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Contextualisation as Theological Imperative: A Framework for Faithful Gospel Communication across Cultures

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Abstract

This study examined the lack of an integrated framework that enables local churches to combine cultural understanding, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and practical ecclesial formation when addressing specific cultural and religious practices. Contextualisation remains a key theological and missiological issue whenever Christianity enters new cultures, societies, and religions. While notable scholars have made many attempts at contextual theology, critical contextualisation, worldview transformation, theological translation, and theological boundaries, no one has presented a holistic approach to cultural interpretation, biblical discernment, worldview transformation, and church formation. This study used a qualitative integrative literature review of foundational and secondary theological and missiological scholarship, with a particular focus on the works of Bevans, Hiebert, Kraft, Sanneh, and Van Rhee. The study comparatively analysed areas of convergence and divergence concerning culture, gospel communication, translation, syncretism, conversion, and Christian practice. The study concluded that faithful gospel communication across cultures requires an integrated framework that brings together cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment. As a result, the study recommends that faithful gospel communication requires neither cultural rejection nor cultural surrender, but a dialogical, critical, and communal process in which local churches discern what to affirm, transform, or reject. The study matters because it gives missionaries, pastors, theological educators, and local Christian communities a framework for pursuing cultural intelligibility without diminishing gospel fidelity.

Key words: Contextual theology, contextualisation, critical contextualisation, gospel communication, worldview.



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INTRODUCTION

This study examined the lack of an integrated framework that enables local churches to combine cultural understanding, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and practical ecclesial formation when addressing specific cultural and religious practices. Bevans's models of contextual theology illuminate different ways Scripture, tradition, culture, experience, and social location may interact; however, they do not provide a sequential, practical process for local churches to evaluate specific cultural or religious practices (Bevans, 2002). Hiebert's critical contextualisation provides an important process of cultural exegesis, biblical exegesis, critical response, and the creation of new practices. Still, it does not fully develop the deeper worldview transformation and long-term ecclesial formation required when cultural practices are sustained by fear, spiritual insecurity, kinship obligations, or alternative sources of protection convictions (Hiebert, 2008).

Kraft's worldview approach addresses the underlying assumptions that shape behaviour and conversion. Still, it gives less detailed attention to communal biblical discernment and the ecclesial practices needed to embody transformed Christian commitments to the gospel (Kraft, 2005). Sanneh's translation principle strongly affirms the gospel's translatability and the legitimacy of local language and cultural expression. Still, it does not, by itself, provide criteria for evaluating religious practices that may conflict with Christian confession in the receiving culture (Sanneh, 2009). Van Rheenen provides necessary theological boundaries against syncretism, yet his approach requires further integration with cultural listening, worldview analysis, and constructive pastoral alternatives (Rheenen, 1991).

This tension has often been expressed through the opposing dangers of ethnocentrism and syncretism (Hiebert, 1985). Ethnocentrism appears when one culture treats its inherited Christian forms as universal and normative for all believers (Kraft, 2005). Syncretism appears when elements of a cultural or religious system are combined with Christian confession in ways that reshape or diminish the distinctive claims of the gospel (Hiebert, 1987). Neither response is sufficient. The first may create culturally foreign Christianity; the second may create culturally familiar but theologically confused Christianity (Hiebert, 2008).

Contextualisation refers to the ongoing process through which Christian faith is understood, communicated, and embodied within a particular cultural, historical, social, and religious setting (Moreau, 2012). It does not merely mean translating a sermon from one language into another, changing musical styles, or adapting church architecture. It involves interpreting the gospel in relation to people's worldviews, communal identities, social structures, fears, values, languages, symbols, practices, and lived experiences (Schreiter, 1985). Contextualisation therefore concerns both the message communicated and the people, communities, and practices through which the message is received and enacted (Moreau, 2006).

Bevans describes contextual theology as a theological imperative because theology is always produced by historically and culturally situated persons. Christian theology cannot be performed outside culture, experience, social location, or tradition. The issue, therefore, is not whether theology is contextual, but whether a community recognises its contextuality, examines it critically, and allows the gospel to address both inherited cultural assumptions and imported Christian forms. Bevans's six models—Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental, and Countercultural—show that contextual theology can be approached from several complementary directions (Bevans, 2002).

This study argues that contextualisation is a theological imperative for faithful gospel communication across cultures. It first examines the biblical and theological foundations of contextualisation. Critically reviews major missiological approaches, including Bevans's models of contextual theology, Hiebert's critical contextualisation, Kraft's worldview-transformation perspective, Sanneh's translation principle, and Van Rheenen's theological safeguards against syncretism. While these approaches offer essential but largely distinct contributions, none fully integrates cultural interpretation, communal biblical discernment, worldview transformation, and the formation of sustainable ecclesial alternatives into a single framework for addressing concrete cultural practices. The article's specific contribution is therefore a four-dimensional integrative framework comprising cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment. Rather than replacing existing models, this framework synthesises their complementary strengths into a practical

process through which local churches can understand the meanings of cultural practices, evaluate them in light of Scripture, address the beliefs and loyalties that sustain them, and develop culturally meaningful Christian alternatives. The article concludes by outlining the implications of this framework for missionaries, theological educators, pastors, and local churches seeking to pursue cultural intelligibility without diminishing gospel fidelity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contextualisation scholarship broadly agrees that Christian faith must be communicated and embodied within the concrete cultural, linguistic, historical, and religious realities of particular communities. However, scholars differ significantly in how they define the relationship between gospel and culture, what they identify as the primary danger in cross-cultural mission, and how they believe churches should discern, transform, or retain cultural practices. The following review therefore does not merely summarise individual theories; it compares their points of convergence, divergence, and limitations to identify the unresolved issue this article addresses.

