

Dynamics of Contextualized Theological Education for Transformative Cross-Cultural Communication in Missions

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Abstract

This paper investigates the interplay between contextualized theological education and transformative cross-cultural communication within the framework of contemporary Christian missions. The core objective of missions, disseminating the Gospel message, is often challenged by cultural discrepancies between missionaries and their target audiences. Consequently, effective cross-cultural communication becomes paramount in this context. Inadequate communication skills can significantly impede the message's efficacy and receptivity. Therefore, mission-oriented theological education must be contextualized to equip future missionaries with the requisite skills to foster transformative cross-cultural communication. Employing a descriptive research approach, this study explored the dynamics of contextualized theological education, aiming to facilitate the accurate and meaningful transmission of the Gospel in cross-cultural settings. The findings revealed that transformative cross-cultural communication in missions necessitates a theological education grounded in context, linguistically adept, and attentive to diverse worldviews. Consequently, theological education, serving as the "labour chamber" for missionaries, must be contextualized to equip them with the necessary skills for transformative cross-cultural communication, a cornerstone of successful Christian missions.

Keywords: Contextualization, Dynamics, Theological Education, Cross-cultural Communication, Christian Missions, Transformative Communication

Introduction

The command to proclaim the Gospel message to all nations, to baptize them, and to disciple them involves interaction with the cultures of all nations. Sharing God's love with the people of all nations requires an understanding of cross-cultural communication for effective missions. The interaction between mission and culture has been a recurrent issue in the history of Christian missions. In this condition, Richard (1975,11) posits that "Christianity, whether defined as Church, creed or ethics or movement or thought, itself moves between the poles of Christ and Culture." Throughout the history of Christianity, the church, in missions, has always faced the intertwining of the Gospel and culture.

When the Western missionaries brought the Gospel to Africa, they encountered a culture that was different from their own. As a result of their perception of the culture and lack of interest in cultural relativism, they undermined the uniqueness of African culture and applied ethnocentrism to African culture. This shows the significance of cross-cultural techniques in communicating the Gospel message across cultures. One of the fundamental tasks of Christian missions is communicating the Gospel message. Communicating the Gospel message across cultures is not as simple as it may seem. The reason is that there is a collision of three cultural models in cross-cultural mission communication. This includes the Bible culture, the missionary culture, and the respondent culture.

Consequently, to efficiently communicate the Gospel message in a cross-cultural context, theological education must be contextualized in content, process and approach to provide basic contextual skills, address the contemporary issues about mission fields and target groups, and transmit the Gospel message into the worldview of the potential audience. In the same vein, cross-cultural communication that will transform the audience must be built upon the audience's language, culture and worldview. As such, theological education, the "labour room" where contemporary missionaries are being trained and prepared for missional practice, must be contextualized.

Therefore, with contextualized theological education, cross-cultural communication in missions can be transformative, and missionaries can overcome their ethnocentric propensity and communicate the Gospel message effectively. The research method employed in this study is descriptive. In a corollary to the above, this study examines the dynamics of contextualized theological education for transformative cross-cultural communication in missions. The study examines the concept of culture, contextualization, theological education, dynamics, and Christian missions and describes cross-cultural communication and dynamics of contextualized theological education. Moreover, findings from this study will benefit cross-cultural missionaries in any context or field worldwide.

Conceptual Clarification

To set the basis of this study, it will be essential to define and explain various concepts that formed the study's foundation, including culture, contextualization, theological education, dynamics, and Christian missions, to understand their meanings in the study context better.

A. Culture

The term culture is a derivation from the Latin verb *colere*, meaning to cultivate or instruct and the noun *cultus*, meaning cultivation or training (Boaheng, 2020, 2). Similarly, culture (Ger. *Kultur*) has been employed to designate man's total non-biologically transmitted heritage (Kraft, 1980, 46). In light of this, the term "culture" in the context of anthropology can be described as an integrated system of taught behavioural patterns that are distinctive to a society's members and do not come from biological inheritance. (Ibid). Consequently, culture is the way of life for a person, the social legacy an individual acquires from his community (Kraft, 1996, 38). In this sense, people share culture, resulting from their social inheritance.

Similarly, Guest (2018, 30) describes culture as a "System of knowledge, belief, and patterns of behaviour, artefacts, and institutions that are created, learned, shared and contested by a group of people. It is the manual for understanding and interacting with the people, which includes shared norms, values, and symbols, mental maps of reality, and material objects and structure of power." Guest's Assertion that culture serves as a manual for understanding and interacting with people and as a symbol of reality which also connote "identity" is worthy of note. For instance, to some extent, the language a person speaks informs others of the culture to which such a person belongs. A person who speaks the Tangale language could be easily identified as Tangale or as coming from the Tangale region in Gombe state, Nigeria—likewise, a person's dressing.

