

Session Seven : working on the societal dimension

Contextualisation must be done on at least three levels

- The local level. The place where you live and the church is situated with its particular characteristics such as the size of the town, its main industrial or commercial activities, its regional specificities
- The national level. The course of history which has influenced the way people think about the place of religion for example.
- European postmodern culture

This article will cover this third aspect of contextualisation. The following outline will conveniently allow to me explain today's cultural context. Culture is the air we breathe. The diagram is obviously a very simplified overview but it does enable us to stand back and see how the European worldview has evolved over the centuries.

	Premodernity	Modernity	Postmodernity
	The Middle Ages	End of 15 th C > 20 th C	Since 1960s (but roots go back to the 19 th C)
	Tradition	Reason	Emotion
	Accepts the world as it is	Wants to change the world	Each person interested in their own personal world
	Looks to the past	Looks to the future	Lives in the here and now (but anxiety about the future)

I have somewhat arbitrarily divided our history into three eras. The Modern period starts at the end of the 15th Century at a time of massive change. The fall of Constantinople (the centre of the Orthodox faith) in 1453 was the end of the Byzantine Empire and saw the spread of Muslim armies into Europe for the first time. In academic circles, this date is used by historians to designate the beginning of Modernity (later history, from the 18th Century onwards is called contemporary history). The invention of the printing press by Gutenberg at around the same time enabled the spread of ideas by books and pamphlets. The discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492 opened new horizons to the way of seeing the world. The

Renaissance flourished and reached its peak in the 16th Century. This was a movement which looked back to the Greco-Roman world and rediscovered a freedom of thought which had been extinguished, mainly by the church, during the Middle Ages. As men looked at writers and philosophers from the past, they saw that they were free to think for themselves, to be humanist (i.e. to start from man and his ability to use reason), and this contrasted greatly with the previous age which I have called simply “pre-modern”. Another world-changing movement started in the same way. The Protestant Reformation is traditionally considered to have started in 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of the chapel of the castle of Wittenberg. This movement also looked back past the Middle Ages to the Greco-World and “rediscovered” ancient documents which were extremely revolutionary, i.e. the Bible and the gospel of grace.

So, from the perspective of Modernity, a way of thinking which stretches through to the 20th Century (with a high point in the 18th Century “Age of Enlightenment”), we can more easily see what came before and what came after. In premodern times, during the Middle Ages, tradition handed down was the only source of knowledge and identity. If your father was a farmer, you would be a farmer. If your father was a blacksmith, you would be a blacksmith. You rarely moved far from the place where you were born. You had to obey the local lord, and the ruling prince. The Catholic Church supported the rulers and allowed no disagreement with its doctrines or practices on pain of imprisonment or death. Hence you had no alternative than to accept to live in the present with no hope of improving your situation.

However, in the Modern period, people looked to the future: the aim now was to change the world. Words such as development, progress, improvement, growth reflect this new worldview in all walks of life, such as politics, economics, technology. This Modern world built on reason seemed to many people to be the epitome of human history.

But the worm was in the apple, as the proverb says, and already several 19th Century philosophers were using reason to destroy reason! Marx: “You think you are reasoning correctly but you are doing it from your class perspective.” Freud: “You think you are reasoning correctly but you are doing it from hidden motives coming from your sub-conscious mind.” Nietzsche: “You think you are reasoning correctly but it’s built on the foundation of discredited Christianity” (and he went on to explain that Christian ethics were wrong in wanting to help the weak and the poor - it would be much better if they disappeared, leaving the world for the strong). These ideas, reinforced by the horror of two world wars involving what seemed to be the most civilised nations on earth, led people to come to the conclusion that humans could never find the meaning to life, either in religion or philosophy. Or as it is often put, there is no “metanarrative”, no overarching meaning to the world, no “truth” which is universal, which applies to everyone in the world. In the last third of the 20th Century the word “postmodern” came to be used as a convenient way of expressing the idea that the values of the Modern world and the idea of progress were no longer feasible. It has led to the refusal of all ideologies and philosophies which claim to “have the truth”. But, more importantly for our subject, any church or any Christian wishing to “witness to the truth” is immediately suspect. People today think it just is not possible to know the truth, so there must be an ulterior motivation when we speak of the gospel (“Does this person want to manipulate me or get my money?”).

