

# CONTEXTUALIZING THE FAITH

A HOLISTIC APPROACH

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## PREFACE

I first encountered “contextualization” while in seminary in the early 1980s. In church and mission settings the term was in its infancy. Even so, battle lines had been drawn. As the term had been adopted in World Council of Churches circles from 1972 onward and framed in terms of social justice, evangelical missiologists were wary of it and its use by those more theologically liberal than they were. Well-used terms such as “adaptation” and “indigenization” were safe and useful (they remain so today), but at the same time limited. Over the several decades since then, evangelical missiologists have accepted “contextualization” into the lexicon, albeit with a different focus and orientation than Shoki Coe (1972) intended when he first used the term in his essay “Contextualizing Theology.”

I’ve been thinking about, using, modifying, defining, and exploring the term ever since I encountered it in seminary. This book is the result of ten years of ministry practice; thirty years of teaching courses on contextualization; writing and editing numerous articles, chapters, and a book mapping evangelical approaches; talking about it with students and colleagues; and gleaning from conferences and seminars. Through all these contributions I have tried to convey the significance of the idea that contextualization is squarely at the intersection of culture, gospel, and gospel bearer (whether autochthonous or expatriate).

In the early years, my focus, like that of most of my colleagues, was on contextualizing theology. Like them, I wanted to guard against warping or even jettisoning biblical truths. I also recognized that whenever we try to organize and convey biblical truths to others who differ from us, we engage in contextualization. At the same time, I also questioned my own organization’s approach to evangelism in its use of a tool known as “The Four Spiritual Laws.” Originally developed for use among American college students, this linear, outlined

approach to presenting the gospel had a great appeal to me as an American student majoring in engineering in my university years. It is a bare-bones listing of the fundamental facts of the gospel—with illustrations used to highlight or explain those facts. I liked the content, the order, and the call for response.

In 1978 I arrived for what became a decade of work in Africa. There I was brought face-to-face with an audience that was *not* American and *not* studying engineering, and I became far more interested in a well-told story than a linear recitation of “facts.” I struggled with this while teaching science in a local Swazi high school but did not have the tools or conceptual framework to know how to move forward.

It was when I went to seminary in the United States that I was introduced to the word and the entire discipline of missiology. Prior to seminary, I did not even know it existed! After seminary, I returned to Africa to teach in a seminary that had recently been established by Cru in Nairobi (then called the Nairobi International School of Theology).

Thankfully, for me, Cru staff working in East Africa were experimenting with new ways to communicate the Four Spiritual Laws through a picture book with an accompanying script. The people pictured in the booklet were dressed traditionally (a different book was planned for each major people group). The accompanying story (available in English and the language of the people portrayed) was about a man who had been estranged from his son and followed an outline that essentially explained the same logical, linear gospel found in the Four Spiritual Laws—but in story format. This was an early version of what we call “storying” the gospel today, though we did not call it that at the time.

I did not think of this as contextualization: it was simply an adaptation of an existing tool to communicate the same message in a different setting. As my teaching service in Africa continued, however, I came to realize that this attempt to take a tool developed in one cultural setting and adapt it for use in another is indeed one approach to contextualization. Granted, it dealt with a very specific evangelistic method rather than a theology, but it served at the intersection of culture and gospel.

As I taught courses on theology and a capstone course on theological systems in Kenya, I became frustrated that contextualization was confined to theology, with an invisible boundary drawn around it to keep it from leaking into other areas of church life and ministry. I was drawn to the idea that contextualization is much, much broader than theology and evangelistic methodology. But to imagine that contextualization is dealing with an amorphous universal “everything the church is and does” made it messy and complicated and literally impossible to get a handle on. Frankly, at the time I was thankful that my teaching assignments focused exclusively on contextualizing theology.

As difficult as that was, it was much easier to handle than trying to grapple with ministry, church life, and the like—all as components of what the church is and does, and all requiring contextualization.

