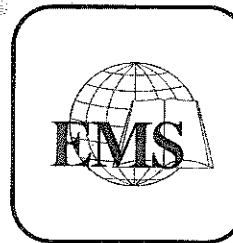


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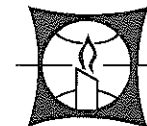
Contextualization and Syncretism

Navigating Cultural Currents

Editor:
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Evangelical
Missiological
Society
Series
Number 13



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Foreword

For many years I have contended that the largest vacuum in Missiology is the study of *syncretism* and the interrelated perspectives toward *contextualization*. I am happy to edit a volume which addresses these issues.

The book is timely. We are seeing many changes—from print media to oral transmission, from ahistorical to tradition, from propositionalism to narrative, from rationalism to embodiment, from market to mission, from rallies to relationship (Webber 2002, 7-8). Change permeates the very air we breathe. A few years ago Walter Brueggemann described this developing transition as the creation of a "new interpretive situation" resulting from "a radical shift of categories of culture, for which interpreters of faith in the West have not been well prepared" (1993, 1). Thus, as we transition from a modern to a postmodern era, the issues of contextualization and syncretism are exceptionally significant. Christianity's typical response to times of cataclysmic change is to so accommodate to the culture that the Christian message loses its divine essence.

Such accommodation is not new. Modernity's enthroning humanity and demoting God led Christians to become practicing deists. Because they could not be perceived, studied, and analyzed by the five senses, Biblical teachings about angels, demons, and Satan were considered myths. Even God was relegated to the spiritual realm, where he was allowed little authority over the world he created. Only "natural" powers which can be empirically analyzed were thought to operate in the "natural" world. Paradoxically, people viewed themselves as self-sufficient, not in need of God in the world that he created. Their world was a "closed universe" because natural powers were thought to operate with no interference from the spiritual realm. Even the social sciences, as described by Paul Hiebert in chapter 2, are rooted in humanistic, modern assumptions that either compartmentalize the natural and the supernatural or negate the spiritual realm altogether.

Culture's influence upon Christianity is easier to discern in retrospect than in prospect. If history is our guide, one thing is sure: This age will be as syncretistic as any other. Ancient Israel frequently syncretized the worship of God with that of the gods. Modern, "enlightenment" philosophies focused on the human and disregarded the spiritual. How is the gospel being contextualized in the contemporary world? To what degree are these new contextualizations syncretistic? This book attempts to answer these questions by defining and analyzing contextualization and syncretism.

Read carefully Steve Strauss' seminal writings on the role of context in shaping theology and the need to engage in intercultural theologizing. Examine my definitions of contextualization and syncretism and recontextualizations of the contemporary church in