CONTEXTUALIZING THEOLOGICAL CURRICULA IN AFRICA

ELIZABETH MBURU (PHD)
Dichotomy in Africa

Symptoms?

i. Syncretism

ii. Corruption and impunity

iii. Prosperity Gospel

Cause? Compartmentalization of thought systems (faith, life, academic discipline)

Result? Failure to internalize the content of our Christian faith
Road map

i. Present data demonstrating the need for contextualizing curricula.

ii. Propose a rationale and contextualization model from the apostle Paul.

iii. Recommend a way forward.
The need for contextualizing curricula

- Are the goals in our theological institutions contextualized to the African situation or are they generic?
- Are these goals clearly articulated or even understood by those in our classrooms?
- Is contextualization filtering down to the course content and delivery?
- What about the worldview of the students? Is this taken as an important factor in the curriculum?
i. Goals: Contextual in nature
   Students 13%; Lecturers 40%

i. Contextualization of course content
   Students 67%; Lecturers 80%

i. Worldview
   Helpful:        Students 44%;
                 Lecturers 20%
   Hinders:       Students 27%;
                 Lecturers 40%
   Both/and:      Students 26%;
                 Lecturers 40%

Findings of a preliminary survey (done in 2016) of three departments of Theology in selected universities in Nairobi.
Conclusion

Although some level of contextualization is taking place in the classroom, what still needs to be addressed is why it is not being effectively incorporated beyond the classroom.
An example of contextualization and implications for curriculum development

i. Paul’s speech in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) – how to use culture and worldview to present and interpret the biblical message

ii. Background:
    Athens
    The Agora and Areopagus
    The worldview of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers
Principle 1

Identify your ultimate goal
i. What is our goal as theological educators? The ultimate goal of theological study is to ensure that as our students move through the various stages of the educational process, they begin to develop a biblical worldview that is both clearly articulated and lived out in their context because it has been internalized.

ii. Focus? Head, heart, hands, and the surrounding context.
Implications?

i. The modes of expression of the biblical message are not static, but dynamic. This implies that an African Christian theology is valid.

ii. Consequently, although some goals of theological education are generic and apply globally, the specific goals of theological education cannot be uniformly adopted across the globe but must be contextualized to meet the needs represented in that part of the world.

iii. These goals must guide in aligning the African Christian worldview to the biblical meta-narrative.
Principle 2

Know your target context
i. Who are you teaching and where? This will guide how you develop your philosophy, learning objectives, content, delivery methods and teaching resources.

ii. Both geographical and digital spaces must be considered.

iii. The rapid cultural changes also have implications for the evaluation and subsequent revision of curricula.

iv. Western secularism vs. the African traditional worldview?
Implications?

i. Contextual relevance must go beyond the course content to the modes of delivery.

ii. As the curriculum and the courses are developed and implemented, the educator must consciously keep in mind the elements of worldview that are essential in guiding valid contextualization questions and the need to use strategies that will encourage holistic learning.
Questions to ask

This must be done intentionally.

i. How does worldview influence a student’s understanding of how this curriculum/course/topic relates to his/her faith, life (within the particular cultural context) and academic discipline?

ii. What objectives should the educator incorporate in the curriculum (including the course outlines) that challenge students to begin to contextualize?

iii. Does the course content uncover contextual issues that require reflective analysis?
Principle 3

Create a dialogue between the biblical context and the target context
i. Every individual is situated within a certain cultural context and lives in general conformity to that context.

ii. Most people in Africa today have a cultural background that is diverse, with key elements ranging from the traditional to the modern.

iii. A study of our target culture, as well as the subcultures within the larger culture, is invaluable for helping one begin to recognize points of dialogue.
Implications?

Dialogue through
i. Mother tongue translations
ii. Stories from the students’ contexts
iii. Theological systems etc.
Principle 4

Determine what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable
i. Some value systems of Africans have a positive correlation in the Bible.

ii. Caution!!

Contextualization carries a very real danger of sliding into syncretism. Syncretism occurs when religious and cultural forms are combined with the biblical message without any regard for whether or not they align with biblical truth.
Africans need to formulate theological concepts in the language of Africa. But theology itself in its essence must be left alone. The Bible must remain the basic source of Christian theology. Evangelical Christians know of only one theology – Biblical Theology – though it may be expressed in the context of each cultural milieu.

(Kato, 1985:12)
What next?

- Training of faculty
- Sharing of resources
- Research, writing, and publishing
The ball is now in our court as theological educators to ensure that the Church of the future is well grounded and that the faith and practice of its members conform to biblical truth.