In 1991, I sensed God’s call to return to the United States to take up a position at Wheaton College. No more systematic theology classes for me: Wheaton has an entire department dedicated to handling that, and all the Bible and theology faculty are far better trained in theology than I am with my missiology degree. In my second summer at Wheaton I offered an elective summer course on “Third World Theology” and was scolded by a theology professor, who informed me that Wheaton had an entire department for theological courses! As I reflect on that comment now, I suspect he was teasing, but it did not feel that way at the time.

A few years later I inherited a course then titled “Contextualization of Theology” (cataloged in my own department) and began to teach it as I had in Kenya, as a theological course. But by then I knew that contextualization could not be bounded exclusively in theological discussion: it must carry across the life of the church. However, as a teacher I struggled to organize this organic, formless mess into something coherent that made sense to me and my students. I expressed my frustrations to Larry Poston, a colleague who was team teaching the course with me. Larry is a religious scholar, and he pointed me to Ninian Smart’s (1996) dimensional approach to religions.

Smart’s approach gave me what I had been missing: an approach that could deal with the whole of church life and yet was organized in a way that it could be taken in smaller chunks. Ever since, I’ve continually adapted and utilized Smart’s dimensional approach to teach contextualization. This book is the product of more than three decades of thinking, teaching, writing, and talking about contextualization. I invite you to walk with me through seven dimensions of contextualization that frame a holistic and healthy approach to planting, growing, discipling, developing, and nurturing a local gathering of believers into a healthy church that is both *in* their culture and thus seen by nonfollowers of Christ as “normal” in many respects, and also *out of* their culture and thus seen by nonfollowers of Christ as “strange” because believers lead lives centered on the principles of the kingdom of God rather than the “kingdom of their culture.”

## Outline of the Book

In an earlier work (Moreau 2012b), I outlined the major underlying pre-suppositions, orientations, and battlegrounds that have characterized evangelical discussions on contextualization. Drawing from an extensive search of

the literature, I then mapped 249 examples of contextualization into categories based on the role of the initiator (facilitator, guide, herald, pathfinder, prophet, and restorer). In that book, and in several chapters and articles over the past decade (Moreau 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008, and 2012a), I presented my own approach as simply one of the examples for modeling contextualization. In this book, I expand on the model I teach and use as follows.

### ***Chapter 1: Setting the Stage: What Is Contextualization?***

This chapter provides a bird’s-eye view of “contextualization”—what it is, the breadth of contextualization, and its dipolar nature. I then introduce the dimensional approach I use in the book by offering a more extended definition of each dimension than found below.

### ***Chapter 2: The Social Dimension: Introduction, Association, and Kinship***

The social dimension is so large that I split the material over four chapters. There are five systems of the social dimension. In chapter 2, I introduce the dimension and examine the systems of association and kinship. In every human society people associate: they form groups (including some, excluding others). Further, all people are born into webs of kinship relations, and through such things as marriage and going to work, they expand those webs. These networks impact such things as church growth and organization and play a critical role in contextualizing the Christian faith.

### ***Chapter 3: The Social Dimension as Exchange: Economics***

In every society people have or produce multiple types of capital ranging from physical goods to services to social statuses. Likewise, in every society people exchange those types of capital. The production and sustaining as well as the exchange of these types of capital constitute the exchange system of the social dimension. These capitals and their exchange form a deeply contextual system that functions in churches just as it does in the larger societies in which those churches operate.

### ***Chapter 4: The Social Dimension as Learning: Education***

God created people to learn: we learn through socialization, through apprenticeships, and through formal educational institutions. These channels of learning are all contextual and found inside of churches just as they are outside of churches. Understanding how people and societies idealize learning

and the learning process helps us frame growth as followers of Christ in a contextual fashion.

### ***Chapter 5: The Social Dimension as Organizational: Politics***

God also created us as social creatures, and in all societies people organize the multitude of groups, associations, and organizations that exist. In this chapter I address how they do that and what it means for contextualization. “Organizational” spans a broad array from leadership to politics to organizational dynamics. As with the other social systems, the organizational patterns found in churches parallel those found in the societies in which the churches are embedded. We examine some of the ways local cultural values impact contextualizing churches, from leadership styles to the operation of Christian churches and other institutions.

