The Bible, Cultural Identity, and Missions

The Bible, Cultural Identity, and Missions

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The Bible remains the most extensively used book for every generation. While the subjects presented therein were specific and peculiar to the prevailing culture of Biblical periods, it is undoubted that such precepts also apply succinctly to all cultures. This makes the Bible a global text, relevant to all age groups and gender variations. However, there are some technicalities with its hermeneutics and if the cultural background of the particular group is left in any theological interpretation of the Biblical text, then it poses problems to the general understanding and contextual meaning of the text. It is upon this backdrop that the theme, the Bible, Cultural Identity and Missions was chosen for the maiden International Conference of the School of Theology and Missions of the Valley View University.

The articles in this publication bring to bear these culturally appropriate interpretations and how the different cultural identities could impact on biblical understanding and help in doing mission.

Read on, pay careful attention to each contributor's perspective, and dig out the essential cultural applications to the topics addressed.

Thanks!

THE BIBLE, CULTURE IDENTITY AND MISSION: A BIBLICAL APPRAISAL[1]

I wish to state that the topic "The Bible, Cultural Identity and Mission" is very apt and timely. However, I am not too sure, what we mean by the topic. To put it another way, the topic is open to a variety of meanings. It is from this background that I attempt to address this issue from the perspective of a Ghanaian biblical scholar.

I am aware that Valley View University (VVU) is a Christian institution of higher learning. Like every Christian institution, the Bible is held in an exclusively high esteem here. In this direction, it is easy for Christians and Christian institutions to recognize the Bible as literature, but more closely as a sacred literature. What is very difficult for Christians and Christian institutions is the fact that the Bible itself is also a product of a culture. This was more so for the first generation Christians for whom the Bible was more like a talisman. Ernest M. Ezeogu in his article entitled, *The Bible and Culture in African Theology I*, described his father's Bible in like manner this way:

> Memories of my first contact with the Bible go back to my days as a toddler in a typical Nigerian Igbo village. My father could not read or write, yet he owned a Bible. In fact, he owned the only Bible in the village, an enormous red-edged book. Nobody ever read my father's Bible. It was not acquired to be read like ordinary books. No. My father's Bible was always carefully wrapped in white cloth and kept under lock and key in a wooden cabinet in which my father kept things he particularly treasured. Whenever you saw my father open the cabinet and bring out the Bible, you know that there is big palaver in the village. There must certainly be a dispute which has defied the ingenuity of the village elders and the only way to settle it would be for one of the contending parties to swear an oath. And for this my father's Bible was the most reliable means. For those first generation Christians my father's Bible had replaced the sacred staff (ofo) of the traditional religion as an object of oath taking, thanks to the example of the colonial court-room formality (online).

More specifically, the Bible is a product of the evolving culture of the Jews over the centuries that the Bible spans. This conference is a forum for us to face this in its multi-faceted bases.

The Bible in its Cultural Backgrounds

The Bible is a logbook that Christians use to guide and regulate their way of life. However, we cannot run away from the fact that, in spite of the claim we all make of the Bible as a "word of God", it did not fall down to us all at the same time unmediated. The contents of the Bible are captured for us through the medium of the Jewish people. Thus the assumptions and motives of the Jews, who preserved the Bible for us, can be gleaned in the word they have preserved for us. This is evident in a critical study of the Bible. In the *Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development*, a book written a little over eighty years ago, its authors W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson did point out that the Hebrew religion that is preserved for us had its roots in the culture of the ancient Near East. Oesterley and Robinson have shown that the biblical records of the Hebrew Scripture (our Old Testament) from the patriarchal era down to the advent of the New Testament have concrete origins in the Canaanite-Palestine region. They have shown the early antecedents of some of the cultural practices of these eras in the broader ancient Near East, and the latter antecedents in Canaan-Palestine. Various latter biblical scholars acknowledge the stance of Oesterley and Robinson, some in part and others completely. However, even before Oesterley and Robinson, William Robertson Smith, a Scottish Old Testament scholar, had talked about the religion of the Semitic peoples, including Mesopotamia, Syria, Phoenicia, Israel and Arabia.

The world of the New Testament has also been acknowledged to be a replica of the Greco-Roman civilization. It is not by accident that the New Testament is written in the Greek language. This is a demonstration of the Greek civilization that permeated the entire Palestine at the time. The agenda of the Greek lords at the time was the spread of Greek civilization, religion, and language. Thus, many issues in the New Testament are best understandable from a good knowledge of the Greco-Roman worldviews and cultural practices. It is from these cultural backgrounds that we shall discuss mission.

To say it simply, we cannot read the Bible except to come into dialogue or confrontation with the cultural assumptions recorded therein. Thus, reading the Bible is a meeting of at least two cultures.