Shared Concerns in Contextualisation Scholarship

Bevans, Hiebert, Kraft, Sanneh, and Van Rheeën converge in rejecting the assumption that Christianity can be communicated in a culturally neutral form. Each recognises that the gospel is always expressed through human language, thought patterns, symbols, relationships, institutions, and practices. They also agree that missionaries and established churches may mistake their own inherited cultural forms for universal Christian norms. Therefore, all five scholars oppose ethnocentrism and emphasise the need to consider local languages, cultures, social structures, and real-life situations in Christian mission.

Moreover, the scholars agree that contextualisation is much more than mere accommodation. Contextualisation cannot be limited to sermon translations, use of indigenous music, dress changes, or church building alterations. Rather, contextualisation involves deeper questions of worldview, identity, authority, community, conversion, spiritual power, ethics, worship, and everyday Christian practice. They share the concern that the gospel should become understandable and meaningful within local communities without being reduced to or controlled by the receiving culture.

At the same time, the scholars agree that culture must be evaluated rather than either wholly rejected or wholly accepted. Hiebert (2008), Kraft (2005), and Van Rheeën (1991) emphasise that cultural practices may carry religious assumptions and spiritual loyalties not immediately visible in outward behaviour. Bevans (2002) similarly recognises, especially through the Countercultural Model, that the gospel both affirms and critiques culture. Sanneh's (2009) translation principle also assumes that the gospel can enter local languages and cultures without becoming captive to them. Across these approaches, the common concern is to sustain a culturally intelligible Christian witness while remaining accountable to Scripture's authority and the central claims of the Christian faith.

Differences among the Major Approaches

Despite this agreement, the scholars place their emphasis at different points in the contextualisation process. Bevans offers the broadest theological account. His six models—Translation, Anthropological, Praxis, Synthetic, Transcendental, and Countercultural—show different ways in which Scripture, tradition, culture, experience, and social location may contribute to theology. Bevans shows that contextual theology is unavoidable and that no inherited theological expression is culturally neutral. However, his models function primarily as theological orientations rather than as a detailed process through which a local church can evaluate a specific ritual, spiritual practice, or social obligation (Bevans, 2002).

Hiebert offers a more practical, procedural approach through critical contextualisation. His framework calls communities to undertake cultural exegesis, biblical exegesis, critical response, and develop new contextual practices. In contrast to Bevans's broad models, Hiebert gives local churches an identifiable process for examining particular practices. He is especially concerned with preventing two extremes: rejecting cultural practices without understanding their meaning and uncritically adopting practices without biblical evaluation. However, although Hiebert recognises the importance of worldview, his model gives less sustained attention to the long-term transformation of deep assumptions, fears, loyalties, and existential concerns that may continue to sustain religious practices after formal conversion (Hiebert, 1987; 2008).

Kraft advances the discussion by concentrating on worldview transformation. He argues that behaviour and

verbal profession cannot be adequately understood apart from the deeper cultural assumptions through which people interpret illness, death, misfortune, blessing, protection, ancestors, spiritual powers, family duty, and identity. Kraft therefore corrects approaches that treat conversion mainly as intellectual assent to doctrine or behavioural conformity to church expectations. His perspective is particularly valuable in explaining why Christians may continue to depend on non-Christian spiritual resources even after accepting Christian teaching. Nevertheless, Kraft offers fewer concrete procedures for communal biblical discernment and gives less attention to how churches may develop visible, sustainable, and locally meaningful Christian practices that embody transformed worldviews (Kraft, 2005).

Sanneh's translation principle highlights another critical dimension: Christianity is translatable. Unlike religious traditions tied closely to one sacred language or cultural system, Christianity has historically entered local languages and cultures through vernacular Scripture, indigenous leadership, and locally meaningful expression. Sanneh's approach challenges missionary practices that make Western language, culture, or social forms appear necessary for Christian identity. His work therefore strongly supports cultural intelligibility, local ownership, and the legitimacy of indigenous Christian theology. However, the translation principle does not fully specify how churches should discern whether a particular cultural practice carries religious meanings that conflict with Christian confession, nor does it provide a detailed process for developing alternatives when a practice must be transformed or rejected (Sanneh, 2009).