### ***Chapter 6: The Mythic Dimension***

God created us as storytellers, which is not surprising since God himself is a storyteller, as evidenced by the vast majority of the Bible being narrative rather than didactic (teaching). Evangelical Christians may bristle at the use of the word “myth” in relation to the Bible, but I use the term in the academic sense of stories that guide our thinking and living rather than in the popular sense of “a story that is not true.” In this chapter I explain how I intend the term to be understood and then walk through the multiple ways we “story” our faith from the biblical narrative to orality to contemporary Bollywood.

### ***Chapter 7: The Ethical Dimension***

Ethics deals with the “shoulds” and “oughts” of life. All humans grow up in an environment in which they learn to discern their family’s and society’s perspectives on what is right (obligations) and what is wrong (taboos): what is the right thing to do, what is the wrong thing to avoid.

Scripture also provides a deeply ethical narrative, and we explore the intersection of Scripture and society in this dimension—and how the net result can range from ethically rigorous faith that is deeply rooted in a local cultural frame of reference to outright syncretism.

### ***Chapter 8: The Artistic and Technological Dimension***

God has made us as creative people; I see that as part of being an image-bearer of a creative God. In every society, people use art and human-made

technology (as McLuhan framed it; e.g., churches, pulpits, pews, offices, classrooms, nurseries, vestments, gravestones, and so on are media that become the message). In this chapter I explore Christian understandings of art, material, and technology as extensions of who we are that in turn shape who we become—and how faith and artistic, material, and technical expressions interpenetrate one another in contextual ways.

### ***Chapter 9: The Ritual Dimension***

Scripture clearly portrays humans as deeply ritualistic people: we see rituals in heaven as well as on earth. Many evangelicals eschew ritual even as they engage in it. This chapter will lay out a basic understanding of ritual and how it plays a critical role in contextualizing our faith.

### ***Chapter 10: The Experience Dimension: The Supernatural***

Around the world today scholars are noting and studying the phenomenon of Pentecostalism and the framing of faith in light of supernatural experience. In this chapter I outline global experiences as well as frames of reference for understanding this as an important dimension ignored by many Western Christians and missionaries—to the detriment of local expressions of faith in settings everywhere on the planet.

### ***Chapter 11: The Doctrinal Dimension***

The final dimension is the one most frequently explored as the only element of contextualization: theology. I'll explain multiple approaches to “theologizing” and then in synopsis form examine contextual realities that help us better understand global expressions of theology and theological development, with a focus on selected topics as they are framed in Africa—with appropriate caveats, of course.

### ***Chapter 12: The Future of Contextualization***

What have we learned? This question frames the concluding chapter, which includes a quick recap of the dimensions and observations on the future of contextualization.

## **A Word on “Majority World”**

Many terms have been proposed and used to capture the countries of the world that have not been in the orbit called “the West.” In ecumenical circles

in the early to mid-nineteenth century, the terms “older” and “younger” churches were used to indicate a relationship that was too often framed in colonial terms. In secular circles, “third world” was coined, but that term has dropped from use in the academy. Many academics today use “Global South” even though that part of the world is certainly not all south of the equator. My personal frustration with Global South is that the expression of something “going south” is a metaphor of things going wrong. While it is true that the world is flat (see the good explanation in Jacobsen 2015, 9–11), that does not help us distinguish the commonalities found in many Asian, African, Latin American, and Pacific Island settings. As has been my practice, I choose to use “majority world” because it remains a more neutral designation, it does not have an implied status or hierarchy, and it reflects the simple fact that this is where the vast majority of the world actually lives.

### **A Word about “Religions”**

Throughout this book, I refer to adherents of religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Among contemporary missionaries and practitioners, each of these terms is still used as a marker to identify a system sharing common beliefs and practices and to distinguish them from other systems. Phrases such as “Buddhists believe . . .” and “Hindus practice . . .” are common. However, they are commonly accurate only in a local sense; they may well describe adherents in one location or following one school within the religion, but they do not represent all adherents. In fact, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—as well as Christianity—are neither uniform nor unified.