Mission

Mission has been variously defined as a task that a person or group of people take as their duty to perform. Largely, mission has been the carrying of that task by one group of people to other groups of people. Largely, the group that takes the task to other groups may be small and vulnerable. Synonymous to mission are words such as goal, purpose, objective, aim, duty. In the area of religion, evangelism and crusade will qualify as prime synonyms. Mission has an innate sense of power that the adherents or propagators of the task impose on the groups to whom they take their task. It is important to note that mission is not restricted to religion and religious organizations. I may not be wrong to say that it was primarily a political task. However, whether it is politics or religion, mission has something to do with power play between at least two cultures. On the political front, mission has been in terms of expansion of the power base of the dominant group over other groups. Mission in religion has been the propagation of beliefs and practices from the group that believes it has the truth to others that do not possess those beliefs and practices.

F. Eboussi Boulaga, also recognizing this meeting of two cultures, writes, "The dominator-dominated relationship that operates in evangelization renders societies present – and hence generates manners, modes, and mores – that are heterogeneous, 'foreign in their kind'" (1984, 18).Thus, mission is the meeting of at least two cultures. In the process, when the two are not recognized as cultures in dialogue, one cultural identity is imposed on the other. In the Old and New Testaments, nations and religious groups have seen it as their duty to take their national cultural and religious views and practices as that which others must practice. Generally, it is the dominant culture that imposes its cultural and religious practices on the subordinate culture. In the process, the subordinate culture is diffused. At the end of the day, the subordinate culture loses its cultural identity, at least in the areas where the impositions have taken place. When this happens, partly or completely, the subordinate culture is seen as evangelized or civilized. We see this in the Old and New Testaments.

Mission in the Old and New Testaments

Examples of mission activities in the Old Testament have been largely political. Mission in the Old Testament was only partially religious. It will be pointed out that the monarch (king) was the principally the champion for the propagation of the religion. Prophets also served as stalwarts of the

faith of Israel. In the New Testament, members of the Christian Church did the work of propagating the gospel. To a very large extent, these Christians were underdogs who infiltrated towns and communities with their message and turned them upside down. In both the Old and New Testaments, the society that received the message is made to submit its religious beliefs and practices to that of the propagators.

Old Testament

We find typical examples of this religio-political mission in the periods of the Assyrians and the Babylonians. However, long before the Assyrians and Babylonians came on the scene, Jehu had been anointed by one of the prophets of the band under Elisha (2 Kings 9:14-29).Elisha was of the opinion that the sanctity of Yahwism was under threat from Jezebel and her cohorts in the court. With the anointing therefore, Jehu saw himself as an architect whose duty it was to clean all the dirt that tarnished the image of Yahwism in ancient Israel at the time. Thus, he had Jezebel and the worshippers massacred (2 Kings 9:30-10:27). By this action, Jehu isolated Israel from all its neighbouring nations and made Israel very vulnerable. Thus, in his 18th year of reign he had to pay tribute to Shalmaneser to save the nation from Assyrian attack (Excerpts from the Black Obelisk, in Miller and Hayes 1986, 286-287).[2]Although Jehu was initially praised by the deuteronomistic writers for this action, because he himself continued the worship of Yahweh at Bethel and Dan, he was eventually condemned (2 Kings 10:28-31). Again, about a hundred years down the road, Hosea condemned this action of Jehu as a wanton massacre (Hos 1:4-5).

In the 8th century BCE, Assyria marched to Syria-Palestine in a bid to extend its territory. So Syria (Aram) and Israel requested Judah to join them in a coalition against Assyria. Syria and Israel threatened Ahaz that if he did not join they were going to attack Judah. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was confused and did not know what to do. He was contemplating whether he should join the Syro-Ephraimite coalition or not. The prophet Isaiah exhorted Ahaz not to join the Syro-Ephraimite coalition. Isaiah asked King Ahaz to trust God to protect him from any invading forces. Isaiah even urged Ahaz to ask for a sign from God. However, Ahaz refrained from asking God for a sign. The prophet went ahead and gave Ahaz a sign in his announcement of the birth of a child to be born – Emmanuel. According

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[2]Jehu is recorded on the Black Oberlisk to have given tribute of silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden beaker, golden goblets, pitchers of gold, lead, starves for the hand of the king, javelins to Shalmaneser.

Isaiah, by the time Emmanuel stops breastfeeding, the Syro-Ephraimite coalition will be defeated. Because of this admonition of Isaiah, Ahaz did not join the Syro-Ephraimite coalition. However, Ahaz submitted himself to Assyria. In the words of Martin Noth:

> In this situation Ahaz decided – against the urgent insistence of the prophet Isaiah that he should trust quietly in his God (Isa vii, 1-17) – to call in help from a greater power and he sent a 'present' from the Temple and palace treasuries in Jerusalem to no less a personage than Tiglath-pileser himself with an offer of submission and a request for help against his enemies Aram and Israel (2 Kings xvi, 7-9) (1960, 260).