In collaboration with the above, Asante (1995, 5) opines that culture aims to define a group's identity and aspirations, serve as the basis of social behaviour, and determine what should be accepted or rejected in each situation. In this sense, culture serves as a means of identification and aims to define group aspirations. In other words, culture is not limited to the past and present of a group of people; instead, it also projects their future. This means that culture can inform others what a group of people intend to achieve and for which reason they behave the way they do.

B. Contextualization

Contextualization is the act of weaving given concepts and context together to make them relevant to culture, worldview, values, historical situations, and a particular group of people. In Christian missions' sense, contextualization can be defined as the act of making the message of God's redemptive love through Jesus Christ reflective and come alive as it relates to the vital issues of a social-cultural context and transform

its worldview, value, and goals (Sanchez, 1998,318). In other words, it is an act of sharing the Gospel message with a particular people from the perspective of their cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews.

Likewise, Luzbetak (1988,79) defines Contextualization as the process by which a local church combines the message of the Gospel with the circumstances of everyday life, combining the two into a single, divinely planned reality known as Christian living. Luzbetak's definition captured the idea of contextualization very well: to integrate the Gospel message within a local culture in a way that is faithful to God's revelation and relevant to the culture. It explained the process as it involves the Scripture with the real-life context of the audience.

C. Theological Education

Theological education, according to Manfred (2009,348), is the organization and construction of understanding and ideas of and about God to bring it into a possible reality of existence and supremacy of the Invisible Being. The process involves leading God-called men out of the bondage of ignorance to knowledge, equipping them to know the reality facts about God, and guiding them from the realm of the darkened mind to the glorious enlightenment of the word of God. In other words, it is education that focuses on God and the act of bringing men into an understanding of God. More precisely, theological education is the process through which God-called individual men and women who have yielded to the leading of the Holy Spirit and recommended by the church are equipped with practical skills to render biblical and Christian ministry in the church, church-related organizations, and society.

D. Dynamics

According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, dynamics is a pattern or process of change, growth or activity- population dynamics. Dynamics in this context is defined as what makes contextualized theological education workable and unique. The activities, ideas and principles make the total theological education contextual, transforming cross-cultural communication in missions to be effective, practicable, and realistic.

E. Christian Missions

Christian missions is a multifaceted mission; its scope range from witnessing, servicing, healing, reconciling, liberating, sharing peace, evangelizing, fellowshiping and church planting (Bosch, 2011, 37). As a result, the word "mission" refers to the many focused initiatives the church takes to fulfil its global goal. This has to do with the growth of God's kingdom and the proclamation of the Gospel. As a result, the church, God's people, engages in Christian missions to declare and illustrate God's kingdom. Christian missions have the whole world as its scope, which involves going from one culture to another. As such, a Cross-cultural mission consists of leaving the

comfort and familiarity of one's culture to enter another culture to proclaim the Gospel message (Boaheng, 2020, 4).

Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication takes place in a culture and context that is different from the speaker's culture and context. Missionaries who engage in cross-culture missions do so to communicate the Gospel message. Fulfilling the great commission involves communication. Without communicating the Gospel message to the potential respondents in their mental map of reality, it will not be easy for them to become disciples. As such, communication is an integral part of cross-cultural missions. In agreement, Hughes (1998, 278) contends that Cross-cultural communication requires learning the language of the ethnolinguistic group to build bridges for the Gospel message to those who have not heard it. This proclamation always occurs through language, worldviews, values, and beliefs.

Meanwhile, language and worldview are the predominant aspects of culture that facilitate communication effectiveness in any given culture and context. The reason is that language is the channel through which the Gospel message is disseminated to the people, while worldview is the channel through which the meaning is produced (Boaheng, 2020, 4). For instance, if an elderly Yoruba man asks a young boy to greet a visitor, the boy will immediately prostrate. Although the boy was not told to prostrate, he understood "greeting" to mean prostrate. In this sense, Agyekum (2010, 18) opines that "language is so important that without it, effective verbal communication is impossible." In other words, language and worldview are essential in effective cross-cultural communication in Christian missions. Also, it is crucial to learn more than their language; it is necessary to learn their customs, values, and various ways of thinking. As such, there is a need to understand the culture and context.