What Van Rheeën provides, however, is the important focus on theological boundaries. The author states that contextualisation results in syncretism when culture influences and alters the core of the Christian confession. Van Rheeën's view is especially significant when culture involves spiritual mediation, divination, reverence for ancestors, protective rites, and similar practices. Such elements can interfere with Christ's lordship. Unlike other theories that emphasise cultural acceptance and accommodation, Van Rheeën's approach to contextualisation requires preserving Scripture's authority and Christianity's distinctiveness. However, an excessive focus on boundaries, in isolation from other factors, does not necessarily resolve all cultural, relational, and socio-psychological reasons why certain practices cannot be renounced (Rheeën, 1991).

Comparative Synthesis

The principal difference among these approaches concerns what each treats as the central task of contextualisation. Bevans emphasises the theological and cultural situatedness of all theology; Hiebert emphasises communal discernment of specific practices; Kraft emphasises transforming underlying worldviews; Sanneh emphasises translation and indigenous appropriation; and Van Rheeën emphasises theological boundaries and protection against syncretism. These approaches are not necessarily contradictory. Rather, they are complementary, because each illuminates a dimension that the others do not fully develop.

Table 1. Major Missiological Contributions and Limitations of Selected Contextualisation Scholars

Scholar	Primary Contribution	Main Limitation for this Study
Bevans	Explains why theology is always culturally situated and offers multiple models of contextual theology	Does not provide one integrated procedure for evaluating specific cultural practices
Hiebert	Provides a practical process of cultural exegesis, biblical exegesis, critical response, and new practices	Gives limited attention to sustained worldview transformation and ecclesial formation
Kraft	Explains the role of worldview, deep assumptions, and existential concerns in conversion and behavior	Gives less detail on communal biblical discernment and practical ecclesial alternatives
Sanneh	Defends translatability, local language, indigenous agency, and cultural intelligibility	Provides limited criteria for assessing culturally meaningful but theologically problematic practices
Van Rheeën	Establishes boundaries against syncretism and protects Christian doctrinal identity	Requires fuller integration with cultural listening, worldview analysis, and pastoral alternatives

The comparison demonstrates that contextualisation scholarship has developed strong but often partial resources. A culturally oriented approach can correct ethnocentrism but may not provide sufficient theological criteria for evaluating practices with incompatible religious meanings. A boundary-oriented approach can protect Christian doctrine but may fail to understand the social, emotional, familial, and existential functions of those practices. A worldview approach can expose the deeper assumptions that sustain behaviour but may not show how local churches should collectively discern and embody transformed Christian alternatives. Similarly, a model that affirms vernacular translation and indigenous theology may not explain how to address the continuation of divided spiritual allegiance within local Christian communities.

Unresolved Issue and Contribution

The unresolved issue is therefore not whether contextualisation is necessary, nor whether churches should be faithful to Scripture. The central unresolved issue is how local churches can integrate cultural understanding, biblical discernment, worldview transformation, and practical ecclesial formation when confronting specific cultural and religious practices. Existing models address these concerns separately or with varying emphasis. Still, they do not consistently combine them into a single framework that can guide churches through the full process of contextual discernment.

This study addresses that gap by synthesising the complementary insights of Bevans, Hiebert, Kraft, Sanneh, and Van Rheeën into a four-dimensional framework: cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment. The framework does not replace the existing models. Instead, it integrates their major strengths into a coherent process that enables churches to identify the meanings and functions of cultural practices, evaluate them in light of Scripture and Christian confession, address the beliefs and loyalties that sustain them, and form culturally meaningful Christian alternatives. In this way, the article offers a practical, integrative resource for mission that avoids both ethnocentric cultural imposition and uncritical cultural accommodation.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative, integrative literature-review design to develop a conceptual synthesis of major theological and missiological approaches to contextualisation (Poth, 2018). An integrative literature review is appropriate because the study does not seek to generate primary empirical data or measure variables; rather, it brings together foundational theoretical writings and relevant secondary scholarship to compare concepts, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and construct a coherent analytical framework. It critically synthesises key theological and missiological works on contextualisation, culture, worldview, gospel communication, translation, syncretism, and cross-cultural mission (McEvoy, 2022). Accordingly, the study

does not report field research, surveys, interviews, observations, experiments, or statistical analysis.

The review followed four stages. First, the review purposively identified and selected relevant literature from theological, missiological, anthropological, and intercultural-studies sources addressing contextualisation, culture, worldview, gospel communication, translation, syncretism, conversion, and Christian practice. The selection prioritised foundational texts with sustained influence in contextualisation scholarship, particularly the works of Stephen B. Bevans, Paul G. Hiebert, Charles H. Kraft, Lamin Sanneh, and Gailyn Van Rheenen. Secondary sources were included where they clarified, assessed, applied, or critically engaged these major approaches.

Second, the selected texts were read as units of analysis, with attention given to each author's understanding of the relationship between gospel and culture, the role of Scripture and Christian tradition, the treatment of worldview and conversion, the danger of syncretism, and the practical implications for local churches and mission practice. Third, the literature was comparatively analysed to identify convergences, divergences, limitations, and unresolved issues across the selected approaches. Finally, recurring analytical themes were synthesised into four interrelated dimensions of faithful contextualisation: cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment.

