

Gospel and Culture Issues in the Philippine Context: Some Process and Methodological Concerns

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Introduction

It is a cause for celebration that in the past 40 years or so there has been a great deal of reflection on gospel and culture issues in the Majority World. This is especially important in the light of the 'resurgence' of Islam and other world religions, and Christianity's continuing unsuccess in Asian cultures where local religious traditions rival Christianity in philosophical depth and comprehensiveness.

It has often been said in missiological circles that Christianity tends to have much success in largely primal cultures, where naked spirit forces are engaged in 'power encounters.' This seems to be true in much of Western Europe and the Americas, Africa, Australasia and the Philippines, often dubbed as the lone 'Christian country in the Far East,' in the outmoded language of Orientalism.

However, a deeper look at the case of the Philippines would seem to make the thesis too simple. While Spanish and American colonization has allowed the spread of Christianity with ease, the continuing existence of indigenous cults which today enjoy a kind of revival and renewed academic interest qualifies its success. Also, the fact that the level of public justice and civic morals is much lower than Buddhist countries like Japan shows that Christianity as an ethical system has yet to penetrate and engage the core values of the country.

Filipino culture is a bit misleading in that it has an open, welcoming face. Unlike other Asian cultures whose resistance is, as it were, 'in your face', the indigenous consciousness is highly accommodative and hospitable to foreign influences. We venture to say that what was labeled as 'conversion' could perhaps be more accurately described as 'adaptation', a collective transaction that involved the mere exchange of statues: dark wooden *anitos* – ancestral and nature spirits -- were exchanged for saints with Caucasian features. We adapted, but did not convert.

What has happened in the Philippines the past five centuries could perhaps give us all insights into how a primal culture that is at the same time located in Asia appropriates

Christianity. It is time that we surface, from our historical experiences, some methodological tools and conceptual pegs on which to hang our efforts at contextualization. The following is an attempt to describe, in a highly generalized way, how the Christian faith was appropriated in the Philippines. From this we shall abstract an outline that may be useful for understanding and framing the process we call 'contextualization.'

Plotting the shock of encounter

In a previous work, I have outlined the process of 're-rooting'¹ or 'inculturation,' as it is known in Catholic circles, as consisting of at least three discernible movements: "a) **cognitive resistance and dissonance**, or that period of encounter when the transmission of the faith meets with initial resistance or is too alien to be received with comfort or understanding within the native culture's system; b) **ambiguous appropriations**, that fairly lengthy period when the members of the culture appropriate the faith, but in a form that is either uncritically received from the originating missionary's tradition or domesticated almost entirely within the people's own metanarratives; and c) **transformative appropriations**, or that phase when believers in the culture learn to theologize and surface, from their increasing engagement with both the Text and their context, cultural themes that need challenging and affirming, as well as the biblical themes that can appropriately speak to them." ²

Initial encounter: cognitive resistance

The Spaniards evangelized the Philippines through a process patterned after the Islamic model of religious conquest.

Subjugated by the Moors for more than six centuries, Spain and Portugal, used to the idea of a totalitarian faith, imposed on the country a particularly hegemonic version of the medieval idea of 'Christendom,' where the church was synonymous with the state and the cross ruled with the sword.

¹ See the work of Jose de Mesa and others along this line in Timoteo Gener's *Re-rooting the Gospel in the Philippines: Roman Catholic and Evangelical Approaches to Contextualization* (Unpublished MPhil. Thesis, Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, 1998), especially his conclusion: "Cultural Transformation through Re-rooting and Rerouting."

² From the author's essay, "Reading, or How to Get the Seven Blind Men See the Elephant," *The Gospel in Culture, Contextualization Issues Through Asian Eyes*, Melba Padilla Maggay, ed., (Mandaluyong, Metro Manila:OMF Literature, Inc.), 2013, pp.168-169. Much of my remarks in this paper comes from this previous work.