Of special note in this regard is that “Hinduism” is even more challenging as a term than, for example, “Buddhism” or “Islam.” Like them, it serves as an umbrella term. Unlike them, however, the Supreme Court of India has defined Hinduism as both a *civilization* and a conglomerate of religions (Richard 2004, 311). To the extent that “Hinduism” refers to a civilization and an aggregate of religions, the questions that the contextualizer brings to India must go beyond the normal “religious” questions and include those normally addressed to a society. In some respects, this parallels Confucianism in China (as an ethical system or way of life) and Shinto in Japan (as a system of social ritual and obligations).

As if that were not enough of a challenge, scholars over the past few decades have shifted such that they now question even the use of “religion”

as a viable category. Religious scholar Kevin Schilbrack analyzes this shift in his article, appropriately titled “Religions: Are There Any?” He details three components in the critique of the contemporary use of “religion”: “that ‘religion’ is a social construction, that the term distorts one’s perceptions of the reality it seeks to name, and that it is ideologically poisonous” (2010, 1112). Despite the critique, Schilbrack and others continue using the term, albeit with caveats, if for no other reason than that an adequate substitute does not exist.

From a Christian vantage point, H. L. Richard, long-term scholar of India, adds that the term “religion” is not found in the Bible, nor is the modern construct. He argues, “The Bible thus gives an expectation that people everywhere will have some notion of God, but does not provide teaching on religions as such, particularly not modern notions of religion” (Richard 2015, 299). In short, there is no biblical data on which to base a biblical definition of the contemporary term.

Richard poses that the idea of “changing a religion” has become problematic in missiology. He is not arguing against conversion but against the idea that a “religion” has sharply defined boundaries that must be crossed in the conversion process. For example, Westerners have generally believed that a person self-identifies as a member of only one religion. We see this in census practices of forcing respondents to choose only one religion with which they identify. However, people across the world often have more than one religious identity and use the identity that best serves them in each circumstance of life. For example, Jan Van Bragt notes, “Putting it very crudely, it is said that Shinto is the religion for the living, and Buddhism is the religion for the dead. The Japanese feel themselves to be Shintoists in the cycle of the four seasons, at the times of planting and harvesting of the rice, at the New Year, at the festival of the tutelary deity of the village, and when a child is born. They feel themselves to be Buddhists at the times of funerals and services for the dead” (Van Bragt 2002, 10).

Aware of the dangers of reductionism, I choose to refer to “Buddhists,” “Christians,” “Hindus,” and “Muslims” throughout the book—but do so with the understanding that these overarching terms stand not only for complex systems but also as umbrella terms for *multiple* complex systems that share some common threads of belief and practice, as do terms such as Aboriginal Religions, African Traditional Religions, Afro-Caribbean Religions, Native American Religions, Tribal Religions, and the like. Historically, terms most commonly used as a kind of supercategory for all of these systems were “animism” (Van Rheezen 1991) and “primal religions” (J. Taylor 1963; H. Turner 1977).

## **Acknowledgments**

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# 1

## SETTING THE STAGE

### *WHAT IS CONTEXTUALIZATION?*

The word “contextualization” is a mouthful! For many, it’s intimidating—and it sounds like one of those academic terms that don’t apply to the real world. Over the past several decades of learning, arguing, teaching, and more learning about the term, I’ve discovered just how down-to-earth the term really is. As adopted in 1972 for mission and church contexts, it’s fairly new, especially in the universe of theological terms; it is still in its infancy, so to speak. And yet in the world of missions and missiology, no term has simultaneously generated more excitement and controversy over the brief life span of its use.