Tiglath-pileser stopped Syria and Israel and stayed in the city of Damascus for a while (2 Kings 15:29).It was during this time that Ahaz went to submit to Tiglath-pileser. In Damascus, Ahaz submitted himself to Tiglath-pileser, both politically and religiously. The submission of Ahaz is the submission of Judah to the rule and dictates of Assyria. In the words of Martin Noth, "When king Ahaz of Judah surrendered to Tiglath-pileser, he had to make room for the Assyrian religion in the official sanctuary of Jerusalem" (1960, 266). G. H. Jones (1984 536) agrees with Noth that the delegation Ahaz sent to Tiglath-pileser meant that Ahaz was voluntarily submitting himself and Judah to Assyria. B. W. Anderson also comments on the meeting as follows:

> While there, he obtained the blueprint for an Assyrian altar, which he promptly ordered constructed in the Temple in Jerusalem (II Kings 16:10-18). In a day when religion and politics were inseparable, there was no clearer way to demonstrate that Judah had become an Assyrian vassal. The record in II Chronicles 28:16-27 shows further how greatly the kingdom suffered under this royal weakling (1988, 335).

On the other hand, Jerome T. Walsh and C. T. Begg write, "The segment concerning Ahaz's altar in vv 10-16 leaves various points unclarified: Was the altar he saw in Damascus a Syrian or Assyrian one? Did he intend it to be used for sacrifices to Yahweh, or (also) to Assyrian deities?" (1990, 181).

   I do not think that Ahaz adopted an altar from Syria whose invitation he had refused to accept in their bid against Assyria. The altar might have been an earlier Assyrian altar that had been raised in Damascus. Noth (1960, 266) thinks so too. What is undeniable is that he adopted a non-Yahweh design of an altar for the Temple in Jerusalem. What is also interesting in this whole episode is the fact that the deuteronomistic historian did not make any evaluation of the whole affair. It is also

noteworthy that such a weak king could take control of the Temple cult and raped the treasures of the Temple for Tiglath-pilelser to save the king and nation (cf. 2 King 12:5-7).

Ahaz as king was the person to urge the people of Judah to uphold the worship of Yahweh. However, for the sake of securing his position on the throne, Ahaz offered to subordinate the worship of Yahweh to the rule of the king of Assyria. He made the expansion bid of Tiglath-pileser easier by submitting to the Assyrian king when Tiglath-pileser did not have Judah on his agenda. From the aftermath, Ahaz submitted Judah to the political and religious control of the Assyrians. This situation persisted for about thirty years. It was during the reign of Hezekiah that he abandoned the Assyrian religion and restored the worship of Yahweh. This was seen as a rebellion, so Sennacherib came against Judah. Hezekiah had to pay him tribute from the Temple treasury (2 Kings 18:13-37). Sennacherib had to abandon his attack on Jerusalem due to trouble back at home. All sorts of foreign religions infiltrated and remained in Jerusalem till Josiah's reformation (2 Kings 23). The attack of Sennacherib was the last against Judah. The trouble that caused Sennacherib to go back home marked the end of the Assyrian empire. It was overtaken by the Babylonians. The religious expansionist actions of Babylon were different from those of Assyria.

During the Babylonian period, monarchs did not explicitly impose religious beliefs and practices on their subjects in the manner in which Assyria had done. Around 609 BCE, a battle ensued between Assyria and Babylon in Carchemish. Necho of Egypt had wanted to go and help Assyria. Josiah had wanted Assyria and Babylon to continue fighting at Carchemish so that Syria-Palestine could be free from their domination. However, Josiah died in a battle at Megiddo when he intercepted the mission of Necho. This meant that Judah became a vassal of Egypt. Necho then put Eliakim (El sets up) the son of Josiah on the throne and changed his name to Jehoiakim (Yahweh sets up).This move was seen by some Jews as Necho's recognition of Yahweh. Thus, they supported Jehoiakim to send tribute to Egypt. Thus, Necho of Egypt used a subtle religious stance to get the support of a good number of the population on the side of Egypt. However, Babylon became victorious in the battle at Carchemish. Thus, while Judah was sending tribute to Egypt, Babylon also was exacting tribute from Judah since Babylon had replaced Assyria as the world power then (605 BCE). Judah was divided among those who supported paying tribute to Egypt and those who wanted Jehoiakim to send tribute to Babylon, the new world power. The king was so confused that he did not know what to do. He paid tribute to Babylon for about three

years and reneged. Nebuchadnezzar marched to Jerusalem and in the encounter, Jehoiakim died so Nebuchdnezzar put Jehoiachin on the throne. He reigned for three months and reneged in sending tribute to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar marched to Jerusalem and besieged the city (2 Kgs 24:10-17). Nebuchdnezzar removed Jehoiachin from the throne and put one Mattaniah, an uncle of Jehoichin on the throne. Nebuchadnezzar carried Jehoiachin and the cream of the population to Babylon. Then, like Necho had done previously, he changed the name of Mattaniah (Gift from Yahweh) to Zedekiah (Yahweh is righteous). For ten years, Zedekiah was a very faithful vassal of Babylon. Zedekiah's refusal to continue to pay tribute to Babylon caused Nebuchadnezzar to besiege Jerusalem. Judah had to pay a big price. The city was devastated and all precious metals of the Temple were ripped off. A further cream of the population was also taken captives to Babylon in 587 BCE. Thus, Judah was in a devastated state until Cyrus overthrew the Babylonians around 540 BCE (cf. Psalm 137; Isaiah 40-55; Ezek 37).