As the missiologist Stephen Neill has long pointed out, Spain and Portugal, "long accustomed to Muslim totalitarianism....took over in their missionary work, almost unaltered, methods with which they had become familiar in the Muslim propagation of the Islamic faith, though neither was quite as thorough in the execution of their purpose as the Muslims had been, and there was more flexibility in their methods."³

Part of this Islamic influence was the introduction of a uniform liturgical language, namely Latin, in all the occupied territories, and the non-translation of the Bible into the vernacular languages. While the Spanish friars used the native languages for catechism, mainly based on the Tagalog *Doctrina Cristiana* which appeared in 1593, not a single translation of the Bible was made during the entire span of Spanish rule. This was in keeping with the strategic decision to present the faith as "something entirely new and not as a more perfect expression of their pagan beliefs."⁴

As the Catholic scholar Jose de Mesa tells it, "In conformity with the policy of deliberate rupture with the pagan past, the key concepts of Christianity were never translated into the native tongues. Lest the converts confuse or identify the Christian with the pagan, such terms were ordinarily left in the Spanish or Latin form. For example, the following key concepts were kept in the Spanish in the *Doctrina* of 1593: God, Trinity, Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary, pope, grace, sin, cross, hell, church, Sunday and the names of the sacraments. This principle of missionary policy was established in Mexico decades before the conversion of the Filipinos."⁵

The decision to leave these critical concepts untranslated into the linguistic world of the native believers meant a certain cognitive imperviousness, an opaque and impermeable mental recalcitrance.

At the outset there seemed to be a ready acceptance, as noted by the Jesuit friar Diego de Bobadilla in his 1640 account of conversion among the Tagalogs: though the natives "readily accept our religion," he says, "they seem incapable of sounding the depths of its mysteries."⁶

³ Stephen Neill, "Religion and Culture, A Historical Introduction," *Down to Earth, The Gospel and Culture*, John RW Stott and Robert T. Coote, eds., William Carey Library:Pasadena Ca., copyright by the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1979, pp.3-4.

⁴ Jose de Mesa, in a lecture on "The Religious Consciousness of Filipino Catholics," part of consultations held at the Philippine Social Science Center, August 29, 1995 for the ISACC research, *Conversion to Protestant Christianity Under Early American Rule*. Text found in the **Report**, Vol.1, Appendix D, May 10,1996. Quoted in the author's *A Clash of Cultures, Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness*, (Mandaluyong City: De La Salle University Press and Anvil Publishing, Inc), 2011, p.161.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For this quotation, and for an in-depth treatment of the translation problems, I am indebted to the work of Vicente Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism, Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press), 1988, pp.84-85.

As in the metaphor of the seed sown in rocky places, most likely, this ready 'acceptance' was a function of the culture's accommodative instinct, a gracious cross-cultural adjustment that is seen as part of hospitality to the stranger. But this does not mean that the message has been sufficiently grasped, enough to take root and change what we call the '*loob*,' that inmost part of our being where the will and the soul reside.

The seeming 'incapacity' to plumb the depths of the faith may be due to the failure to enter and engage what anthropology calls the 'deep structures' of the culture – matters of consciousness, values and worldview – as against such 'surface structures' as liturgical artifacts and church architecture.

It is important to note that cognitive acceptance of a message from outside the culture depends on whether it coheres with the people's metanarrative.

Early accounts of the Spanish friars, for instance, noted indifference, even resistance, to threats of hell and rewards of heaven.⁷ Unknown to the Spaniards, the indigenous mind did not find these concepts attractive, for it was assumed that after death one merely goes 'beyond the river,'⁸ to the Sky World where one rejoins one's ancestors. To a communal culture, the prospect of being reunited with one's clan in a place where one pretty much lives in the same way life has always been lived in one's village is much preferable to abstract concepts like 'eternal life' and vague threats of eternal punishment.

A period of ambiguities

The cumulative result of inadequate translation was the appropriation of these words almost entirely within the indigenous frame of meaning. "Since there was no primary Text that could serve as controlling frame of meaning, the people cast about for whatever sense they could make out of the Latin and Spanish words. The 'Trinity' functionally became the 'Father, Son and the Virgin Mary;' 'grace' became that 'unexpected boon brought by luck or chance

⁷ Rodolfo Juarez, as gleaned from Spanish documents of early friars, in "The Christianization of the Philippines," Conversion to Protestant Christianity Report, Track I, Volume III of the PEW research report, Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1997-1998.