#### **Contextualization**

Whether used as a term of approbation or celebration, “contextualization” is a term (and an underlying idea) that has an emotional resonance with many Christians around our world. It resides at the intersection of God’s unchanging Word and the ever-changing settings in which people live out their faith as followers of Christ (Conn 1984). By “unchanging Word,” I’m referring not only to Scripture itself, but also to Jesus Christ as the Word of God and to the gospel he established and communicated through his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

### ***The Breadth of Contextualization***

Contextualization happens everywhere the church exists. And by church, I'm referring to the people of God rather than to buildings. Contextualization refers to how those people live out their faith in light of the values of their societies. It is not limited to theology, architecture, church polity, ritual, training, art, or spiritual experience: it includes them all and more. Whether we meet in cushioned pews in a climate-controlled European Gothic cathedral, or take the Lord's Supper of potato bread and palm wine, or actively seek supernatural signs and wonders, or sculpt expressions of our faith from tragedy to triumph, or enter sweat lodges to face our sin and find purification, or go to early morning prayer meetings or late-night concerts, we are all in the process of expressing or engaging our faith in highly contextual ways.

One problem with this is the idea that if contextualization is indeed everything Christians do, then the word becomes meaningless. But contextualization does not focus purely on what we do; it also examines why we do it the way we do. At the intersection of faith and culture, it forces us to step back (as impossible as that is) from ourselves and ask questions about why we practice our faith the way we do. From the simple to the profound, at the heart is the fact that as human beings our faith is *always* enfleshed because, despite our spiritual nature, we are enfleshed beings (we have physical bodies).

John paints a wonderful picture in Revelation 7:9–10 of followers of Christ “from every nation, tribe, people and language,” standing before the throne of God. John says that they cry out, “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” This wonderful picture is a simultaneous blend of uniformity (white robes, all holding palm branches) and diversity (nations, tribes, peoples, languages). Have you ever wondered what language they use? At least from John's depiction, it's Greek! As I envision this massive worship experience, I imagine everyone speaking their first or heart language, but all of us understanding one another. This massive gathering of worshipers does not homogenize them: they retain their ancestral and linguistic frames of reference. But they are clearly unified in worship of God and Christ. I see this as a marvelous image characterizing contextualization.

### ***The Dipolar Nature of Contextualization***

Contextualization, in the framework of this image, can in one sense be thought of as having two “poles” that are in continual dialogue (drawing from Feinberg 1982). In the Revelation 7 image, one pole is the commonality: the white robes, the palm branches, and the declaration. The other pole is the

individuality: nation, tribe, people, language. I'm using them as metaphors for the dipolar nature of contextualization. These two poles—one universal and one local, one transcendent and one immanent, one eternal and one limited in time and place—are in continual dialogue with each other. However, they do not share equal weight. The universal or normative pole transcends human societies, while the individual pole is the locale in which the normative pole is embodied.

### **The Universal or Normative Pole**

As I noted, the first pole is the commonality. In the image from Revelation 7 this is represented by the sameness of the clothing and the declaration. This is the “universal” or “normative” pole. In contextualization, this universal pole is the gospel itself, a commonality that is timeless and universal. Stripped of all the additions people have tacked on over the years, I compress this gospel into a very short and simple phrase: *Jesus the Christ is Lord*. It will help to unpack this phrase before we look at the other pole.

#### ***Jesus***

Jesus is the historical, incarnated man who ministered, taught, suffered, died, was resurrected, and will return. He is the very Son of God—not through a biological act, but as an ontological reality that is unique in the universe. He is the actual Son; we are adopted sons and daughters.

#### ***The Christ***

I use “the Christ” in the phrase because too many people in our society think of “Christ” as his family name rather than his title—he is *the* Christ, *the* Messiah, *the* Savior. “The Christ” is his title and is unique among all creation.

#### ***Is Lord***

It is this one, Son of God and very God, who is Lord of the universe. His reign is not limited in time or space, and the submission of the entire created order to his reign is its ultimate destiny.

