

Reimagining Contextualization: A 21st-Century Paradigm for Missiological Strategy in Globalized AI Era

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INTRODUCTION

As we are living in the first quarter of the 21st century, our world has been drastically transformed by technology and globalization. In the field of the global Christian mission, Contextualization in missiology, which refers to adapting the Christian message to different cultural contexts while maintaining its core truths, became particularly prominent in the latter half of the 20th century. This period saw significant social, political, and religious transformations, which affected how the Gospel was communicated across diverse cultures. The term 'contextualization' was coined by Shoki Coe in 1972. He was influential in integrating cultural relevance into theological education, especially through his leadership in the Theological Education Fund (TEF).¹ After Coe, the concept of contextualization got developed and applied in the global mission fields so fast.

A significant contributor to the academic discussion of contextualization, Paul Hiebert developed the "critical contextualization" model. In his article "Critical Contextualization" published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (1987), Hiebert outlines a process that involves making the Gospel understandable and applicable in a given cultural context without compromising its essential meaning.² This definition aligns with his broader work, suggesting that in the book, contextualization is likely defined as the process of adapting the Christian message to a specific cultural setting, ensuring it resonates with the audience while preserving its theological integrity.

Lesslie Newbigin and David J. Hesselgrave both were pivotal in critiquing foreign missions for their imposition of Western leadership styles and practices that often overlooked indigenous contexts. Newbigin defines contextualization as making the Gospel at home in a new cultural setting, ensuring it is both understandable and relevant while preserving its core truths. He mentioned in his book, "Foolishness to the Greeks", "The value of the word contextualization is that it suggests the placing of the gospel in the total context of a culture at a particular moment, a moment that is shaped by the past and looks to the future." This definition emphasizes the dynamic nature of culture, considering its historical roots and future trajectory.

The study of D. Hesselgrave is another milestone of contextualization theory in the 20th century. Hesselgrave defines contextualization as "the process of making the Christian message and church life come alive in forms appropriate to the context of the target group without compromising the essential truths of the gospel."³ This foundational definition emphasizes both cultural sensitivity and biblical fidelity in cross-cultural ministry.

In fact, there are numerous research works on the theory of contextualization in Christian mission. It is undeniable that the studies of contextualization have significantly contributed to the global mission in the 20th century. However, the world has undergone rapid transformation due to technological advancements and profound geopolitical and economic shifts in the 21st century, which has also impacted the global Christian mission environment.

GLOBAL MISSION IN FLUX: CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE 21ST CENTURY

Today's mission environment bears little resemblance to the world in which contextualization theory first developed. There are two major factors of world transformation in the 21st century: globalization and digitalization. Basically both of these two factors are based on the development of technology.

Globalization

Globalization refers to the process of enhancing interdependence and integration among economies, markets, societies, and cultures globally, driven by technological advancements in transportation, communication, and trade. In the context of missiology, globalization presents a double-edged sword. While it facilitates the rapid dissemination of the gospel across the world, it also engenders distinct mission challenges due to the accelerated synthesis of cultures through the influx of diverse populations into urban centers. Consequently, it has become commonplace for individuals in Berlin to enjoy Japanese ramen or Turkish chicken wraps for lunch while simultaneously listening to BTS Korean-pop music on their iPhones (American). In fact, globalization is the primary factor that renders contextualization theory obsolete in the 21st century, as there is no "core or main cultural context" in globalization to contextualize in the gospel message. Social networking sites (SNS) such as Instagram or Snapchat have become global cultural melting pots for the Millennial and Zoomer generations.

1. Guirguis, Youssry, History of Contextualization, *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, Vol. 15 [2019], No. 2, Art. 11: Pp. 5

2. Hiebert, Paul G. "Critical Contextualization." *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* Vol. 11, No. 3, 1987, 104–112.

3. Hesselgrave 1989, 43

Another notable aspect of globalization is the shift in the primary driving force behind Christian missionary activities from the West to the Global South, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, where there has been rapid growth. This phenomenon is evident in works such as “*Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*,” edited by William D. Taylor, which emerged from the 1999 Iguassu Missiological Consultation.⁴ This book discusses the increasing dialogue between Western and non-Western Christians in a globalized context. The Western perspective of missiology is no longer the mainstream in the Christian mission field of the 21st century, and contextualization is no longer the prevailing approach today either.