⁸ The Manunggul jar is witness to this idea of the afterlife as a journey '*sa kabilang ibayo*.' A secondary Neolithic burial jar excavated from Lipuun Point in Palawan dating around 800 B.C., "it shows our primal belief in an afterlife," comments Imelda Cajipe Endaya, "a realm ruled by a Maykapal or Creator. On the jar's lid are two human figures on a boat. Some say the front figure is the dead person's physical manifestation, its hands crossed over the chest is a burial position. The rear figure is interpreted as the spirit, which rows the boat to its final destiny. The boat not only is clue to our dominantly marine culture. It is also symbolic of life as a journey."

happenstance;' and the 'cross' transmuted into '*pasang krus*,' that heavy burden dealt by the hand of fate that one bears patiently as if it were a form of sacrifice or penance."⁹

By the time the Americans came, the people have so appropriated and reinterpreted the words that their lexical meanings belonged neither to Latin nor the Castilian language. The historian Reynaldo Ileto notes that among the documents captured by Spanish authorities on a raid in Mount Banahaw, home to Hermano Pule's *cofradia*, were Tagalog writings on the life of Christ, herbal medicine prescriptions, and the prayers. These *dasal* or *oracion* were neither Spanish nor Latin.¹⁰

Jose de Mesa summarizes this period of appropriation thus: "The traditional beliefs and rites of official Catholicism were absorbed, accommodated, and adapted to the native thought patterns, temperaments, culture and religious background of the people. People reinterpreted Catholicism according to their own indigenous experience. With this we have the beginnings of Filipino folk Catholicism."¹¹

In time, there occurred a liturgical synthesis between Catholicism and the indigenous consciousness. This, however, was unaccompanied by shifts in religious paradigm.

"The indigenous mind, for the most part, simply assimilated the new elements within its own system, even as Christian figures were substituted, as with the ready accommodation of the figure of the Virgin Mary and the saints at the center of what in the past had been ancient fertility rites and festivals: the fluvial parade in Naga, for instance, which has for centerpiece Our Lady of Peñafrancia, or the annual *pahiyas* in Lukban, Quezon honouring the prodigious earth gifts of San Isidro.

"Even as the artifacts changed, the high god *Bathala* remained distant, high as the sky, as seen in the absence of representation for God the Father in Catholic churches. This distance is behind the continuing psychological need for a bureaucracy of saints that would mediate access, much like the *anitos* or the 'ministering spirits' of old."¹²

As the Spanish chronicler Loarca had observed, "When the Indios were asked why they did not offer any sacrifices to *Bathala*, they answered that *Bathala* was too great a lord and therefore no one could speak to him."¹³ Instead, *Bathala* had agents called *anitos*, who were

⁹ Maggay, *op.cit.*, p.171.

¹⁰ Reynaldo Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution, Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910*, (Quezon City:Ateneo University Press), 1979, pp.64-65.

¹¹ Jose de Mesa, *op.cit.*

¹² Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures*, *op.cit.*, p.172.

¹³ See chapter 11 of Loarca in Blair and Robertson, *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*, Vol. VI, p. 129ff.

of such a nature that they were sent to the world and could talk to humans, interceding to produce crops, protect journeys at sea, win wars or heal diseases.

This pattern of accommodating outside religious influence, but always within the culture's metanarratives, has remained largely unaltered until recently. In many variants of popular movements, we see signs of the old religion, even as there seems to be a decisive turn towards a more dynamic interaction between the text of Scripture and the primal context.

Transformative appropriations

After almost four centuries of Spanish Catholicism, American Protestantism came in the late 1800's and early 1900's. This has meant the introduction of a more cognitive character and an intellectual content to the people's Christianity. Emphasis shifted from the altar to the pulpit, from ritual to the preaching of the Word.

However, the missionaries' preaching, which centered on the question, "Are you saved?", by which they mean, "Do you have a ticket to heaven?" did not register at all in the minds of either ordinary converts nor with those who refused to cross over to Protestantism. Felix Lagunero, for instance, an early Protestant convert, found the threat of hell and punishment not at all attractive nor compelling, although he was responsive to the good news of "salvation and good deeds."¹⁴ Likewise, the non-convert Rosita Remoto, who went at first to Protestant church services, found the approach too cognitive: "I felt it was tiresome and a burden because it was like we were also going to school." She stayed through the services, however, because she loved the music and the singing, and especially remembered the songs, "*Sa Manunubos Duol Kamo*" and "How Great Thou Art."¹⁵

While Protestant preaching and the Filipino indigenous consciousness were like ships passing each other in the night, the people were responsive to God's 'goodness', which carried quite a range of meanings to the converts.

At one level, the converts were attracted to the personal life and service of the American missionaries, as against the mostly abusive and dissolute morals of the Spanish friars.