The resulting framework should therefore be understood as a conceptual and analytical synthesis derived from the reviewed literature rather than as an empirically tested model. It aims to provide a systematic guide to theological reflection and missiological practice that can then be evaluated, improved, and tested empirically in specific contexts. However, it critically synthesises key theological and missiological works on contextualisation, culture, worldview, gospel communication, translation, syncretism, and cross-cultural mission (McEvoy, 2022).

The research used qualitative thematic analysis and integrative synthesis of the literature on gospel, culture, contextualisation, worldview, syncretism, and Christian practice. The relevant texts were deductively coded in comparison to highlight convergences, divergences, limitations, and complementarities.

This process of analysis yielded four interrelated dimensions as follows:

- i. Cultural Exegesis – uncovering the meaning and social significance of cultural practices.
- ii. Biblical/Theological Discernment – evaluating cultural practices in terms of Scripture and Christian doctrine.
- iii. Worldview Transformation – addressing the underlying beliefs and spiritual allegiances in cultural practices.
- iv. Ecclesial Embodiment – creating new forms of Christian practice and pastoral responses in the local church.

Overall, the analysis sought to balance cultural intelligibility with doctrinal faithfulness. This research concludes that neither cultural accommodation without theological discernment nor doctrinal articulation without cultural understanding is enough for a faithful contextualisation. Because the study is conceptual and literature-based, its four dimensions should be considered an interpretive framework rather than generalisable empirical findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Because this study is a qualitative integrative literature review rather than an empirical investigation, the results should be understood as analytical themes derived from synthesising the reviewed literature, not as statistically generalisable findings. The four dimensions below emerged from a comparative analysis of foundational theoretical texts and relevant secondary scholarship. The analysis examined how the selected authors addressed four recurring concerns: interpreting cultural practices, the role of Scripture and Christian doctrine in evaluation, transforming underlying worldviews, and forming concrete Christian practices within local churches.

This synthesis utilised a comparative process. Bevans's contextual-theology models have been useful in underscoring the importance of situating theology within cultural context and engaging in dialogical interaction among gospel, culture, tradition, and experience. Hiebert's critical contextualisation contributed the categories of cultural exegesis, biblical exegesis, communal discernment, and the formation of new contextual practices. Kraft's worldview approach emphasised that deeper assumptions about spiritual power, misfortune, identity, protection, and social

obligation sustain visible religious behaviour. Sanneh's translation principle reinforced the legitimacy of local language, indigenous agency, and culturally intelligible Christian expression. Van Rheenen's work supplied a necessary concern for theological boundaries and the prevention of syncretism. When these contributions were compared, four recurring and interdependent themes became evident: cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment.

Cultural Exegesis

The first theme, cultural exegesis, emerged most directly from Hiebert's call to study local practices before judging them. Still, it is also supported by Bevans's emphasis on culture and experience as sources for theological reflection, Kraft's concern for worldview, and Sanneh's commitment to local language and cultural intelligibility. Across these approaches, the literature indicates that visible practices cannot be evaluated adequately without understanding their locally specific meanings.

Cultural exegesis, therefore, involves examining what participants believe they are doing, what social duties or expectations influence participation, what fears or hopes are involved, and what outcomes participants expect. This theme responds to the danger of ethnocentrism, in which missionaries or churches condemn a practice simply because it appears unfamiliar or inconsistent with their own inherited forms of Christianity. It also recognises that apparently similar rituals may function differently across communities and must therefore be interpreted within their particular historical, social, and religious settings.

Biblical-Theological Discernment

The second theme, biblical-theological discernment, emerged from the convergence of Hiebert's biblical exegesis, Bevans's Translation and Countercultural Models, and Van Rheenen's emphasis on theological boundaries. Although these thinkers differ in emphasis, neither considers cultural relevance the criterion for judging a practice's compatibility with the Christian faith. Contextualisation must be accountable to the Word of God, the church's confession, and the gospel itself.

This important issue involves evaluating the relationship between a cultural practice and Christian doctrine regarding God, Jesus Christ, salvation, worship,

spirituality, man, death, ethics, and Christian hope. It guards against cultural accommodation and contextualisation and helps maintain the integrity of Scripture, the lordship of Christ, and the church. Consequently, the review shows that discerning the Bible and theology is necessary to critique cultural affirmation at the expense of doctrinal continuity.

Worldview Transformation

The third theme, worldview transformation, emerged primarily from Kraft's analysis of culture as a system of deep assumptions, values, and categories through which people interpret reality. Hiebert's later work on worldview reinforces it, and Van Rheenen's concern that believers may retain spiritual loyalties that conflict with Christian confession adds another layer. While Bevans and Sanneh emphasise the importance of cultural location and indigenous expression, Kraft and Hiebert show that contextualisation must also address the deeper worldviews that shape how people respond to illness, death, misfortune, blessing, protection, identity, family obligation, and spiritual power.