So, in Postmodernity, what people use to evaluate situations is their emotions, not their reason: “Does this feel right for me?”. Instead of trying to change the world, they try to change their own

personal world. Whole shelves of self-help books in supermarkets and bookshops illustrate this. The aim is to live as happily as possible in the here and now, and everyone should be tolerant of “my choice”, so people talk about their rights in order to try to protect themselves from being victims of what others do or think.

Certainly some people (for example in the ecologist movement) do think of the future and have a less selfish attitude. However I have observed that they show very little hope compared to our Christian world view. The motivation for action is all too often fear – anxiety over the state of the world we live in and which we are handing down to our children and grandchildren - and that impairs their serenity in the present moment.

So as I wrote above : “people talk about their rights in order to try to protect themselves from being victims of what others do or think”. In this postmodern context, people tend to think that if they succeed in life, it’s because of their intelligence, hard work or skills. But if things don’t turn out as they would like, then they are victims of others or of circumstances. That is particular the case, in some ideological and political thinking, if you are a victim of racism, or discrimination as a woman or as someone in one of the LGBT categories. According to “critical theory”, all the problems facing such people are due to hierarchies of power (“hegemonies”) which are oppressing these “marginalised” people. The consequence is the pressure which Christians have to face when we try and communicate (or even live out) the gospel in a society built on the ideas of “tolerance” of “diversity”. There is a real danger that anyone who does not go along with this understanding of the world will be censured. There will be no place to publicly speak out what the Bible teaches as it reveals the loving intentions of almighty God for humanity.

Of course, because of human sin, there really is racism and discrimination in our societies, but as Christians we hold that there are other aspects of relationships between people than just questions of power. We believe in God’s revelation in the Scriptures, and we do find many things in the Bible which make sense in a postmodern world and which can serve as bridges towards our culture. For example, the Bible contains all sorts of literary styles, and foremost among them is the story. People today love stories (especially television series) and learn from seeing how people live their lives. Stories are not linear. They deal with the awkward realities of life in a fallen world. A postmodern person is more likely to be interested in how we cope with these than in any pretention that we have all the answers – because we don’t. But we do have enough answers to trust God with our lives and hold on to our living hope. We have the true metanarrative of God’s good creation, followed by the fall and the true story of Jesus which gives us a model to follow and a reason for our confidence to approach the throne of grace.

That is why we have to build relationships with non-Christians so that they may begin to see that our faith is plausible. That has to be the first stage of our apologetics as we pray that people will move from realising that faith in Jesus is plausible to seeing it as desirable and then credible. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote that our aim should be to make good people wish that Christianity were true and then show that it is. In other words: to help them move from “I must check this out” to “I like it” to “Is it true?”. We are now in a better position to see why this is the case. Because people today are suspicious of any metanarrative, they are more interested in what is real, in what works, in what will help them to have a better life. How can they have peace of mind? Does prayer work? So they understand sin first of all not as a moral category but as something which destroys relationships – with God and with others. This is not to deny the

Biblical teaching but to see where we can connect with people in the first instance, as they watch us live as individuals and as a gathered church.

That is why we must aim at contextualisation. Postmodernity is not wholly good or bad, but it is the water in which we have to catch our fish. This is how the celebrated Lausanne Covenant expresses it in its Article 10 - Evangelism and Culture:

The development of strategies for world evangelisation calls for imaginative pioneering methods. Under God, the result will be the rise of churches deeply rooted in Christ and closely related to their culture. Culture must always be tested and judged by Scripture. Because men and women are God's creatures, some of their culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because they are fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. The gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture. Missions have, all too frequently, exported with the gospel an alien culture, and churches have sometimes been in bondage to culture rather than to Scripture. Christ's evangelists must humbly seek to empty themselves of all but their personal authenticity in order to become the servants of others, and churches must seek to transform and enrich culture, all for the glory of God.

(Mark 7:8,9,13; Genesis 4:21,22; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Philippians 2:5-7; 2 Corinthians 4:5)

Question

This extract from the Lausanne Covenant is s an appeal to Christians to know the culture we live in and to take it into account, but it also draws our attention to an inherent difficulty -at the same time we need to be closely related to culture, and also rooted in Christ. Drawing the line on how much adaptation we are called to make will always be a subject of debate among Christians. How much in culture would you accept for the sake of the communication of the gospel, but which parts of culture would you reject as being contrary to a Christian way of life?