¹⁴ From an interview of early Baptist convert Felix Lagunero, 83 years old, on June 27, 1996, in Iloilo City by Liza Lamis, in "Conversion to Protestant Christianity Report," a PEW-funded research done by the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1995-1998. Cited in the author's book, *A Clash of Cultures, Early Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness*, (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing and De La Salle University Press), 2011, p.112.

¹⁵ Muriel Montenegro, interview with Rosita Remoto, 69 years old, October 27 and 31, 1996, *A Clash of Cultures*, p.117.

Lakay Pecdasen, 102 years old at the time of the interview and leader of the *Dap-ay* in Sagada, saw the Anglican church then as “the church of the good people.” Recalling John Staunton’s gesture of giving away coffins when an epidemic hit the place, he says: “During the *trankaso* (plague) when many people died here, the people got coffins from church for free. That was how Staunton was good.....If somebody lacked food, Staunton would lend them and they may pay back during harvest.”¹⁶

At another level, ‘goodness’ means the blessing and prosperity associated with becoming a Protestant. David Lagarto vividly remembers the missionary Anna Johnson’s illustration of a Ford car in her class at Pototan Academy. As the narrative goes:

‘Who among you have seen a Ford car?’ David raised his hand, and all the rest of his classmates followed suit. ‘Good. So you have seen a Ford car. This Ford car is owned by Mr. Ford in America. He owns the Ford cars all around the world. He is a believer of Christ.’ David felt his soul drawn to what Ms. Johnson was saying, ‘because you are really rich if you become a Christian.’ They started whispering to each other that the Protestants there in America are really ‘big’ people.¹⁷

This can easily be misconstrued as ‘prosperity gospel’ or a naïve acceptance of an overstretched version of Max Weber’s theory of the ‘redemptive lift’ arising from the ‘Protestant work ethic.’ However, this enthusiasm over Protestantism as a factor in the social rise of a group of people inhabiting a small tropical colony of the US is more deeply rooted in the culture than the mere promise of economic lift.

“Quite deep in the religious imagination of our people is the sense that ‘salvation’ has to do with *ginhawa*, which in Visayan languages means ‘breath’ (*gin’awa* in Cuyunon, for instance) and in Tagalog means “relief from hardship, a general sense of ease, comfort and well-being.”¹⁸

This “salvation in the present tense” is known among the Ikalahan tribe by the word *li-teng*. Delbert Rice, a long-term missionary among the Ikalahan, suggests that the word is their equivalent of the Hebrew concept of ‘shalom.’ To them, it means “health, a little bit of wealth,

¹⁶ Stanley F. Anongos, interview with Lakay Pecdasen, 102 years old, baptized Anglican convert, July 15, 1996, Demang, Sagada, Mountain Province, *A Clash of Cultures*, pp.116-117.

¹⁷ Liza Lamis, interview with David Lagarto, 92 years old, early convert without much knowledge of foreign missionaries, Duenas, Iloilo City, August 17, 1996, *A Clash of Cultures*, p.112

¹⁸ Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures*, p.113.

good relationships with your neighbors, and with the unseen neighbors, peace.” It is, he says, “pretty much what was referred to by Jesus as the abundant life.”¹⁹

Recently, the impact of the charismatic movement, both Catholic and Protestant, has been such that the Bible is being read massively in offices and schools, or broadcast at the end of television shows, over the radio or even in supermarkets. This has resulted in a kind of delayed Reformation.

El Shaddai, for instance, the biggest Catholic charismatic movement led by Mike Velarde, a businessman turned evangelist, is not much different in content from usual evangelical preaching.

Admittedly, the movement shows characteristics that evoke discomfort and strangeness among those raised in the austere rigors of Protestantism. “Umbrellas are ritually held upside down to catch showers of blessings; passports are held up in the air to ensure their holders’ passage to the US or some such country where people wish to work or emigrate; scarves and necklaces function as conductors of blessing and healing alongside usual articles like candles, oil, salt and water; prosperity is invoked by blessing food like eggs, perhaps a throwback to ancient rites for inducing fecundity.”²⁰

Protestants in this country, schooled in the doctrinal controversies that ruptured the Church in the 16th- century, tend to be dismissive of such instances of ‘folk Catholicism.’

But it needs to be said that the religion of a people is usually a product of the interaction between formal texts and contexts, between a faith tradition and popular appropriations. What we are seeing is a long and slow-moving process of engagement between the indigenous religious imagination and formal influences from the outside.