In contrast to the Assyrians and the Babylonians is the Persian Empire, under Cyrus. Cyrus was so different in the way he treated his subjects when it comes to their religious adherence. Miller and Hayes have pointed out that some rulers of the ancient Near East boasted of their generosity to the religion of their subjects. They write, "With a grand flair for propagandistic impact, Cyrus too played the role of a liberator, accepting and acknowledging the patronage of the gods worshipped by those capitulating to and supporting him" (Miller and Hayes 1986, 441; So also Noth 1960, 307).The Cyrus cylinder that chronicles his achievements reads,

> Cyrus boasts of his efforts to obtain peace in Babylonia. He claims to have abolished forced labor, improved housing conditions and enjoyed the affection of the people…Explicitly, it is stated that he returned the sacred images to the peoples from who they had been taken and rebuilt their sanctuaries, that he gathered together foreign exiles and returned them to their former homes, and that he restored the idols of Summer and Akkad that Nabonidus had displaced from their own chapels (Anderson 1988, 471).

In line with this principle, Cyrus allowed the Jews to go back to their own land and worship their own God. Due to this gesture, the prophet Isaiah designated Cyrus as a messiah (the Christ) of Yahweh (shepherd, Isa 44:28; anointed, 45:1).

In the Hebrew scripture, there is no indication anywhere that the Jews made any effort to propagate their religion beyond their own people. What we have seen so far give us the picture of other nations that dominated

Israel and Judah making efforts through their rulers to spread their religious beliefs and practices on Israel and Judah. On the contrary, we saw situations in which rulers of Israel and Judah submitting their own people and nation to the religious beliefs and practices of their overlords. Then in a very unique way, Isaiah talks about Cyrus, who allowed the Jews to worship Yahweh and who returned the Temple decoration that had been taken away by the Babylonians, as Yahweh's instrument for the restoration of the Jewish religion. However, the situation got worse during the inter-testamental period.

During the inter-testamental period, the reforms of Cyrus were reversed when the Greeks came on the scene in Canaan-Palestine. The Greeks came to the ancient Near East with the view to spread Greek civilization, culture, and religion. Initially the Jews were divided on the attempts by the Greeks (1 Macc 2:31-48).This caused Antiochus IV to seek support from the pro-Hellenistic faction in Jerusalem to expand the Hellenisation process. Antiochus was able to get the conservative priest Onias out of office when he travelled out of the country. Onias was replaced by a more liberal person named Jason (Jesus, Joshua), apparently with the support of Antiochus IV (2 Macc 4:7-10). 1 Macc 1:11-15 gives us a record of concession that Jason granted for remodeling of Jerusalem on Hellenistic lines; a gymnasium was built in the city and many Jews removed the marks of circumcision, abandoned the holy covenant and dressed after Greek fashion (Noth 1980, 363)."Orthodox Jews and particularly the Hasidim (Pious Ones), a predecessor group of the Pharisees, were deeply incensed at the trend of events. However, they were satisfied with the fact that Jason was from their religious sect and his rise to the position of high priest was seen as an act of God" (Ntreh 2006, 117).The action of Jason in usurping the position of high priest encouraged one Menelaus who was not from the high priestly family to also bid for the position. Menelaus is believed to have paid a bigger amount of money to Antiochus for the position (Noth 1960, 364). He gave Antiochus the opportunities for further Hellenisation processes to continue. However, when rumor got to Jerusalem that Antiochus had died on an expedition, Menelaus was removed and Jason was reinstated. This was a demonstration that the Jews were not comfortable with the expansion of Hellenism in Israel. The removal of Menelaus angered Antiochus who came back and reinstated Menelaus as high priest in Jerusalem.

Antiochus, who was not happy with the pace of the Hellenisation process, issued an edict in 168 BCE in which he set to destroy those very features of Judaism that ever since the captivity had been regarded as

distinctive characteristics of the Jewish faith (cf. 1 Macc 1:41ff). Ntreh writes:

> All Jewish sacrifices were forbidden, the rite of circumcision was forbidden; the Sabbath and feast days were no longer to be observed. Disobedience to these meant death. Furthermore, books of the Torah (Law/Pentateuch), Genesis to Deuteronomy, were disfigured or destroyed; Jews were forced to eat swine flesh and to sacrifice at idolatrous altars set up throughout the land. Antiochus himself erected an altar of the Olympian Zeus and made a burnt offering in the Temple court (1 Macc 1:41-45; Dan 11:31). Antiochus enforced this edict by erecting a fortress citadel in Jerusalem and filled it with Syrian soldiers. The consequence of this edict was the Maccabean revolt (2006, 117-118).

The Maccabean revolt began in 167 BCE and was led by Mattathias a priest and his sons. They had the support of conservative Jews. They fought for a very long time and made great successes until they were granted the right (around 143 BCE, under the Hasmonians [Simon, the oldest and last of the Maccabean brothers]) to rule the Jews until 63 BCE at the arrival of Pompey.

