Contextual Mission: An Australian Perspective

(Reflections on the seventh study theme of Edinburgh 2010:
'Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts')
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Edinburgh 1910: Through European Glasses

Nearly all the 1215 delegates to the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910 were white and western, from Britain, North America, Australia, New Zealand and white South Africa. There were eighteen from Asia and one from Africa.[1]

One of the Chinese delegates was Cheng Jingyi, a twenty-eight year old pastor in a Beijing church. He was probably the youngest delegate at the conference.[2] Like other speakers he was given seven minutes during the debate on Commission VIII, on 'Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity'. What he said was judged by one published report of the conference as 'without question the best speech made at Edinburgh'.[3]

Cheng urged the mission leaders to form a united Protestant church in China, because denominationalism was a real obstacle to the spread of the Good News. He said Chinese people had no taste for the western divisions between Christians.

The way this was received demonstrates how strongly those present saw the world through European and American glasses. The official historian of the conference, W H T Gairdner, wrote that Cheng seemed quite unaware of how difficult this would be, and saw him as theologically naïve.[4] And the chairman of Commission II, John Campbell Gibson wrote in the Commission report, rather condescendingly: "It is, we think, disappointing that the native mind … has not made a deeper mark on church organization".[5]

Looking back a hundred years and reading the reports of the Edinburgh 1910 conference, reminds me how much has changed in that short period. To illustrate how short it is, I received an email recently from someone whose father was an usher at Edinburgh 1910.

Discontinuity and Continuity

But to hear what western mission leaders were thinking in 1910 is to be keenly aware of both discontinuity and continuity.

As everyone knows, Edinburgh occurred at the peak of western optimism and confidence in European and American superiority. It was called the *World* Missionary Conference and yet it was a gathering of one part of the world—the Christian world—to talk about how to reach the

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[1] Brian Stanley, The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 12-13.
[2] Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 108.
[3] In the *Missionary Herald* (Boston), 106 (1910): 354, cited in Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 108.
[4] W H T Gairdner, *'Edinburgh 1910': An account and interpretation of the World Missionary Conference* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 184–186.
[5] World Missionary Conference, *The church in the mission field: Report of Commission II*, World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 12.

other part of the world—the non-Christian world. It was not even the whole of Christendom, but western Protestantism. And South America was avoided as a sensitive issue because although evangelicals wanted to evangelise there the Anglo-Catholics insisted that as a Roman Catholic continent it was already part of Christendom.

But, despite the things that seem strange from our perspective, those at Edinburgh were beginning to grapple with many of the issues that still occupy us today. The relationship to other faiths, the empowering of the non-western churches and the role of women in mission are just some examples. Here and there, in speeches or reports or submissions to the questionnaires that went out before the conference, we find progressive or prophetic statements, prodding the conference to see things differently. It is easy for us to judge the western missionary movement of a hundred years ago. I wonder how we will be judged in a hundred years' time for how we dealt with the issues facing us?

Contextual Theology

One thing that was hardly mentioned at Edinburgh 1910 but which, in the hundred years since, has become of the central concerns of missiology today is the concern to allow the gospel to take shape differently in different contexts. As Stephen Bevans says, 'There is no such thing as "theology"; there is only contextual theology. … The attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context … is really a theological imperative."[6]

This shift shows an awareness of how much our own culture influences our understanding of God. No longer do we confidently assume that western theology, for example, is universally applicable or useful. A universal theology, as Robert Schreiter puts it, is actually a *universalising* theology, one which extends its own beliefs and ways to another setting, unaware of how it has been shaped by its own context.[7]

Contextualisation refers to the ongoing and multi-layered process of allowing the gospel to take shape in a particular context. We can immediately see how important contextualisation is for mission, because if the Good News is to become good news for particular people it needs to speak to them within their culture, in their language and addressing their experience.

Contextual mission goes beyond what the Edinburgh conference called 'accommodation' to native customs, or 'indigenisation' through training local leaders.[8] It goes beyond helping every church to become self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating and insists on every church self-theologising. Going beyond the split between Christendom and heathendom, or (to use the language of Edinburgh) so-called older churches and younger churches, a contextual approach expects every local church, the church in every culture and the church in every broad region to engage in contextual mission. That is, every contemporary Christian community needs to examine its context and critically interact with the gospel story in a deep and ongoing way, in a journey towards expressing God's Good News in ways that reflect our cultural identity.

A Shift Since 1910

This is a huge shift from the dominant assumptions of Edinburgh 1910.

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[6] Stephen B Bevans, *Models of contextual theology*, Rev. & Exp. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 3.
[7] Robert J Schreiter, *Constructing local theologies* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985), 2.
[8] World Missionary Conference, *Education in relation to the Christianization of national life: Report of Commission III*, World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 240-241.