A Catholic scholar once remarked to me that it took at least a thousand years for Israel to negotiate the shift from a recalcitrant polytheism to a stable monotheism, and even then, not very successfully. ²¹Judaism’s central confession, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one...” was a product of centuries of inculturation.

¹⁹ From a consultation with Delbert Rice by the ISACC research team on April 25, 1997, for *Track 2, Filipino Religious Consciousness, Conversion to Protestant Christianity*, in *A Clash of Cultures*, p.113.

²⁰ From a previous work of the author, “The Gospel in Context: Some Continuities and Discontinuities,” unpublished paper for a global research project on primal religions, 2010, p. 18.

²¹ From a conversation with Jose de Mesa, Roman Catholic theologian and eminent author and scholar on inculturation issues.

Some methodological concerns

Appropriating a culturally distant Text within the conceptual frames of today's cultures is necessarily experimental and fraught with dangers.

Earlier, in the first wave of debates over contextualization, there was a reaction from conservative scholars like Bruce Nicholls to the kind of "existential theology in Bultmannian terms" deemed represented by Daniel von Allmen. He pressed instead for a "dogmatic contextualization," by which he meant that we begin the task from "biblical theology as a fixed and authoritative orientating point," a dogmatic and normative framework for belief and practice.²²

The trouble with this is that we all perceive selectively. A culture or a society, because of the peculiarity of its cognitive needs and historical circumstances, will tend to organize its reading round some insight which then gets absolutized.

The theologian Krister Stendahl had long ago noted a certain guilt orientation in western cultures, and suggested that this 'introspective conscience of the West' may have much to do with the stress on 'justification by faith' as a legal abstraction. It may have conditioned the reading of such epistles as Romans and Galatians primarily as an apologetic for a sure ticket to heaven apart from works of the law: "where Paul was concerned about the possibility for Gentiles to be in the messianic community, his statements are now read as answers to the quest for assurance about man's salvation."²³

For quite a while since then, 'justification by faith' has served as core theme of what the gospel is about, until the advent of radicalism and the awakening of the churches in the Two-Thirds World to the realities in their contexts. Thus the surfacing of liberation theology in Latin America, the 'water buffalo' and 'pain of God' theologies in Asia, the emphasis on 'signs and wonders' for Africa and cultures in fear of spirits, and such other alternate centers in the reading of the Text.

What is happening in theology, as with the sciences, is a bit like the seven blind men who generalized out of their limited experience what the whole elephant must be. One took hold of the body and thought it was a wall; another got hold of the massive leg and thought it was a tree trunk; another happened to feel the length and pointed sharpness of the tusk and

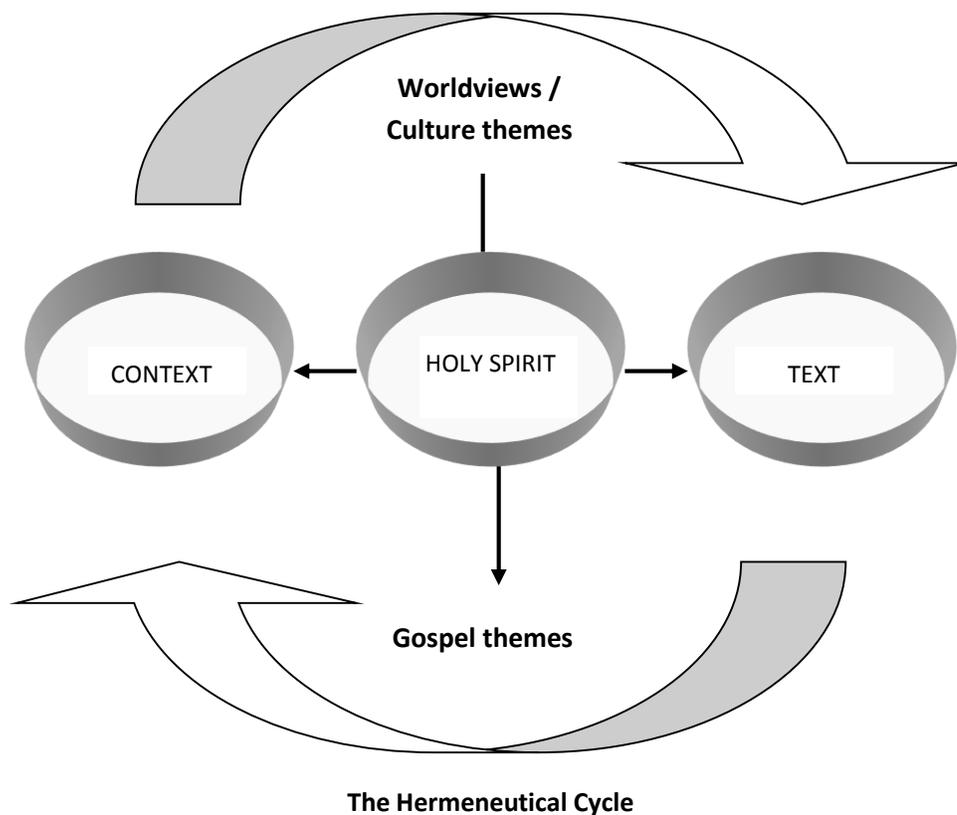
²² See, for instance, Bruce J. Nicholls' "Towards a Theology of Gospel and Culture," in *Down to Earth*, op.cit., pp. 69-82.