The synthesis indicates that conversion cannot be reduced to accepting Christian doctrine, participating in church, or abandoning selected visible practices. Individuals may affirm Christian beliefs while continuing to interpret life through inherited assumptions that direct fear, trust, loyalty, or dependence toward alternative spiritual sources. Worldview transformation, therefore, requires sustained discipleship, biblical teaching, pastoral care, prayer, and participation in a Christian community. This theme extends Hiebert's process of critical contextualisation by emphasising the long-term transformation of the assumptions and existential concerns that may continue to sustain religious practices after formal conversion.

Ecclesial Embodiment

The fourth theme, ecclesial embodiment, emerged from Hiebert's final step of developing new contextual practices, Bevans's concern for contextual theology as lived communal faith, Sanneh's affirmation of indigenous Christian expression, and Kraft's emphasis on forms of discipleship that address real human needs. Van Rheenen's concern for theological boundaries also contributes by showing why churches must not merely condemn problematic practices but must provide faithful alternatives that direct worship and allegiance toward God.

This theme recognises that prohibition alone is insufficient when cultural practices provide social belonging, mourning, healing, family solidarity, identity, protection, or a response to fear and uncertainty. Churches must therefore embody the gospel by developing locally meaningful forms of worship, prayer, lament, pastoral care, reconciliation, discipleship, healing ministry, memorial practices, and community support. Such alternatives should preserve legitimate social and cultural needs while transforming or rejecting religious meanings incompatible with Christian confession.

Synthesis of the Findings

The four themes are analytically distinct but practically inseparable. Cultural exegesis asks what a practice means in a particular community; biblical-theological discernment asks whether its meanings and claims are compatible with Scripture and Christian confession; worldview transformation addresses the assumptions,

fears, and loyalties that sustain the practice; and ecclesial embodiment asks how the church can provide faithful, culturally meaningful alternatives. Together, these dimensions constitute the article's proposed framework for faithful contextualisation.

This synthesis does not claim that none of the reviewed scholars addresses these concerns. Rather, it integrates concerns often emphasised separately in the literature. Bevans provides broad theological orientations; Hiebert offers a process of critical contextualisation; Kraft emphasises worldview; Sanneh foregrounds translation and indigenous agency; and Van Rheeën protects theological boundaries. The integrative review brings these contributions into a single analytical framework that may guide local churches and mission leaders as they discern which cultural forms to affirm, transform, or reject in particular contexts.

Table 2. An Integrative Framework for Faithful Contextualisation

Analytical Dimension	Central Question	What it Involves	Main Scholarly Contributions	Main Purpose in Contextualisation
Cultural Exegesis	What does this cultural practice mean to participants?	Examining local meanings, social duties, fears, hopes, expected outcomes, identity, and historical context surrounding a practice	Hiebert's cultural exegesis; Bevans's attention to culture and experience; Kraft's worldview analysis; Sanneh's concern for local language and cultural intelligibility	Prevents ethnocentric judgment by ensuring that churches understand a practice before affirming, transforming, or rejecting it
Biblical-Theological Discernment	Is the practice and its underlying meaning compatible with Scripture and Christian confession?	Evaluating cultural beliefs and practices in relation to biblical teaching about God, Christ, salvation, worship, spiritual power, death, ethics, and Christian hope	Hiebert's biblical exegesis; Bevans's Translation and Countercultural Models; Van Rheenen's theological boundaries	Protects doctrinal continuity and prevents syncretism by ensuring that cultural relevance does not override biblical authority and the lordship of Christ
Worldview Transformation	What assumptions, fears, loyalties, and spiritual beliefs sustain the practice?	Addressing deep cultural assumptions about illness, death, misfortune, blessing, protection, ancestors, identity, family obligation, and spiritual power	Kraft's worldview approach; Hiebert's later worldview work; Van Rheenen's concern for divided spiritual allegiance	Moves beyond outward behavioral change by fostering long-term discipleship and transformed trust, loyalty, and Christian identity
Ecclesial Embodiment	What faithful and culturally meaningful Christian alternatives can the church provide?	Developing contextual forms of worship, prayer, lament, pastoral care, reconciliation, healing ministry, memorial practices, discipleship, and community support	Hiebert's creation of new contextual practices; Bevans's contextual theology as lived communal faith; Sanneh's indigenous expression; Kraft's concern for real human needs	Ensures that churches do not merely forbid practices but provide Christian alternatives that meet genuine social, emotional, and spiritual needs

Table 3. How the Dimensions Work Together

Step	Function in the Framework	Practical Outcome
1. Cultural exegesis	Interprets the local meaning and function of a practice	The church understands what people believe, fear, expect, or seek through the practice
2. Biblical-theological discernment	Evaluates the practice and its meanings through Scripture and Christian confession	The church identifies what may be affirmed, transformed, or rejected
3. Worldview transformation	Addresses the beliefs, fears, and loyalties beneath visible behavior	Believers develop trust in Christ that reshapes their interpretation of life and spiritual reality
4. Ecclesial embodiment	Development of meaningful Christian practices in a local setting and pastoral alternatives	The church manifests the gospel through worship, pastoral care, discipling, and community life.