A. Culture in Cross-cultural Communication

Culture in cross-cultural communication concerns the audience's language, practices, beliefs, values, and worldviews, which is relevant to effective communication. Effective communication within any culture requires an understanding of the ethical history of that culture. One can understand and be able to speak the language of a particular tribe. However, speaking and understanding the language cannot guarantee effective communication in that culture. There is a need to understand how history has taught the people of that culture to perceive themselves and others. Understanding what the people regard as a culture will exhibit what they value and reject. For instance, if a cross-cultural missionary travels to the Yoruba region in the southwest of Nigeria and never takes cognizance of greeting and respecting in his approach to witnessing the Gospel to the people. Such a missionary might not find it easy to reach the people. The

reason is that the Yoruba value greeting and respect. In other words, communication can only be effective when it conforms to the culture in which it is taking place.

Christian Missions deals with culture, not just communication. As such, knowing culture in communication will provide bridges to relate to and share the message of the Gospel effectively. In agreement, Hesselgrave (1991, 148), while discussing communication in cross-cultural missions regarding integrity and credibility, opines that it is essential to "consider the respondent culture and how it defines such things as integrity, credibility and goodwill." Therefore, it is the receptor's culture that defines the integrity and credibility of the speaker. In other words, culture implies communication. Kraft (1980, 272) further collaborates this view while examining the basic principle of communication. He subscribes that "communication is most effective when the receptor understands the message to relate specifically to life as he/she lives it." This is to say that communication in cross-culture must conform to the culture.

B. Context in Cross-cultural Communication

Context is ageographical location, a belief shared in a commonplace, and standard practices peculiar to a particular group of people. Communication always takes place in context. A context is anything such as a room, town, language, church, or tradition that people share and which binds them together. In cross-cultural communication, context can be referred to as the shared understandings and traditions of a particular group of people. It can also refer to the geographical location of a specific people and the shared beliefs and practices of a group of people. The importance of context in cross-cultural communication cannot be overemphasized. In agreement, Hughes (1998, 280) reiterates that "effective cross-cultural communication necessarily takes place within a given context.

Consequently, a cross-cultural missionary who successfully identifies with a particular people group for a specific context is well-positioned to impact that situation with the Gospel." In this sense, it is essential for any missionary seeking to communicate the Gospel in any context outside their own to adopt some form of identification with that culture. The reason is that people tend to listen to someone who shares their context. This can be likened to a foreign missionary working among people who share and understand their values and practices. The people will be more likely to listen to them than those who do not. In other words, a missionary should understand the context of the people, such as their interests, pace of life, concerns, and values. The context shared in communication is essential in cross-cultural missions.

Furthermore, sharing a person's context enables a missionary to see things as the people see them and begin thinking as they do (Ibid). When a missionary demonstrates the ability to speak the language of a particular people and communicate through their worldviews, familiar terms, and ideas that the people understand and find meaningful, the possibility of their responding by believing and

accepting the message is much greater. Kraft (1980, 148) asserts that missionaries should present messages through cultural forms that stimulate within the receptors' beads, meanings that shape into the message they bear because meaning is not transmitted; only messages are transmittable. Meaning comes from the receptors' mind through world views, experiences, traditions and beliefs. In this sense, the context in which a message is being disseminated is as essential as the message itself. Therefore, cross-cultural communicators should carry the meanings of the Gospel to people personally to make the message plain to the receptor. The reason is that the audience actively participates in the communication process, processing the message according to their needs, interests, and values (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 1989, 192).

Dynamics of Contextualized Theological Education

Theological education is at the centre of Christianity. The notion that "as the seminary goes, so goes the church" must be taken seriously, even in Christian missions. The reason is that theological institutions determine the direction of missions. The theological lectures, seminars, textbooks, and programs are the foundation on which missions are built (Manfred, 2009, 149). Theological education is vital and integral for transmitting mission in contemporary African communities. Missionaries and mission pastors put into practice what they are taught and pass on their knowledge and experience to people in their mission works or outreach ministries. It is, therefore, critical to contextualize the approach, content, and process of modern theological education to effectively equip and prepare missionaries for the realities of modern cross-cultural communication, which will enable them to transform and communicate the Gospel message of light to the people who are in darkness and bring them into the marvellous light of God, revealed in Christ Jesus.

Thus, theological education, the labour room where missionaries and mission pastors receive training for missional practice, must be contextualized. Also, to have any connection to the cross-cultural missions shaped by the mission Dei, it must be approached through the lens of culture, worldviews, and the language of the people in their context. In other words, theological education should not just provide orientations for the study of the Bible, church history, practical theology, or any other theological subject without constantly being and making students aware of its missiological implications to the group of people in their cultural setting. In practical terms, the theological education approach should be shaped to provide adequate communication skills to prepare students, especially missionaries and mission pastors, to communicate the Gospel message to target groups in their cultural, linguistic and worldview milieu. As such, contextualized theological education is culturally oriented in content, has a worldview grounded in process, and is linguistically relevant in approach.

