarkable growth of the church in newly entered areas necessitates the formation of such a consciousness. Perhaps more importantly, the Body of Christ should translate that consciousness into a present reality. The process of contextualization in the area of worship should be painstakingly initiated and followed. To do so would require an intimate knowledge, not only of the meanings of the local cultural forms, but of the theological assumptions upon which they rest.

In the final analysis, God's view of worship is more inclusive than we think. In fact, worship in God's economy is all-encompassing, embracing all nationalities. "Twice the New Testament book of Revelation stresses that representatives of 'every race, language and nation' will be privileged to worship at the great and final gathering before the throne of God (Rev 5:9 and 7:9). In the searching light of this apocalyptic vision it is evident that God not only accepts but rejoices in the varieties of race, culture and language of the people that have committed themselves to him" (Wilson-Dickson 1992:13).

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