Table 4. Contribution of the Synthesis

Scholar	Major Contribution	Dimension Emphasised Most Strongly
Bevans	Theology is always culturally based and involves interaction with scripture, tradition, culture, experience, and context	Cultural exegesis and ecclesial embodiment
Hiebert	The process of critical contextualisation through cultural, biblical exegesis, communal discernment, and new Christian practices	Cultural exegesis, biblical discernment, and ecclesial embodiment
Kraft	For conversion to take place there must be worldview transformation underlying visible behavioral transformation	Worldview transformation
Sanneh	The gospel is translatable into local languages and indigenous Christian action can express it	Cultural exegesis and ecclesial embodiment
Van Rheeën	The need for theological boundaries in order to avoid syncretism and divided loyalty	Biblical-theological discernment and worldview transformation

Taken together, the four themes directly answer the central purpose of this study: to develop an integrated framework for faithful gospel communication across cultures. The integrative synthesis shows that faithful contextualisation requires more than cultural adaptation, doctrinal instruction, worldview analysis, or warnings against syncretism pursued separately. Cultural exegesis enables churches to understand the locally specific meanings, functions, fears, social obligations, and expectations connected to a practice. Biblical-theological discernment evaluates those meanings and practices in light of Scripture and Christian confession. Worldview transformation addresses the deeper assumptions, loyalties, and existential concerns that continue to shape belief and behaviour. Ecclesial embodiment translates discernment into locally meaningful Christian practices,

pastoral care, discipleship, worship, and communal alternatives.

Discussion

The integrative synthesis shows that contextualisation should not be treated as a minor missionary technique to make Christianity more appealing to local audiences. Rather, it is a continuing theological, hermeneutical, and ecclesial task through which Christian communities discern how the gospel can be faithfully communicated, understood, and embodied within particular cultural worlds. The reviewed literature consistently rejects the notion of a culture-free Christianity. Bevans's contextual theology makes clear that all theology is articulated through historically situated communities; Sanneh's translation principle shows that Christian faith has historically taken root through vernacular languages and

local expression; and Hiebert, Kraft, and Van Rheeën demonstrate that culture affects not only external forms but also the ways people interpret spiritual power, suffering, morality, kinship, death, identity, and hope. The implication is that contextualisation is unavoidable. The more important question is whether churches contextualise consciously and critically or unconsciously by treating inherited missionary forms as normative Christianity.

Beyond the False Choice

The synthesis challenges the persistent tendency to frame contextualisation as a choice between preserving doctrinal purity and pursuing cultural relevance. This opposition is misleading because both extremes fail to account adequately for the nature of Christian mission. A church that reproduces imported language, worship forms, leadership assumptions, and social expectations without examining their cultural origins may preserve a recognisable institutional identity. Yet, it can communicate a culturally foreign Christianity. Conversely, a church that accepts local practices solely because they are meaningful, emotionally powerful, or socially necessary may achieve cultural familiarity while allowing non-Christian assumptions to reshape its confession and practice.

The literature indicates that the problem is not culture itself but the uncritical treatment of culture—whether local, missionary, Western, African, Asian, Latin American, or otherwise. Bevans's work is especially important here because it exposes the cultural situatedness of inherited theology. His argument prevents established churches from assuming that their own theological vocabulary or ecclesial forms are neutral standards by which all other expressions must be measured. At the same time, Van Rheeën's emphasis on theological boundaries prevents contextual theology from becoming cultural relativism. Taken together, these approaches reveal that contextuality involves two aspects: engagement with culture and commitment to the Word and to Christian confession.

The framework developed in this article contributes to this debate by refusing to begin with either automatic acceptance or automatic rejection. It begins with interpretation. Before a church decides whether to retain, adapt, transform, or reject a cultural practice, it must understand what that practice means in its own setting. This approach matters because the same outward action

can mean different things in different communities. A practice associated with food, dress, music, mourning, healing, family loyalty, ritual exchange, or community celebration may function as cultural memory in one setting but as a claim to spiritual mediation or protection in another. Therefore, theological evaluation must attend not merely to a practice's visible form but to the worldview, intention, social pressure, and expected spiritual outcome connected to it.

A Contribution beyond Existing Models

The study does not aim to replace Bevans, Hiebert, Kraft, Sanneh, or Van Rheeën. Each framework offers an indispensable insight into faithful contextualisation. Bevans provides a broad theological account of why theology must engage culture, tradition, experience, and social location. Hiebert provides a process for studying culture, examining Scripture, engaging in communal discernment, and creating new contextual practices. While Kraft shows that actions rest on worldview assumptions, and conversion must address people's fears, loyalties, and categories for making sense of life, Sanneh highlights the translatability of Christianity and the legitimacy of local languages, local leaders, and local theology. Van Rheeën offers an important caution: while cultural accommodation is good, it may turn into syncretism, especially if it modifies the basic confession of the Christian faith.