From the West to the rest

First, those at Edinburgh thought in geographical terms: from the West to the rest.[9] It was 'Christendom' taking the gospel to 'the non-Christian world'.[10] It assumed that the West was Christian, that it understood the gospel, and that the West had the resources to reach the world. The job, it seemed, depended on western missionaries, and so most of the commissions concentrated on how the mission effort might become more effective. Context hardly came into it; it was a global job to be done by those who had the knowledge and the resources.

Within five years, with the onset of the First World War, the simple assumption that Europe was Christian was deeply challenged, as the evil and violence that was unleashed put a huge question mark against what it meant to be a Christian nation.[11] Since then, Europe has become post-Christian, and church attendance a minority activity. Since then, the centre of gravity for world Christianity has moved to Africa, Asia and Latin America. As Philip Jenkins puts it, 'if we want to visualise a "typical" contemporary Christian, we should think of a woman living in Nigeria or in a Brazilian *favela*".[12] Within decades of Edinburgh the Christendom mindset—and we need to remember that it had been cracking since the sixteenth century—was untenable. By the second half of the century mission was no longer from the West to the rest but 'from everywhere to everywhere'.[13]

Cultures as regions

Second, those at Edinburgh thought in terms of continents (such as Africa), regions (such as East Asia), or countries (such as China or Japan). They had some sense of context but it was painted with an extremely broad brush. In the survey of world mission, published by the conference, indigenous Australians were discussed in one page and Maoris in a paragraph.[14]

Since then we have become aware how complex and multi-layered cultures are. As well as thinking in terms of the world's 200 nations, or in terms of 'peoples', we now tend to pay attention to smaller cultural units, such as those labelled by the Lausanne Movement as 'people groups'. There might be in the order of 15,000 of these and there might be 5,000 languages. To make things more complicated, in this post-colonial and globalised era, people move between cultures and assume hybrid identities. A student of mine introduced herself recently as Korean by birth, raised in Paraguay and now an Australian citizen. Even more common are Pakistanis in Britain or Moroccans in France, a legacy of colonialism.

The Edinburgh 1910 conference had eight commissions. The Edinburgh 2010 conference has nine themes for study. The seventh is 'Christian Communities in Contemporary Contexts', and is the focus of these reflections. The theme shows how central it is in missiology today to take into account communities—presumably much smaller than nations or regions—and contexts. The guidelines for study issued by Edinburgh 2010 suggest that the task is to examine the variety of Christian communities as they draw on different traditions and engage with specific

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[9] Anne-Marie Kool, 'Changing images in the formation for mission: Commission Five in the light of current challenges—A world perspective', in *Edinburgh 2010: Mission then and now*, eds. David A Kerr and Kenneth R Ross (Oxford: Regnum, 2009), 167.

[10] World Missionary Conference, *Carrying the gospel to all the non-Christian world: Report of Commission I*, World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 2.

[11] Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 304.

[12] Philip Jenkins, *The next Christendom: The coming of global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 2.

[13] Michael Nazir-Ali, *From everywhere to everywhere* (London: Collins, 1991).

[14] World Missionary Conference, *Carrying the gospel to all the non-Christian world*, 126–127.

communities. Engaging contextually involves exploring worldview, language, customs, traditions and what gospel transformation might mean in each context.[15]

The Australian Context

When we ask ourselves what it might mean to engage in contextual mission in the Australian context, the first thing to say is that there are many Australian contexts, just as there is not only one Australian culture.

I live in Melbourne's western suburbs, where, in the simple act of taking public transport, I am acutely aware of cultural complexity and hybridity every day. There are communities of Vietnamese, of Indians and of Burmese, and older communities of Greeks and Italians. At Yarraville the young upwardly-mobile professionals and those who like to be slightly bohemian (though not too much) get on the train.

These cultures are not simply geographical. At my local church, two Burmese ethnic groups, the Karen and the Chin, gather to worship from many suburbs around. Some worship in the English language service and several hundred worship in two other services in their own language. The context of my local church, then, is largely Karen and Chin, and our service is usually bi-lingual or tri-lingual in response. At a practical level, this is what it is to be a Christian community taking its contemporary context seriously.

There are, however, several aspects of Australia's national context which are important if Australian Christians are to engage with their contemporary context. We could list many, of course, but I want to focus briefly on five areas which largely frame the Australian national context. If Edinburgh 2010 serves the global church at all, it will be through prodding churches in different contexts to explore what it might mean for the gospel to take shape in each context. It could be argued that while the Australian church has for a long time been self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating, it is still only beginning to self-theologise. That is, a distinctly Australian theology or understanding of its mission, is yet to take mature shape, although some attempts have been made to begin the conversation.