²³ See his article, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," in the *Harvard Theological Review*, 1963.

thought it was a sword. Each was right in his perception of what each part was like. But all were wrong in supposing that the part they chanced upon was all there was to the elephant.²⁴

Because of the incarnational nature of our faith, there is no Christianity which is not 'inculturated' or 'contextualized' in some cultural form: "no one ever meets universal Christianity in itself; we only ever meet Christianity in a local form, and that means a historically, culturally conditioned form. We need not fear this; when God became man, he became historically, culturally conditioned man, in a particular time and place. What he became, we need not fear to be. There is nothing wrong with having local forms of Christianity – provided that we remember that they are local."²⁵

Based on the Philippine experience, let me then outline how contextualization works as a process and as a method. We can picture it this way:



In this diagram, we treat the local church as a hermeneutical community interacting with their Text and Context. Through the Holy Spirit, they become aware of things in their

²⁴ See my previous article, "Reading, or How to Get the Seven Blind Men See the Elephant," op.cit, p.163.

²⁵ Andrew F. Walls, "The American Dimension in the History of the Missionary Movement," *Earthen Vessels, American Evangelicals and Foreign Missions, 1880-1980*, Joel Carpenter and Wilbert R. Shenk, eds. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990, p.19.

culture or society that need addressing. Also through the Holy Spirit, the church is guided, as framed by its worldview, to search the Scriptures for the appropriate Word to its context. The church as culture-bearers then surface the gospel themes that speak to their specific needs. Thus the church evolves a local theology for its own people.

Note that this diagram illustrates the following propositions:

First, appropriations of the Text always happen in context, and always within a culture's worldview or metanarratives.

For instance, the use of *Kyrios* and not '*Messiah*' by those anonymous Hellenized Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene must have sent nervous currents of apprehension to guardians of orthodoxy in the Jerusalem church. As Andrew Walls has long pointed out, they risked relegating Jesus to a status alongside such pagan cult divinities as Lord Serapis or Lord Osiris.

But then, "It is doubtful whether unacculturated pagans in the Antiochene world could have understood the significance of Jesus in any other way. None of us can take in a new idea except in terms of the ideas we already have. Once implanted, however, this understanding of the word received a set of controls from its new biblical frame of reference. In time much of the original loading of the word disappeared altogether."²⁶

Secondly, genuine conversion happens only when the deep structures of a culture are engaged.

Surface structures – how people eat, dress, build their houses, plant crops, conduct business -- yield easily enough to change through time. The deep structures, however, -- like worldview, values, mental habits – very rarely change, if ever.

Conversion – 'turning from idols to the living God' -- involves changes in beliefs, values and behavior based on a fundamental change in the story that we most believe about our lives. This change of story does not necessarily mean the complete rejection of the people's metanarrative, but its radical reordering and redirecting towards the values and virtues purposed by God for human society.

This process requires the ability to listen to the context and apply the Text not only to matters regarding 'salvation' but to the whole gamut of issues touching the central structures of people's lives – family, economics, governance and other such institutions.

²⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History, Studies in the Transmission of the Faith*, Orbis Books: Maryknoll, New York, 1996, pp.34-35.