Digitalization

The pace of technological advancement since the end of the 20th century has accelerated exponentially. For instance, the dial phone, which had been used for several decades, was replaced by the first Motorola cellular phone in 1973. Within two decades, the first smartphone was invented by Nokia, and the iPhone was introduced in 2007, marking the beginning of the true digitalization of people’s lives. Today, smartphones have become an integral part of every individual’s life, and the MZ generation is characterized as the “embedded digital generation” within the smartphone network.

The advent of smartphones has not only revolutionized individuals’ lives but has also significantly altered their mentalities and cultural perspectives. The digitalization facilitated by smartphones has enabled the rapid and synchronous exchange of cultural, social, and geopolitical viewpoints across the globe.

The advent of digitalization has accelerated cultural transformation, rendering contextualization obsolete in the 21st century. If digitalization assimilates individuals’ cultural and ethnic perspectives, AI homogenizes people’s consciousness and cognitive behavior through the homogenized AI data. In the digital era, humanity was the user, but in the AI era, humanity becomes an integral part of AI data. While globalization through social networks has assimilated global culture, AI synchronizes individuals’ consciousness and social norms for homogenized cognitive behavior. Consequently, in this AI-driven digital world, there is no longer any time or space for contextualization in Christian mission.

In the 21st century, in fact, Christian mission and contextualization theory face numerous challenges stemming from various cultural, social, and geopolitical factors. These include political correctness, diversity-equality-inclusiveness (DEI), queer theology, and more. Additionally, contextualization theory itself encounters challenges during theological and social

upheavals in the 21st century.⁵ However, the two most significant factors driving cultural revolution in the 21st century – globalization and digitalization – highlight the urgent need for a new methodology in Christian mission that either replaces or addresses the limitations of outdated contextualization theory in this article.

BEYOND TRADITION: MISSIOLOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR A NEW CENTURY

In his book titled *God’s Radical Love in Missio Dei*, the author presents “the Radical Cultural Synthesization for the Gospel” as an alternative approach to contextualization for a missiological strategy in the 21st century.⁶ The text defines this concept as:

1. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel is a process of transformation of humanity in a target area of missio Dei by injecting the gospel through a common ground of the cross-cultural environment, until the Christ-centered culture and life become the dominant ones through the witness of Christians living in Gods Radical Love.
2. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel takes Gods Word as the absolute criterion of all human culture and life, and synthesizes them to Gods Word, which is “cosmos” and “ultimate reality.” Therefore, there will be no possibility of modification of the gospel in this process.
3. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel takes culture as a “precarious reality.” The gospel should be the backbone of such a “precarious reality,” because the gospel is the ultimate reality.
4. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel should be carried out through Christians *kerygma, koinonia, and diakonia*, which are missional actions. These actions are rooted in a life witnessing Gods Radical Love.
5. The radical cultural synthesization for the gospel transforms the gospel information from a thin level of culture to a thick level.
6. The author believes that the radical cultural synthesization for the gospel can be processed through externalization, objectivities, and then internalization, until it forms a *nomos* with Jesus as its core.

Throughout history, cultural synthesization has been a recurring phenomenon. Typically, dominant and superior cultures have exerted influence over subordinate cultures. The most notable example of cultural synthesization in history is Hellenization, which Puchala’s book employed as a metaphor for the cultural ideological expansion and assimilation of the

4. William D. Taylor, ed. *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue*. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerAcademic, 2000).

5. See Edward Kim, *God’s Radical Love in Missio Dei: Focused on Missiology for Jewish Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024), 145-147.

6. Ibid, 150.

Western world.⁷ As outlined in historical works such as Peter Green's *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*, Hellenization typically involved the dissemination of Greek language, culture, and institutions across the Mediterranean and Near East following Alexander's conquests.⁸ In the context of Puchala's discussion of the Cold War, it appears probable that he utilizes Hellenization as a metaphor for the cultural and ideological expansionism of the superpowers. The Cold War witnessed both the United States and the Soviet Union promoting their political systems—capitalism and communism, respectively—through cultural exports, media, and educational programs, similar to how Greek culture was adopted in diverse regions during the Hellenistic period.