### **The Local Pole**

The other pole is the local setting, as with the individuality in the Revelation 7 image. Whether gathered in a secret house fellowship in a restrictive nation or assembled in an ultramodern megasanctuary in South Korea, Christians are embedded in local settings. They may be embedded enclaves of other cultures (e.g., international churches in many global cities) or never leave their birth

environment; either way they remain inescapably embedded. This is the pole that is always changing and dynamic. While the universal pole is eternal, this pole is temporal and ever changing. Changing the metaphor, it is the soil in which the universal pole is embedded.

## Introduction to the Dimensions

If contextualization includes every way we express our faith in Christ, how do we determine what should be included? How do we organize our approach? As I noted in the preface, this question troubled me for over a decade, until a colleague introduced me to the dimensional thinking of Ninian Smart (1996), including (in Smart's order) (1) the doctrinal or philosophical, (2) the ritual, (3) the mythic or narrative, (4) the experiential and emotional, (5) the ethical and legal, (6) the social, and (7) the material dimensions.

Smart was not thinking specifically about contextualization. Rather, he was attempting to find a way to describe religions using universal categories. He did not develop or frame his approach to facilitate my agenda in relation to contextualization. However, even though his approach is a universal and etic (outsider) paradigm framed in a modernist worldview, it does provide a platform for the examination and exploration of contextualization of Christian faith in multiple non-Christian religious settings on their terms. This enables us to consider how we as Christians might contextualize our faith in settings of other religions in ways that make sense to people who practice those religions.

The danger, of course, is that of syncretism: intermingling inappropriate elements of other religions into our Christian faith (Moreau 2000a). This drives some of the criticism of contextualization, namely, that it leads to syncretism (Moreau 2012b, 123–29). However, the reality is that all expressions of the Christian faith are local, embedded in contexts. Our heritage is one of religious encounter and, in some cases, assimilation (such as the Christmas tree). Using Smart's dimensional analysis no more opens us to syncretism than any other approach might. Rather, it provides a very helpful paradigm of areas to consider for contextualizing our faith.

Over the past two decades I have modified Smart's dimensions for specific use in contextualization. Through the rest of the book I'll explain how I approach contextualization of all that the church is, does, and believes—not limited to Christian theology. What follows is a brief explanation of each of the seven dimensions, which I expand on in the chapters to come. Throughout this introduction I'll be referring to these as dimensions of "religion"—a reminder that I'm keeping the conversation broad at this point, including

non-Christian religions, since each dimension is found within them as well as within our own Christian faith.

### ***The Social Dimension***

The social dimension refers to the dimension of religion that expresses the linking of people to each other, built on the cultural values of how people are to relate socially in religious contexts. It includes broad, universal social institutions as well as the sense of belonging inculcated through socially experienced religious events. For the purposes of contextualization, and following a framework used in intercultural communication, I identify five specific social institutions: association, kinship, exchange (or economics), learning (or education), and organizational (or political; see Moreau, Campbell, and Greener 2014, 88–94; Hiebert and Meneses 1995). Each of these institutions meets a need (whether religious or other) and has elements that can be identified as being of significance for the survival and growth of the institution. They are all found in every society on the planet. Each has a significant role to play in religious expression and life as well.

#### **Association**

Association refers to the reality that all religions are part of societies in which people form groups based on a broad variety of needs and social practices. In a very pragmatic sense, alumni associations typify this. However, our focus is on religious association. Since in associations people are members by some defining characteristic, we can rightly ask what religious types of associations exist and how people are included as well as how people are excluded. An alumni association, for example, only includes people who graduated from the institution of which they are alumni. Associations in religions are characterized by a variety of factors—from the broadest “I’m a Muslim” to the narrowest “I’m a member of the \_\_\_\_\_ group, which practices \_\_\_\_\_.” Religious associations may be public or secret; they often have symbols or slogans as well as rituals of incorporation and intensification. They also have means of inclusion and exclusion, whether formal or informal. These include such things as assent to specified beliefs and/or practices, belonging to a particular lineage, having undergone a particular ritual or trial, and much more.

#### **Kinship**

Every faith must provide for the biological reproduction of new members and see that they are nourished and cared for during infancy and childhood.