The missiologist-historian Andrew Walls, in tracing Christianity's leap from Judaism to inculturation into Greek thought forms, explains how the Bible engages cultures and transforms the social fabric of the nations:

The Word is to pass into all those distinctive ways of thought, those networks of kinship, those special ways of doing things, that give a nation its commonality, its coherence, its identity. It [the Word] has to travel through the shared mental and moral processes of a community, the way decisions are made in the community. ²⁷

Thirdly, this process is both a scientific and a pneumatic task.

It has two movements: a) **identifying the culture themes** that need to be engaged; and b) **discerning the Text for the context.**

The first requires the social sciences, the second the spiritual discernment of a 'hermeneutical community,' able to read the text as well as their context, and hear the footfall of the Spirit when She descends and visits them as a people.

There has to be a very intentional appropriation of the resources of the faith – the Spirit and the Word – in discerning those fundamental elements in the worldview of a culture that need changing and challenging.

Missiologically, while all cultures are off-kilter, most of the elements of each culture can be readily affirmed. Eugene Nida estimated that only a very small fraction, about 5% of a given culture, need challenging or discarding. Often, however, these are worldviews that influence the entire culture and are expressed in its central structures.

A major theme in Filipino culture, for instance, is empathy for human weakness. The ancient high god, *Bathala*, is described in myths as at most 'depressed' over human wickedness, and so has retreated up in the sky and hid his face behind the clouds. He is not an angry God holding in his wrath, as in the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards' sermon, 'Sinners in the hands of an angry God.' This makes for a people who are used to bargaining with lesser powers and spirits, the high god being inaccessible, and are tolerant and empathetic when people fall into sin. We see this in popular culture in the song, '*Sapagka't Kami ay Tao Lamang*', ['Because We are Just Human'].

For such a culture, the themes in Hebrews – Jesus as mediator, a high Priest not unable to sympathize with human weakness, and its understanding of the atonement as a sacrifice

²⁷ Ibid., p.50.

where justice and mercy meet, where law-breaking is so serious that it sent the Son of God to the cross (“without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”) – are important texts.

In a sensitive reading and applying of the text, a whole host of questions may also come to the surface and address new issues in the context under the direction of the Spirit. The Word may challenge our own worldviews in reading the text, as with the western world becoming aware of a vastly bigger *kosmos*, shifting from a merely naturalistic to a more inclusive view of the world as populated also by beings other than people, and by people who are other than those who are living.

What all this means is that we pay more attention to **cognitive mapping** and **worldview engagement** in communicating the Word.

As well, it needs emphasizing that **insight into the Text is a dynamic process led by the Spirit.**

During the years of resistance against the martial law regime of Ferdinand Marcos, the evangelical leadership admonished those of us who were part of the opposition seeking to unseat the strongman to ‘obey Romans 13.’ Our small ‘hermeneutical community’ in ISACC felt that this was not the Word speaking to us; the relevant text was Revelation 13. There are times in history when the State ceases to be a servant but becomes a Beast, and therefore must be resisted. With this conviction, we went to the barricades and organized the religious presence in what is now known as the People Power Revolution of 1986.

This was a watershed in the understanding of Filipino evangelicals regarding faith and social involvement. In the aftermath, church leaders started asking how come ISACC had its ear on the ground and managed to stand in solidarity with the longings of our people, while the leaders of traditional church institutions seem to have got it wrong.

This experience taught us the importance of listening to the Spirit in discerning the appropriate Text for a given historical context. To misread both the times and the movement of the Spirit in larger social forces is to miss our historical cues.

By way of concluding....

Contextualization has been happening since the Gospel broke out of its Jewish wineskins. It is, properly, the work of culture-bearers listening to their context and their Text as guided by the Spirit.

For those concerned about losing the universality of what Paul calls the 'deposit of the faith', it is well to remember that "the Bible as Story is archetypal;²⁸ that is, its stories of human suffering and divine deliverance, which find their historical climax in the death, rising and coming again of the Lord Christ, will again and again resonate at various levels and in startling new ways as churches through the centuries appropriate for themselves its vast density of meanings.

"While the biblical canon is closed, the Spirit through his Word is still speaking to the churches, progressively revealing insights to her people as they struggle to theologize from within their own contexts in the effort to transform their historical situations."²⁹

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²⁸ In the literary field, one school of reading literature is the 'Archetypal Approach', where special attention is paid to those strands of human experience that are recurrent and part of the Jungian 'collective unconscious' as expressed in symbolic forms deemed to be universal.

²⁹ Maggay, "Reading, or How to Get the Seven Blind Men See the Elephant," op.cit., p.176.