Recognizing that human culture is akin to water, fluid and ever-changing, it is impossible for any human culture to dominate over the Word of God because the Word of God stands as absolute reality, transcending human cultures. It is supra, counter, and cross-cultural, consistently dominating human cultures when the gospel is introduced in a human culture.

Consequently, it is imperative to revise the mission strategy to supplant the antiquated contextualization theology. To construct a novel mission strategy in the context of the rapidly globalizing AI era, the author has selected several key components of cultural synthesization. Primarily, these components of a contemporary mission strategy for the 21st century are meticulously expounded upon within the author's book, except for the issue of AI, because AI was not fully functional at the time I finished the book.⁹

1. *Missio Dei*
2. Cultural common ground
3. Theory of thin and thick culture
4. The super, transcendent, counter and cross-cultural attribute of the gospel.
5. Globalization
6. Peter Berger's society-making theory
7. AI generation

The fundamental foundation of the Radical Cultural Synthesization is a missiological interpretation of John 3:16 that is rooted in the concept of the Radical Love of God.¹⁰ The term *missio Dei* was coined by Karl Hartenstein during the International Missionary Council's (IMC) conference in Willingen, Germany, in 1952.¹¹ The concept of *missio Dei* represents a

7. Donald J. Puchala, *Theory and History in International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 147.

8. Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age*. 1990.

9. Edward Kim, *God's Radical Love in Missio Dei: Focused on Missiology for Jewish Mission*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024) 151-169.

10. The Radical Love of God is capitalized because the love of God is radical and the sole love in the universe. See, Kim, 2024:67-71

11. Karl Hartenstein, *Theologische Besinnung*, in: Walter Freytag (ed.), *Mission zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Vom*

paradigm shift from the traditional understanding of mission as the exclusive domain of the Church to the proposition that mission is an inherent activity or attribute of God. G. Vicedom elucidated that the *missio Dei* commenced with the act of "sending."¹² God initiated mission through the figures of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, and Israel. Subsequently, God manifested Himself through the incarnation of Jesus. Vicedom defined the goal of *missio Dei* as the kingdom of God. According to the theology of *missio Dei*, the subject of mission is God. God created the universe and humanity. And the humanity was created in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

The author elucidated that the fundamental motivation of the mission of God is the radical love of God, which is rooted in the concepts of "*Hesed*," "*Racham*," and "*Emeth*" in Hebrew. This radical love of God serves as the cornerstone of the mission of God.¹³ Therefore, the mission is not ours, but God's mission stemmed and motivated from His *Hesed*, *Racham* and *Emeth*, until He gave His begotten Son, Jesus for the salvation of all humanity (John. 3:16).

Subsequently, the "cultural common ground" serves as the catalyst for the dissemination of the gospel. All humans share commonalities within their cultures. Donald Brown elucidated these universal human characteristics in his book titled *Human Universals*, published in 1991. These commonalities originate from the inherent similarities among human beings: biological necessities and habits, psychological similarities, shared spiritual attributes or social activities, and so forth. Although there may be cultural and cognitive differences between cultures and societies, human life remains remarkably consistent across diverse environments. Consequently, this "cultural common ground" presents an ideal opportunity for establishing a cross-cultural connection and delivering the gospel message. In 2024, I organized an International English Youth Bible camp in Germany that attracted over 70 teenagers from five different countries. They were immediately connected through English language and Instagram. Many of them had limited English proficiency, but the Google translation app proved to be an invaluable tool for their communication. This experience provided the MZ generation with a new "digitized common cultural ground."

Upon assuming the presidency of the United States in 2016, Donald Trump garnered limited support from the younger generation due to their limited knowledge of him. However, during the 2024 presidential election, Trump actively participated in numerous

Gestaltwandel der Weltmission der Christenheit im Licht der Konferenz des Internationalen Missionsrats in Willingen, (Stuttgart: Evangelischer Missionsverlag, 1952), 51-72. See also, Hartenstein, Karl, *Wozu nötigt die Finanzlage der Mission?: Evangelisches Missionsmagazin*, (Neue Folge 78, 1934) 217-229.