As in the Old Testament era, the Jews were on the receiving end of religious mission. All they could do was to protect the sanctity of their religion against Greek incursions. This was the state of religion before the arrival of Jesus in the New Testament.

New Testament

In the New Testament, we see for the first time efforts by religious adherents propagating their religious beliefs and practices to others. Some New Testament scholars have talked about these persons as itinerant preachers. John the Baptist and Jesus will fall in this category of first century charismatic preachers. Jesus' last command to his disciples and to the Church was, "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:19-20).Two significant examples of such missionary endeavours and their consequent repercussions can be found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles and the letter to the Church in Galatia.

In the accounts in both Acts of the Apostles and the letter to the Galatians, the message had been preached to both Jews and Gentiles. There were certain Jews for whom this was an unimaginable. Writing about the action of the Jews here, William Barclay has this to say:

> They could never forget the position of the Jews as the chosen people. They were quite willing that the Gentiles should come into the Church but on the condition that first they become Jews (1976, 113).

In the case of the accounts in the Acts of the Apostles, the Church Council resolved that salvation was by grace (Acts 15:11).Gentiles need not become Jews to be acceptable before God. However, the Gentiles were to refrain from some things as a compromise measure to appease the Jews. Paul also exhorted the Church in Galatia that salvation was by faith only (Gal 2:16; 3:8, 11, 25; 5:6).In Athens, Paul used the inscription of the people, "to an unknown god" to preach the same message of the salvation through Jesus to the people of that city (Acts 17:23).

However, as Kwesi Dickson pointed out,

> It was recognized, of course, that the gospel should be preached to all peoples, but no serious consideration was given, at least in the initial stages, to what was to be expected of converts concerning the mode of life which befitted their new religious affiliation (1991, 57).

It is interesting from the New Testament examples that the early Church did not impose anything on the Gentiles, although some elements of the Jewish Christians had wanted to impose some Jewish customs of the Gentile Christians. The two examples demonstrate that there is need for a proper dialogue that respects the cultures that meet in the propagation of the gospel. In this dialogue, there must be a proper give and take process.

Missionary Work in the Gold Coast/Ghana

All Christians, who wish to be fair and true to the work of missionary in Ghana, will acknowledge that the model had been dialectic rather than dialogical. In the dialectic model, the gospel, although preserved in cultural attire of the Greco-Roman Palestine of the first century, is seen to be above the Ghanaian culture. Almost everything Ghanaian was seen as being of the devil. Examples of such attitudes can be repeated from various parts of the continent of Africa. In their introduction to *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth write:

> It has become increasingly clear, and disturbingly so, that the Church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues…Unfortunately, hitherto, evangelism in Africa has been based

upon the false notion that Africa has nothing to offer as a culture or spiritual basis for the Gospel (Dickson & Ellingworth 1969, 9).

Thus, we were encouraged to shed off our cultural identities and practices and to conform to Jewish ones found in the Bible. In this process, the person or persons in the mission enterprise gives the impression that the Jewish culture is to be the norm for all peoples everywhere. In short, the missionary enterprise makes the Bible universal. However, the Bible itself does not seem to make such claims. What the early and present day missionaries had not noted is that the imposition of one culture on another in the missionary enterprise has not had any lasting success. Examples abound in history. The Church in North Africa that was established with the support of the powerful empires and imposed on the people has been wiped out because of the fall of those empires.

In Ghana, this cultural imposition was characterized in the change of names in our encounter with Christianity. Kuntu became Blankson, Obuor became Rockson. Also to a very large extent, we took biblical names like Benjamin, Michael, Mary, and even common English names like Edward, Charles and Charlotte. In reality, these are mere superficial make ups. This change of names does not affect us in any significant way(s).

However, granting that those who want all other cultures to shed off their cultural identity are right, which Jewish culture are we to take on? Is it the Jewish culture of the pre-monarchic, monarchic, post-monarchic or the Jewish culture of first century Christianity?. There is no monolithic Jewish culture in the Bible. This demonstrates that the desire is an effort in futility. So what do we do?

We need to pursue a **dialogic process of interaction with the Bible**. This process presupposes that we give the biblical tradition and the African culture equal role in the dialogue. Almost two hundred years ago, Bishop Ajayi Crowther had advocated that missionary enterprise must pursue such a dialogic process. He advocated the use of things that are in our domain to preach the gospel to us. Specifically, the bishop wondered why missionaries could not use sacrifices that are common in our African Traditional Religion to preach about the sacrificial death of Jesus. We cannot run away from the fact that the Bible is preserved for us in the cultural garb of the Jews down the centuries to the early Christian era. God is not a Jew or is God tied to the Jewish culture to the neglect of other cultures. God found it necessary to put us here and revealed himself to us.