It is typically the family (whether nuclear or extended) that provides the basic context for the performance of these activities. Often the early training and socialization of children into a faith is either initiated or takes place by concerned relatives in the family structure. Many faiths also express metaphorical family relationships (spiritual father, mother, brother, sister, child) as well as prescriptions and prohibitions on things such as marriage, inheritance, authority, residence, and the like.

### **Exchange**

Every faith must have some way of producing and distributing various types of capital. There are many types of capital: material (goods, services, money), social (status, power, authority, knowledge), and spiritual (efficacy of prayer, connection to the divine or the supernatural, spiritual vitality). Each type of capital sustains the lives and faith of its members. The institutions and roles that are organized around the production and exchange of these types of capital—including concepts of obligation, debt, pricing, payment, and so on—constitute the exchange system of the faith. Often there is an idealized portrait of the system, which may not correspond to the actual exchanges in the lives of average adherents, and especially in the lives of those at the bottom of the social and/or spiritual capital scale.

### **Learning (Education)**

Learning is a facet of the socialization process that is necessary for all faiths. Whether through formal educational systems (religious schools), non-formal means (apprenticeships), or informal means (socialization through youth groups, faith-based small groups, reading of religious materials, religious experiences, and so on), this component of the social dimension includes all those activities that contribute to providing members with the knowledge, values, and skills of the faith that are considered essential. They are transmitted to members to prepare them to understand and live out their faith in religiously acceptable ways.

### **Organizational (Political)**

All faith communities must have some means of maintaining internal order as well as regulating the relations of their members with other faith communities. Internal threats to a faith's existence come from the competition for power and control over the various types of religious and other capital noted previously. Since the availability of power has limits in every community,

regulation of (and conflict over) the use of those capital resources is inevitable. The legal and political system—how a faith organizes itself—is the network of institutions and social roles that exist to regulate this access to and competition for power. Religions maintain order through formal and informal laws and policies, means of governance, enforcement, leadership to regulate lives of members, and so on.

### ***The Mythic Dimension***

The mythic dimension refers to the stories of a culture that reflect its thinking about the world, itself, its laws, and its values. Myth concretizes important values for the culture and enables those values to be passed from generation to generation. Mythography, the study of myth, typically focuses on religious epics including the timeless stories of creation, redemption, and human/divine drama found in a religion's scriptures, epics, and classics.

In terms of contextualization, I use the term to include contemporary stories as well. They range from stories of heroism to martyrdom, from great success to great failure. I also include oral components including folklore and proverbs. People tell stories of great heroes of their faith, but as warnings they also use stories of people who fail in their religious faith or obligations. In the contemporary sense, Hollywood, Bollywood, Nollywood (Nigeria), the Marvel Universe, DC Comics, manga, and anime are all purveyors of myth on a global scale. When it comes to myth, as we will see in chapter 6, the question is not, Is it true? Rather, the questions are (1) Does it *draw on* or *utilize* the basic ideals of a society? (2) Does it *challenge* the basic ideals of a society? and (3) Does it *capture* the imagination?

### ***The Ethical Dimension***

The ethical dimension fundamentally refers to how people *should* behave as they relate to other people, animals, and the world. Ethics are found on the personal, group, and social (or systemic) levels. They are deeply interwoven into the cultural values and doctrine and often enshrined in heroic (or evil) acts discussed in cultural myth. They provide the behavioral maps that we negotiate as we live and interact with others. In this sense, the Ten Commandments and Golden Rule fit the ethical category rather than the doctrinal category. Both the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule are founded on fundamental truths such as these: God is the creator of humankind, we are made in his image, and God has the right to determine proper codes of conduct for his creation. However, they are codes of living that arise from the truths

rather than “truths” in and of themselves. In the Ten Commandments, the commands to love God and neighbor (and thus not lie, steal, lust, or cheat) are all *applications*. They are certainly “true” in the sense that they conform to who God is, but they are not religious truths per se. Rather, they are natural obligations based on religious truths from which they are derived. Ethics are typically stated by using words such as “should,” “must,” or “ought”: “Thou shalt . . .” in King James English of the Ten Commandments exemplifies this.