I'll be interested to learn the extent to which these dominant factors in Australian culture are found in New Zealand, and the extent to which your context differs.

Indigenous Reconciliation

First, a fundamental aspect of the Australian context is that we are nation founded on an unacknowledged invasion and appalling treatment of the Indigenous peoples. I'm not sure that the average non-indigenous Australian Christian appreciates how deeply this affects who non-indigenous Australians are and whether they can feel at home in the Australian continent.

Speaking as a non-indigenous Christian, those of us who arrived after 1788 invaded the continent without a treaty, shot and killed Indigenous people when they resisted, moved them off their land, introduced diseases which wiped them out by the thousands, destroyed most of their culture, treated them as invisible, discriminated against them, led many of them to despair and hopelessness, introduced many of them to alcoholism and welfare dependence, let them languish in third-world conditions, removed their children and denied their claims to land. To

[15] Edinburgh 2010, < http://www.edinburgh2010.org/en/study-themes/7-christian-communities-in-contemporary-contexts.html>. Accessed 31-7-09.

this day, despite the welcome apology given by the federal government in 2008 and a commitment to closing the gap between Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, government policies ride roughshod over Indigenous voices, discrimination still occurs and they remain the most disadvantaged group in Australian society.

I agree with Norman Habel that Australia will only find its soul as a nation when the long journey of reconciliation is taken, involving personal relationships between Indigenous and non-indigenous people, symbolic actions of healing, justice, a treaty, compensation, and practical steps in health, education, housing and so on.[16] The churches have a central role in this, because reconciliation is at the heart of the kingdom of God.[17] But the challenge of this context to Australian churches is to come to terms with its mixed past in relating to Indigenous people; commit itself seriously to resourcing, training and listening to the voices of Indigenous people; and make sure that justice and reconciliation does not slip off the national agenda.

A Multicultural Vision

Second, there is probably nowhere more suited than Australia to aspire to a multicultural vision of the Kingdom of God, where the foreigner or stranger is welcomed (Deut 10:19), where we seek the welfare of the city (Jer 29:7), where we follow Jesus' call to love our neighbour, and where—as in the early church—ethnic barriers are relativised as we find unity in Christ despite our diversity (Gal 3:28).

Australia and Canada are the only two countries with a national policy of multiculturalism. Since 1945 nearly seven million migrants have arrived in Australia, which means that half of the population increase since 1945 (from seven to twenty-one million) has been due to migration.[18] In Melbourne 29% were born overseas, and 25% speak a language other than English at home.[19]

With some exceptions, Anglo-Australians have tended to be over-represented in churches. Although most people don't use the term 'ethnic' this way, we could say that the most common 'ethnic churches' are Anglo-Australian churches. Fifty years ago, churches expected migrants to assimilate, reflecting national policies. Then various denominations catered for migrant ethnic congregations, meeting separately and often worshipping in languages other than English.

The current challenge is to discern when cultural diversity is best served by meeting separately—such as when new migrants can hardly speak any English and are keen to preserve their customs and culture—and when the multicultural vision of the gospel is best served by nurturing relationships between new migrants and other groups. At my local church we are actively cultivating friendships and relationships at every possible level, despite the Burmese groups needing to worship in their own way and in their own language. Why? Because their children are already Burmese-Australians, straddling cultures and wanting to live differently from their parents.

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[16] Norman C Habel, *Reconciliation: Searching for Australia's soul* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 1999).
[17] Ross Langmead, 'Transformed relationships: Reconciliation as the central model for mission', *Mission Studies* 25.1 (June 2008), 5-20.
[18] Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 'Fact Sheet 2: Key facts in immigration', Australian Government, <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/02key.htm>, 2009
[19] Victoria demographics, <www.about-australia.com/facts/victoria/demographics>. Accessed 31-7-09.

Mission in a Post-Christian Society

Third, if the Christendom assumptions of Edinburgh 1910 were soon to crumble in Europe, they have also crumbled in Australia. Despite attempts between 1788 and the 1830s to make the Church of England the established religion of the Australian colony, Australia has always been an irreligious nation as far as non-indigenous people are concerned, with low rates of church-going despite 96% of Australians claiming to be Christian in the 1901 census. That figure has now dropped to 64%.[20] Only about 10% of Australians go to church on any Sunday[21] and about 20% say they go at least once a month, the lowest figures in about fifty years of counting.[22]

In a post-Christian society the Christian church is not 'on the radar' for politicians, the media and the person on the street. Commitment as a follower of Jesus is a minority activity, seen as slightly odd. The stories of the Bible are not known or understood in literature or in daily language. The church is seen negatively, as 'yesterday's cause', tainted by past scandals and simply boring and irrelevant. As many commentators have observed, we are in some ways in a similar situation to the early church, competing in a marketplace of religious ideas. But in other ways, as Lesslie Newbigin often pointed out, mission to the post-Christian West is more challenging because of the legacy of Christendom and the failures of the church.