Suggestions have included doing a

Incultural-Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics,
Inculturation Biblical Hermeneutics,

Intercultural Exegesis.
Contextual Biblical Hermeneutics

I simply speak of African Biblical Hermeneutics.
In all these approaches, African biblical scholars are asking for intercultural dialogue between our African cultures and the cultures in the biblical texts that we read. In that interaction, we envisage a give and take process. In this process, we learn things from the Bible and we contribute our quota to the interpretation of the Bible. This is the way of the moment when subject interpretation of the Bible is not seen as anathema. It is my hope that more people will be receptive to this way of looking at reality of reading the Bible today.

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CULTURAL IDENTITY AND THE URBAN MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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Abstract

As the world becomes increasingly urbanised, societies tend to become more and more diverse culturally, politically, religiously and economically and pluralism becomes the order of the day. The urbanisation trend is experienced on every continent and region of the world, with varying degrees of intensity. Urbanisation has a way of touching all social institutions and the church does not escape this onslaught in any way. Today, the church is becoming an increasingly urban institution and requires new approaches to sustain its impact. Cultural identity and diversity are some of the underlying challenges that the church has to deal with in an urbanising environment, and Christian mission needs to reinvent itself to be able to tackle this ever growing task.

This paper identifies aspects of urban social change that are both causes and products of the diversified cultural environment in our cities and how an appropriate response can make all the difference in Christian mission.

Keywords: City, Consumerism, Culture, Identity, Missions, Religion, Theology, Urbanism, Urbanisation, Worldview

Introduction

Mission in the twenty-first century is raising many questions that cannot be ignored, because to leave them unanswered would affect not only the effectiveness but also the very credibility of the enterprise. Many of the questions are certainly not new, since they are questions that have persisted in different forms from the very beginning of the Christian church. These 'old' questions have, however, assumed 'new' and peculiar forms that require specific responses that address the present and also look

forward to the future. Some of the questions are, however, quite new, emerging from changes in the environment and requiring new attitudes. Some of the most recurrent of these issues are those concerning the relationship between mission and cultural identity, particularly the place of Scripture in determining this relationship.

This presentation isolates a very specific aspect of cultural identity and diversity in mission in order to confront the issues directly and bring out features which might otherwise be obscured in a general treatment of the topic. We have chosen to focus on urbanisation as a global phenomenon because it is a growing trend that has become an incontrovertible fact of our time and which is going to continue for many more years. Numerous studies have shown that the urbanisation trend is not limited to any one continent or region of the world, but is being experienced all over with varying degrees of intensity. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been monitoring trends in the world for decades and has recently been sounding alarming bells that need to be taken seriously by all.

Many scholars and researchers have written much about the impact of urbanisation on the church's mission, and have sounded warnings and given much advice, and this presentation continues in that direction. We are, however, focusing specifically on the impact of urbanisation on Christian mission in African cities and the consequences for the future of mission on the continent. We have chosen to do this with an acute sense of the glaring differences between western or American cities and those of Africa. The cultural differences are often so vast that comparisons are not helpful. Some African urban centres operate quite differently from their equivalents in western countries and have their own dynamics, which are in no way comparable with others and therefore deserve to be treated on their own terms. Garth Myers, who spent more than a decade studying the nature of African cities, has observed that

> as African societies urbanize, it becomes evident that they do so in ways that challenge prevailing theories and models of urban geography, sociology, anthropology and planning. But these are just as surely cities 'in a world of cities'.[1]

He also appropriately cautioned against any attempt to 'perpetuate the sense that we must learn about African cities by studying western urban

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[1] Garth Myers, *African Cities – Alternative Visions of Urban Theory and Practice* (London & New York: Zed Books Ltd., 2011) 1

theory and then applying it to the continent'.[2] We therefore approach this topic using examples from African cities like Accra, Lagos, Kampala, Cairo, Kinshasa etc., without obscuring the global perspective. We first look at the reality of urbanisation, together with its impact on cultural identity and social institutions, before considering how Christian mission might respond to this phenomenon.

The Urban Reality

In 2007, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) announced the official transition of the world into a predominantly urban community.[3] This announcement meant that more than half of the world's population had moved to live in urban centres and many more would follow in the ensuing years, possibly till about 2050. The estimated figure for urban dwellers in 2025 will be 60% of the world's population, and countries of the southern hemisphere (including Africa) will account for the largest urban population increases.

In Ghana and many other African nations, the intensity of this reality is only just beginning to dawn on many people, including the policy makers of both the church and the state. This realisation is taking place because the effects and side effects of rapid urbanisation are beginning to confront the nations on many fronts.[4] Ghana's demographic history indicates a steady growth of the population, from less than seven million citizens (6,726,815) in 1960 to almost 25 million (24,658,823) in 2010. The annual population growth rate is 1.8% (2011 estimates), but the rate of urbanisation stands at 3.4% and the urban population in 2010 was 51%. All major cities are experiencing unprecedented growth and expansion with the attendant realities of diversity and socio-cultural change.[5]

As the world becomes increasingly urbanised, societies tend to become more and more diverse culturally, politically, religiously and economically, and pluralism is becoming the order of the day in all these spheres. Social institutions are particularly impacted, creating situations and conditions that have far reaching consequences for all who live and work in a city. Cultures also inevitably come into play and are impacted in very significant ways.