However, the synthesis shows that these approaches often operate at different levels of analysis. Bevans primarily offers theological models; Hiebert offers a discernment procedure; Kraft focuses on worldview; Sanneh stresses translation and local ownership; and Van Rheeën foregrounds theological boundaries. Used independently, each approach may leave an important question insufficiently addressed. Cultural affirmation can lack clear criteria for theological evaluation. Evaluation of the Bible becomes abstract and externally imposed without first understanding cultural meanings. Worldview analysis can remain incomplete if it does not result in visible church practices that meet the real needs previously served by older patterns. Boundary-setting can produce prohibition without pastoral alternatives. Translation can produce understandable language without necessarily transforming the worldview that shapes religious allegiance.

A way to address this fragmentation is to integrate four interdependent elements: cultural exegesis, biblical-

theological interpretation, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment. Its distinctive contribution lies in connecting these dimensions as a coherent movement of contextual discernment. It begins with cultural exegesis because accurate pastoral and theological response requires knowledge of a practice's locally specific meaning. It proceeds to biblical-theological discernment because cultural meaning alone cannot determine Christian legitimacy. It then attends to worldview transformation because practices are often sustained by deep assumptions, fears, and loyalties that instruction or prohibition alone cannot change. Finally, it requires ecclesial embodiment because transformed beliefs need socially visible and pastorally credible Christian forms of worship, care, discipleship, lament, reconciliation, healing, remembrance, and mutual support.

This sequence should not be understood as rigidly linear. In real church life, churches may engage these dimensions simultaneously and repeatedly. A community may develop a Christian practice while continuing to learn its cultural meaning; biblical study may expose worldview assumptions that require further pastoral dialogue; and new ecclesial practices may reveal previously overlooked social needs. The framework is therefore best understood as a cyclical process of discernment, action, reflection, and revision rather than a one-time method for solving cultural problems.

From Individual Conversion to Church Formation

An important implication of the synthesis is that contextualisation cannot focus only on individual conversion or personal morality. Many cultural and religious practices are communal. They express belonging, family loyalty, grief, social status, intergenerational responsibility, mutual support, and shared memory. Individuals may continue participating in practices not simply because they reject Christian faith but because refusal can threaten relationships, expose them to social exclusion, or leave them without an accepted way to respond to crisis, death, illness, or insecurity. A contextual approach that concentrates only on doctrinal instruction may therefore underestimate the social and emotional cost of change.

Kraft's worldview emphasis helps because it shows that conversion involves changing the interpretive frameworks through which people understand everyday life. Yet the synthesis extends this insight by arguing that worldview transformation must be supported by ecclesial

embodiment. Churches cannot expect believers to abandon practices that provide protection, mourning, healing, solidarity, and belonging unless Christian communities offer faithful ways to meet those needs. In practical terms, this may include services of lament, family support during bereavement, prayer and pastoral care for illness, community-based reconciliation, teaching on Christian hope, culturally meaningful worship, and local forms of testimony and mutual aid.

This emphasis strengthens Hiebert's final step of developing new contextual practices. Creating alternatives is not an optional addition after theological evaluation; it is central to faithful contextualisation. If a church declares a practice unacceptable but does not accompany believers with meaningful Christian alternatives, it risks isolation, hidden participation, divided allegiance, and superficial conformity. Ecclesial embodiment therefore turns contextualisation from a theoretical debate into lived discipleship.

Local Agency and Communal Discernment

The framework also has important implications for where theological authority sits in mission. The synthesis supports Hiebert's insistence that local Christians should not be treated as passive recipients of missionary judgment. They are participants in cultural interpretation, biblical study, theological reflection, and the development of Christian practice. This does not mean that biblical authority is replaced by local preference. Rather, it means theological discernment becomes more accurate and sustainable when those who know a community's language, history, family structures, social obligations, and symbolic meanings participate actively in the process.

Sanneh's translation principle reinforces this point. Christianity becomes genuinely local not merely when it is spoken in a local language but when local believers exercise theological agency in interpreting Scripture and expressing faith within their own cultural setting. Such participation also corrects the tendency of missionaries, pastors, and denominational institutions to confuse their own cultural assumptions with universal Christian standards. The framework therefore requires humility from external mission workers and established churches. They must listen before they judge, distinguish biblical conviction from cultural habit, and recognise that local churches may illuminate dimensions of Christian faith that have been neglected elsewhere.

At the same time, local agency must operate within a communal and scriptural process of discernment. The emphasis on participation should not be interpreted as a justification for cultural preference alone. The framework preserves the countercultural function of the gospel by requiring that every practice, including inherited missionary practices, be examined in the light of Scripture and Christian confession. In this sense, contextualisation is not simply the church's adaptation to culture; it is also the transformation of culture, including church culture, through the gospel.

The Framework's Scope and Limits

The framework is intended as an analytical and pastoral resource rather than a universal formula. It does not presume that every cultural practice has the same meaning, nor does it prescribe identical Christian responses across communities. Its usefulness depends on locally grounded investigation, careful biblical interpretation, and participatory discernment. A practice affirmed in one setting may require transformation or rejection in another because its meanings, worldview assumptions, and social functions differ. This is why cultural exegesis is foundational to the framework.