Newbigin's suggestion is a simple but profound one, something I've explored myself in various places. He suggests that in a post-Christian context we need to tell the story of Jesus again and to embody it in our lives.[23] Along with others I call it incarnational mission, integrating word and deed as we live into the kingdom, in the hope that in God's power the story will be heard freshly by an ignorant generation.

Engaging the Postmodern Mind

Fourth, the all-pervasive context of postmodernity provides a real challenge for Christian mission in Australia. Edinburgh 1910 occurred at the height of modernity, where faith in progress, reason, technology and universal solutions was at its peak. The twentieth century has seen a seismic shift that is still difficult to pinpoint. I won't try to define postmodernity here, except to say most of us recognise it, particularly amongst younger people, but also in ourselves.

We see it in acceptance of pluralism and relativism, and in a lack of interest in grand theories or overarching frameworks. We see it in the way people choose a bit of meaning from here and bit from there in an eclectic fashion. We see it in the dominance of style, media, virtual worlds, celebrity, irony, playfulness and architectural montages. We see it the fragmentation of life, and the desire, even passion, to connect, whether in person or by phone, email, Facebook or Twitter. We see it in the tendency of people to judge things, not by whether they are true or not, but whether it works for them.

Postmodernity is clearly neither to be totally rejected nor totally embraced. We could perhaps learn from the tendency of western Christianity to hook its wagon to the project of modernity. We need to work harder at discerning what aspects of postmodernity resonate with the gospel—such as the desire for community— and what aspects need to be challenged, such as the suspicion of over-arching frameworks of meaning. Newbigin's suggestion of telling and living

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[20] Philip Hughes, 'What do the 2006 Census figures about religion mean?', *Pointers* 17.3 (September 2007), 1.
[21] Peter Kaldor et al., *Build my church: Trends and possibilities for Australian churches* (Adelaide: Open Book, 1999), 15.
[22] Ruth Powell, 'Why people don't go to church ... and what the churches can do about it', *Pointers* 12.2 (June 2002), 8.
[23] Lesslie Newbigin, *The gospel in a pluralist society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 182.

the gospel story applies here as well as in the post-Christian context. Postmodern Australians seek a personal connection and want to see faith that works, faith with its sleeves rolled up.

The Asian Horizon

Fifth, and finally, the contemporary context for the Australian church includes its unique position as a predominantly western nation on the door step to South East Asia, and beyond to Asia in general.

While the previous comments take seriously the context within Australia of various contemporary communities, this contextual reality takes us back to the focus of Edinburgh 1910, which was global mission. A hundred years later, Australians need not feel that as a western nation they must take the gospel to the 'non-Christian world' to our north. Any mission engagement the Australian church undertakes in its region—and I would venture to suggest the New Zealand church as well—needs to occur within the context of global partnership, mission from all continents to all continents and regional co-operation.

As distinct from a typical European, my own roots and interests are in Asia. My mother was born in Beijing and I spent my childhood years in Hong Kong. I spent my student backpacking days in South East Asia and have taken an interest in Baptist mission in India and Bangladesh. I have visited Burmese friends on the Thai-Burma border, and have taught on more than one occasion at a theological college in Myanmar.

Western Christians have made mistakes in their missionary endeavours, but they should not prevent us from exploring more equal partnerships with Christians in Asia. In an increasingly global village, we are now close neighbours and South East Asia, in particular, is clearly part of the Australian context. I would be interested to learn whether, in your context, Asia looms as large as the Pacific in terms of its regional context.

Conclusion

The seventh study theme for Edinburgh 2010, 'Christian communities in contemporary contexts', highlights an awareness that was barely present at Edinburgh 1910: the importance of contextualising the gospel in Christian mission. As soon as we take context seriously, we become aware of the incredible variety of the communities around us. Like ordinary Australians, the churches in Australia can easily forget that their nation began by dispossessing those who were there already, or forget that multiculturalism asks more of the church than to enjoy a variety of cuisines. Christians can find the challenge of witness in a post-Christian society daunting, or feel disoriented by the huge shifts of the postmodern worldview. And finally the Australian church can forget to raise its eyes to the Asian horizons not far from Australia.

These are just some of the contextual factors that prod us to engage patiently, energetically and in an ongoing way with the communities and cultures all around us. I look forward to a conversation on which of these factors resonate with the contexts New Zealanders find themselves in, and how they might be similar or different.

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