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[2] Garth Myers, *African Cities,* 26

[3] www.unfpa.org accessed November 2012

[4] See G.K. Nukunya, *Tradition and Change in Ghana* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2003) 141-166

[5] Ghana Statistical Service, *Population and Housing Census* (Accra: GSS, 2010)

Urbanism and Cultural Identity

Urbanisation affects and changes people's conceptions of and participation in various social activities. This is because most urban centres are transitional societies and continue to evolve over long periods of time. Urban African societies are places which are still socially, culturally and religiously evolving, with all the attendant challenges of identification and adjustment. Religion is therefore in many cases no longer the fulcrum determining or supporting other social institutions, as in rural communities, but just one of many competing activities. Religious groups with often incompatible beliefs, including churches, are therefore compelled to co-exist, each propagating and perpetuating itself. Not too long ago, many urban dwellers in Ghana were only sojourners in cities, who traced their 'homes' to their original villages and considered themselves merely to be enduring the myriad of cultures in the cities. Such people always had plans to go back one day and reconnect with their cultural roots. Such situations are rare today, as many urbanites were born in the city and have lost many of their traditional cultural attachments. Worldviews tend to change in cities, but not without a struggle. This is because our worldviews are often deep-seated and subtle culturally structured assumptions that underlie our perception of reality, and are determined largely by various factors of our upbringing and environment. Our worldviews make us believe or assume things to be true or draw certain conclusions simply because of the cultural environment in which we have been brought up. Consequently, culture and worldview greatly affect our understanding and interpretation of the biblical message.

Two social institutions that have a direct bearing on mission work in the city are the family and marriage, which get severely impacted on various fronts and at various levels. Family life in an African city comes under great pressure to abandon traditional kinship ties and adopt the nuclear family lifestyle. Many elements that ensured social cohesion in the traditional setup are threatened by large-scale anonymity and the career-oriented mentality associated with urbanism. Job and career become more important than extended family relations and may result in social loneliness and rampant depression, which most urban dwellers have to live with. When families disintegrate this way, they inevitably affect community life, which, for Africans, is so crucial to an individual's wellbeing. African city dwellers are therefore compelled to find ways to re-engineer community life to retain at least some elements of the battered traditional culture.

The institution of marriage does not fare any better in the midst of urban stress. Admittedly, some marital relationships have been known to grow stronger under urban conditions, but these are greatly overshadowed by the many cases of breakdown due to the laxity and greater tolerance of non-marital opposite sex relationships, including cohabitation. Infidelity tends to increase in the urban area due to these expanded relationships, and is perhaps one reason why divorce rates are always higher in the city. A number of studies have shown that second and third marriages abound in urban centres and are still likely to fail, whilst the number of children being raised by single parents has been soaring and many more get born out of wedlock. The greater incidences of inter-ethnic marriages in the city also have their own effects. On the one hand, they expand cultural contact and sometimes create more understanding among ethnic groups, but they can also result in conflict and disintegration of relationships. In many African countries, inter-ethnic marriages have been known to produce a positive impact on national unity and cohesion, whilst also sometimes creating unnecessary tension among ethnic communities.

Also related to the impact on the institution of marriage is the impact on the nurture of children. The parent-child bond may be strengthened or weakened by various factors, but the moral training of children, which was traditionally the responsibility of parents and close relatives, is shifted to a greater extent onto other institutions including schools, churches and social clubs. Contrary to their traditional cultures, young people may also either delay in getting married or rush into marriage, because parents get less involved in the selection of a marriage partner. All these factors have varying degrees of impact on the mission of the church in the urban setting.

In the city, one can encounter surface cultures which may change rapidly according to the times, but there are always deep assumptions (cognitive and evaluative) underlying these cultures, and these are not easily eroded. For this reason, urban mission should never underestimate the depth of a person's cultural convictions and the role this plays in reaching him or her for Christ. The city often only succeeds in eroding the surface add-ons of a culture, while the deep core themes might endure for a long time or even forever.

Coming to Terms with Cultural Identity in Mission

What has cultural identity got to do with mission in an urban setting? Do the dynamics of mission change in an urban environment? What has the urban impact on social institutions got to do with the mission of the church in the city?

The church is one of the most visible institutions in African urban centres and life is almost unimaginable without one form of church activity or another. Although many acknowledge this fact, they sometimes fail to realise the overwhelming effect of urbanisation on mission structure and delivery. Without a proper attitude to contextualisation, either the saving knowledge of the Gospel will be ignored in the city or churches will preach a Christ who is made in their own image. Preaching becomes a mercenary exercise aimed at pleasing city dwellers and not necessarily to get hearers to achieve a personal relationship with Jesus.