The framework also does not resolve every theological disagreement about contextualisation. Christians may continue to differ about the interpretation of particular biblical texts, the limits of cultural adaptation, the relationship between doctrine and practice, or the criteria for determining when a practice carries incompatible religious meaning. Nevertheless, the framework makes such disagreement more constructive by clarifying the questions that churches must ask: What does this practice mean locally? What theological claims does it make? What worldview assumptions sustain it? What Christian alternatives can meet the needs it addresses? These questions enable churches to move beyond reaction, fear, and cultural preference toward accountable communal discernment.

Because this article is based on an integrative literature review, the framework remains conceptual. It should not be treated as an empirically validated model or assumed to be equally effective in every setting. Future research could test and refine it through case studies, ethnographic research, interviews with church leaders and members, congregational action-research projects, and comparative studies across culturally distinct Christian communities. Such research would help identify how the four

dimensions operate in particular contexts and what additional factors—such as gender, age, class, denominational structures, migration, media, political conflict, or economic vulnerability—shape contextualisation in practice.

Implications for Scholarship and Mission

For contextualisation scholarship, the synthesis suggests that future studies should resist two reductions. The first reduces contextualisation to cultural adaptation, translation, or indigenisation alone. The second is reducing faithfulness to doctrinal boundary-setting alone. Both concerns are necessary, but neither is sufficient without attention to worldview and ecclesial practice. Research should therefore examine not only what missionaries or churches say about culture, but also how believers interpret their lived realities, what needs cultural practices fulfil, and what Christian communities actually provide as alternatives.

For mission practice, the framework calls missionaries, pastors, theological educators, and local leaders to cultivate four interrelated capacities:

- i. The ability to listen carefully to local narratives, practices, fears, relationships, and social obligations.
- ii. The ability to interpret Scripture responsibly and apply Christian doctrine to concrete cultural realities.
- iii. The ability to disciple believers in worldview, trust, identity, and spiritual allegiance.
- iv. The ability to form churches whose worship, care, community life, and pastoral ministries embody credible Christian alternatives.

Faithful contextualisation, therefore, is not achieved when Christianity merely appears local, nor when churches merely maintain inherited doctrinal language. It is achieved when Christian communities confess and embody the gospel in ways that are intelligible within their cultural settings, accountable to Scripture, responsive to human needs, and transformative of beliefs and practices that conflict with allegiance to Christ.

Together, these dimensions form the proposed framework because they move from understanding culture to theological evaluation, to transforming underlying worldviews, and finally to the practical

embodiment of Christian faith within local communities. The framework therefore provides a logical bridge between the literature reviewed, the findings of the integrative synthesis, and the subsequent discussion of how churches may communicate the gospel in ways that are culturally intelligible, pastorally responsive, and faithful to Christian conviction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: This integrative literature review concludes that faithful gospel communication across cultures requires more than cultural adaptation, doctrinal boundary-setting, worldview analysis, or independently pursued indigenous Christian expression. The synthesis of Bevans, Hiebert, Kraft, Sanneh, and Van Rheeën demonstrates that each approach makes an important but partial contribution to understanding the relationship between the gospel, culture, conversion, and church practice. Bevans highlights the cultural situatedness of theology, Hiebert emphasises communal discernment, Kraft focuses on worldview transformation, Sanneh affirms the translatability and local ownership of Christianity. At the same time, Van Rheeën provides safeguards against syncretism.

The study further affirms the local church as an active theological participant rather than a passive recipient of missionary decisions. However, because the proposed framework is derived from an integrative literature synthesis and has not been empirically tested, its applicability across specific cultural contexts remains to be established. Future empirical research involving interviews, case studies, ethnography, congregational action research, and comparative studies is therefore necessary to test, refine, and further develop the framework.

Recommendations: Based on the integrative synthesis, the study recommends a four-dimensional framework comprising cultural exegesis, biblical-theological

discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment. The framework provides a basis for local churches to interpret the meaning and significance of cultural practices, evaluate them in relation to Scripture and Christian confession, address the worldviews and loyalties underlying such practices, and develop culturally meaningful forms of worship, discipleship, pastoral care, and community life. In this way, contextualisation becomes neither the imposition of an external cultural form nor the uncritical accommodation of local culture, but an ongoing process of theological discernment and faithful Christian embodiment.

The study further recommends that missionaries, pastors, theological educators, and local churches should adopt contextualisation as an ongoing, integrative process that begins with careful cultural exegesis and communal listening before theological evaluation. Contextual decisions should be grounded in Scripture and Christian confession while addressing the worldviews and loyalties underlying cultural and religious practices through sustained discipleship, prayer, pastoral care, and biblical teaching. Churches should also develop culturally relevant Christian alternatives that respond to genuine social and spiritual needs without compromising Christian commitments. Theological institutions should incorporate cultural anthropology, worldview analysis, biblical interpretation, local-language ministry, counselling, and communal discernment into ministerial training. Finally, the proposed four-dimensional framework—cultural exegesis, biblical-theological discernment, worldview transformation, and ecclesial embodiment—should be applied as a continuous process and empirically validated through interviews, case studies, ethnography, congregational action research, and comparative studies across different cultural contexts.

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