### ***The Artistic and Technological Dimension***

By the artistic, or material, dimension I refer to the multitude of ways people symbolically capture and express ideas, values, and themes of their religion or of their personal approach to their religion. By “material” I refer to what Marshall McLuhan meant by “technology”—and his idea that we create things and they in turn re-create us (Lochhead 1994). This certainly includes things we normally think of as technology, but it also includes anything we create that enables us to extend ourselves through artistic and other types of expression. The “material” can include such mundane things as a pencil, but for this dimension the focus is on how we use that mundane pencil to create art, from sketching to writing poetry or songs or stories to even using the pencil itself as an object in an artistic creation. This dimension includes architecture, art (sculptures, paintings), objects (crosses), locations (cemeteries, holy sites), religious fashion and decoration, and so on. It also includes art as performance, from singing to sermonizing to creating music and drama.

### ***The Ritual Dimension***

By ritual I mean regularized ceremonies of religious life. This can be as mundane as bowing before a person of high status to an uncommon event such as the investiture of a global religious figure (e.g., a pope). Ritual runs the full gamut of religious experience, and every religion is loaded with ritual. While American evangelicals over the past century often disdained the formal ritual of liturgical or mainline churches, at the same time we created our own rituals that serve the same purposes as those we disdained, such as small-group Bible studies, quiet times, and weekend conferences. In this chapter we’ll explore ritual along the lines that scholars of ritual have long noted: (1) rituals that enable *transition* from one state to another (e.g., baptism), (2) rituals that *intensify or strengthen* the religious beliefs or faith of a person or group of people (e.g., a worship service), and (3) rituals that offer a means to deal with a *crisis* (e.g., prayer for a sick person).

### ***The (Supernatural) Experience Dimension***

Smart characterized the experiential dimension as focusing on general religious experience, including such things as the emotions connected with those experiences. Because I'm particularly focusing on Christian contextualization, I narrow the focus to *how we experience the transcendent in our lives*. This can range from the mundane to the sublime, though generally we focus more on the latter. By "supernatural experiences" I refer not only to supernatural experiences that Christians encounter—such as dreams, visions, the various sign gifts (e.g., tongues and interpretation), and encounters with supernatural beings (angels or demons). I also include in this category supernatural experiences noted by practitioners of other religions, such as out-of-body experiences (OBE), near-death experiences, trances, possession, shamanic journeys, and so on. By including non-Christian supernatural experiences in this list, at this stage I am not distinguishing between the genuine and the contrived or fake, nor am I indicating the sources of such experiences. Instead, I'm simply recognizing that these are reported as genuine experiences and therefore I include them in this dimension. This dimension includes not only encounters with the transcendent, but also and whether we consider such encounters to play a significant role in our religious lives.

### ***The Philosophical or Doctrinal Dimension***

The final dimension is the one most commonly discussed and argued over by evangelicals. Smart referred to this as the philosophical dimension, a term better able to handle the range of perspectives that the religions of the world have on "truth." However, my focus is on contextualizing Christian faith. Thus the word "doctrine" (or perhaps "theology") better captures the central idea for Christians. This dimension includes important truths expressed in religious form. Religions often seek to answer central and abiding questions, such as, What is the truth about the world, people, and the unseen powers? Although across religions the answer ranges from "It's all illusion" to "What you see is what really is," I limit my focus to Christian contextual expressions of doctrine or truth.

## **Conclusion**

So far I have set the stage by giving a very cursory overview of how I understand contextualization together with an equally cursory introduction to the seven dimensions of contextualization. In the rest of the book I turn to

a more detailed examination of each dimension in turn, following roughly the same general outline for each dimension: (1) an introduction to the dimension (or component), (2) a discussion of how that dimension shows up in Scripture, and (3) selected examples of what contextualization of that dimension entails.