The church in the city must therefore be acutely aware of the place of culture in ministry and the great potential for a clash of worldviews owing to the multiplicity of cultural backgrounds. Urban ministry requires a clear understanding of the role of worldviews in the lives of city dwellers, because they underlie almost everything people do and must be an important consideration in everything that is done to them. For many migrants to the city, it is the city that turns out to be their Damascus road; it is there that the scales fall from their eyes, and it is there that they learn to become part of the movement to create an inclusive community with Jesus as the motivating force. It is the city that helps them to shed the cultural biases that they have cherished and propagated all their lives. Even when they have come to Christ prior to their migration to the city, their traditional perceptions may still linger or become reshaped in many directions. Unfortunately, it is possible to live in the city and still close one's mind to cultural diversity, and that is why a conscious effort is required to 'convert' such people and break through their entrenched perceptions.

The impact of cultural identity on mission started all the way back in the early church, which started as a mono-ethnic community of Jews who had been brought up to despise other cultures. These early Jewish converts to Christianity had no room for cultural diversity and even considered it a duty to God to avoid any contact with other cultures. This attitude was, however, to undergo a radical change, orchestrated from within the same Jewish camp. Peter, the leader of the early Christians, himself needed to be converted from this narrow thinking through his encounter with Cornelius and his household. Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi explains how this conversion was mediated by the Holy Spirit himself.[6] What was at stake here was cultural identity and integrity, and the Holy Spirit expertly allowed histories, religious convictions and cultural identities to collide and

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[6] Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi, *Mission – An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 90-92

confront each other without an explosion. The otherwise potentially explosive encounter turned into one where natural hostility was replaced by mutual hospitality. Through the name of Christ, the Holy Spirit dissolved the fears and hesitation and created a bond between two culturally opposed communities. The end result was a mutual conversion and a mutual acceptance of each other's cultural identity. It was now Peter's turn to convert his fellow Jews, which he succeeded in doing, again through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Paul, the former Pharisee and strong advocate of Jewish cultural integrity, took matters to new heights when he traded his cherished Jewish consciousness for an all-out mission that championed cultural integration with the Gentile world, with much focus on urban communities.

The early church, with Paul as its strong architect, fought this with all its strength and succeeded in giving Christianity a truly universal character that was capable of being accommodated in any culture and that would persist in the following centuries. Yet the sting of the Jewish cultural bug, which made Jews extremely uncompromising where a foreign culture was concerned, appears to have been more enduring in the transmission of the Christian religion than has been generally acknowledged. In the early church, culture continued to be the culprit of many tensions within the church. Unfortunately, some of these tensions were not necessarily a clash of cultures with the Christian Gospel, but rather the result of the imposition of one culture on another. Even the split between eastern and western Christianity in 1054 had clear cultural undertones. However, no attempts to remove the cross-cultural dimension from mission have ever succeeded for any considerable period of time because of the intrinsically cross-cultural nature of Christian mission. All mission endeavours need to understand this, no matter how difficult and trying any situation might be. Many great revivals, including the Reformation of the 16th century, were attempts to draw the church back to its primitive origins, when the so-called pure Gospel, and not cultural traditions, ruled the lives of believers. However, after less than a century, the churches that originated with the Reformation started to champion the accommodation of the Gospel in cultural patterns and the adoption of contemporary language in theology. In some cases, reformed cultural adaptation was even considered to have reached such heights that it stood a chance of obscuring God's role in the world.[7]

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[7] William Dyrness contends that the Church started to use contemporary language and arguments 'in such a way that God's unique role in creation and providence was lost'. See William A. Dyrness, 'Diversity in Mission and Theology' in Manuel

New Urban Theologies

Urban dwellers are continually creating new theologies, or having new theologies created for them, in response to existential questions, some of which are disingenuously innovative. Through such exercises, many urban dwellers get exploited or even abused by peddlers of unacceptable cultural theology. Any attempt to divorce the existential context from the cultural context of a city dweller is likely to end in a lack of impact as far as Christian mission is concerned, because urban mission requires a blending of 'the text with the context'. This means ensuring a delicate balance between faithfulness to the biblical truth and relevance to the target of a mission. Urbanites develop what may be called an urban culture, i.e. a way of life suited to their urban surroundings, but their individual worldviews determine to a large extent how they understand Scripture within this urban culture. Therefore, when two urban dwellers read Jesus' statement 'give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God', they may come up with two extreme views, depending on their cultural conditioning. The African theologian Byang H. Kato warns that

> although the content of the Bible remains the same, the way of expressing it is changeable. This is because the way of expressing it is not inspired. God may take one instrument on some occasion and use it for the spreading of His unchanging Word, and take another kind of instrument on other occasions.[8]

Again, urban dwellers may appear to have lost the urge for things spiritual, as well as the appeal of organised religion, but most are still held captive by the lure of mystery, which is a carry-over from their cultures. When faced with urgent situations, such people often seek answers to life's existential questions elsewhere, including in the spirit world, astrology, telepathy, extra sensory perception (ESP), psychic powers, etc. Fortune tellers and soothsayers are known to make a great deal of money from city dwellers through a careful response to their culturally induced fears:

Ortiz & Susan Baker, *The Urban Face of Mission* (Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2002), 118

[8]Byang H. Kato, "Evangelisation and Culture" in *Perception*,No 12, April, 1978, p.6. Quoted from Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity – The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992) 399-400