12. Georg F. Vicedom, *The Mission of God: An Introduction to a Theology of Mission*, trans. Gilbert A. Thiele and Dennis Hilgendorf (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 5-12.

13. Edward Kim, 2024, 32-71.

podcasts and heavily utilized social media platforms to target the Millennial-Zoomer (MZ) generation. This generation experienced a significant shift in their perception of Trump, leading to a majority of them becoming his supporters. In the field of anthropology, this phenomenon is referred to as a cognition shift from a thin perception to a thick perception. This concept is extensively discussed in "The Interpretation of Cultures" (pages 6-10) by Clifford Geertz, who introduces and develops the analytical approaches of "thick description" and "thin description." These terms were borrowed from philosopher Gilbert Ryle but were specifically applied to ethnographic and anthropological research by Geertz.¹⁴ According to Geertz, a thin description provides a basic, factual account of an event, capturing its surface-level actions without any interpretation of their significance.¹⁵ For instance, a thin description of a person rapidly contracting their right eyelid might simply state, "The person's right eyelid contracted." While this description captures the physical act, it lacks insight into the underlying reasons for it.

In contrast, a thick description delves beyond the surface to uncover the layers of meaning and context that lend significance to the behavior. It involves interpreting the symbols, motives, and cultural codes embedded within the action. In the context of the 2024 election, Donald Trump effectively mobilized the "MZ generations" who hold a thin perception of him by rapidly connecting them through social networks that are prevalent among these generations. In the process of cultural synthesization, there is a significant shift in cultural cognition and perception from a thin level to a thick level. This transformation culminates in the emergence of a novel social norm.

Peter Berger's seminal work, "Sacred Canopy," published in 1966, offers a comprehensive analysis of the cultural cognitive level of individuals transitioning from a "thin culture" to a "thick culture." Entitled *The Sacred Canopy*, this work delves into the concept of "sociology of knowledge" and elucidates how society shapes human behavior and how religion influences the process of world construction. Berger posits that a radical cultural synthesization for the gospel can be achieved through his theory of world construction. According to Berger, humanity is inherently incomplete and undergoes a process of development and completion within a society. The process of creating society is also part of this development. He referred to this process as the "dialectic process of world building," which comprises "externalization, objectivation, and internalization."¹⁶

Consequently, the introduction of a new culture commences at the surface of the existing local culture. When the gospel encounters a new people group or

cultural community, it directly confronts them and seeks common ground to establish initial contact. Subsequently, the gospel can be introduced into a new people group through shared cultural elements, such as digitalized gospel disseminators (e.g., social media platforms, AI prompts). Initially, the gospel remains at a superficial level of cultural understanding within the people group, but gradually it becomes externalized, objective, and eventually internalized within their cultural perceptions. However, all of this process should be undertaken with the Radical Love of God, as the Radical Love is the fundamental motivation of God's mission and the everlasting fuel for progressing *missio Dei*.

The theory of radical cultural synthesization necessitates further research and extensive discourse involving a diverse range of individuals from various cultural backgrounds, as it is still in its early stages of development. Nevertheless, cultural synthesization has already been demonstrated in our adversaries, such as the LGBT community, leftist propaganda, the secularization movement, liberal theologians, and even politics brainwashing MZs. The Enemy of God has been employing cultural synthesization for an extended period.¹⁷ Prior to the advent of globalization and digitalization, the social construction operation was a gradual process. However, in the contemporary era, cultures and societies undergo rapid transformations, making it challenging to contextualize the gospel for a culture that can only sustain a few seconds. The only viable approach to fulfilling the mission of God is to disseminate the gospel, as it possesses inherent supernity, transcendence, cross-cultural nature, and superiority over all human cultures.

17. Homosexuality has been a kind of mental illness until 1974. But, it became a social norm in the 21st century. This is an example of cultural synthesization by our enemies.



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14. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Basic Books, 1973.

15. Ibid, 6-10

16. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 4.