A. Culturally Oriented in Content

This means theological education that many of the modern missions' fields or target groups are not just a place for "applied theology" learnt in the books and classrooms but a place where theology emerges from the ground. During a mission trip to the EgbaEgbema/ Ndomi Home Mission field in October 2022, one of the students witnessed a man during the One-on-One evangelism, and the man asked the student, "between Jesus Christ and their community idol, which one answer fast?" The man asked such a question because, according to him, "the idol answers them any time they called upon it." As such, for the man, accepting Jesus Christ is not a matter of need but a matter of the God who answers fast when called upon. In other words, it is a matter of a better God who is superior. In essence, engaging the content of theological education in the culture and milieu of the target groups will generate transformative ideas that will prepare missionaries to engage a target group.

Therefore, cross-cultural communication in missions of modern times needs a contextualized theological education that reflects and develops in view of the culture and context of a target group. In this condition, the content of theological education must constantly generate new ideas and frontiers to foster transformative cross-cultural communication in missions. Vinay & Sudgen (1982, 30) posit that theological education has traditionally guarded the deposit of faith. However, to guard the deposit is not necessarily the same as defending it against questions raised in other cultures. The deposit can only be guarded as it is continually made relevant to its context, for to guard the deposit without making it applicable to the context is sabotaging the deposit.

In other words, the wisdom of cultural sensitivity should not be overlooked when developing the content of theological education. The missional content of theological education should always begin with the social context and culture of the contemporary target groups.

B. Worldview Grounded in Process

Many people in contemporary society knowingly or unknowingly conduct their lives based on their worldview. Worldview is the picture people hold to determine how things work and relate to each other, what those things mean, what is most significant, and what constitutes meaning, loyalty, duty, faith and many different ideas (Ringenberg, 2003, vii). In Proverb 23 7 (KJV), the Scripture discloses, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Many people have formulated a living philosophy based on survival needs, crisis, and numerous personal, family, religious, and political values. As such, the process (teaching and learning) in theological institutions should transform and integrate faith with how people live their lives in contemporary times. The process of theological education should integrate faith with contemporary realities such as Japa syndrome, survival needs, personal and family values, and political and religious crises. Such integration takes place through classroom

instruction, practical leadership and outreach opportunities and should be related to the subject matter of all courses. Students should be encouraged to think, act and make sound judgments in these matters of life and conduct. Making connections between faith, living, and learning is a fundamental purpose of theological education. This will enable the students to relate faith with practical life to provide a conscious influence for Christ in the world.

C. Linguistically Relevant in Approach

The approach of theological education should remain linguistically flexible to make it relate to the needs of contemporary culture. Throughout known history, institutions have adjusted their curriculum to meet the needs of the time (Nicholls, 1979). The same educational and cultural sensitivity type must be implemented in the contemporary time. While holding a grip on academic excellence and credibility within the larger higher education community, theological education needs to develop indigenous linguistic programs that are current with the needs of the mission fields or target groups. The language needs of mission fields or target groups are becoming more varied. This necessitates modifying the present approach to theological education. If theological education is going to affect the missional practice of contemporary society significantly, there is a need to develop a flexible delivery approach that demonstrates effectiveness concerning the cultural context of a mission field or target group. Students could learn an indigenous language relevant to a mission field or target group. Also, such students could be sent on a mission trip to a mission field or target group relating to the language learnt to provide field-based knowledge and familiarity with the culture of the people in that mission field or group. Therefore, theological education must remain flexible to the cultural and contextual needs of the contemporary mission fields and target groups.

Conclusion

The dynamics of contextualized theological education play a pivotal role in enhancing transformative cross-cultural communication in missions. As missionaries engage with diverse cultures, their ability to adapt and contextualize the Gospel message to fit their target groups' unique linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts is essential. This study highlights the importance of culture, context, and linguistic relevance in theological education and how these elements contribute to the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication. Key findings from this study emphasize the necessity of a culturally oriented approach to content, a worldview-grounded process, and linguistic adaptability in theological education. These aspects empower missionaries to bridge cultural gaps and communicate the Gospel message in ways that resonate with the beliefs and values of different cultures.

By understanding and incorporating local customs, languages, and worldviews, missionaries can overcome ethnocentric tendencies and present the Gospel message in

a manner that is both relatable and transformative. This requires missionaries to commit to ongoing learning and adaptation as they navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication. In conclusion, the study accentuates the critical role of contextualized theological education in equipping missionaries for effective and transformative cross-cultural communication.

Theological education can play a central role in advancing the mission of spreading the Gospel across diverse cultures and communities by fostering an educational environment that emphasizes cultural sensitivity, linguistic flexibility, and context-driven teaching.

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