**Water Buffalo Theology**

Water Buffalo Theology, written by Kosuke Koyama, is an expression of an Asian theology, rooted in the Thai Buddhist culture that has developed through Koyama’s missionary experience in Thailand. While the book itself discusses contextualization, the discussion is rooted in Koyama’s development and contextualization of Christian theology in the Thai Buddhist society. In the development of his theology, Koyama opposes syncretism, while also opposing a veneer Christianity, or what is exemplified in the book as “kitchen” theology. In other words, theology must be able to culturally express Christianity in terms that carry both the form and meaning of the Gospel message, while rooting itself within the culture, and thus allowing the Gospel to prophetically interpret, challenge, and change that culture and be fully understood by the believers. In the preface, Koyama defines contextualization as a two step process, “First, to articulate Jesus Christ in culturally appropriate, communicatively apt words; and second, to criticize, reform, dethrone, or oppose culture if it is found to be against what the name of Jesus Christ stands for.” (1999:xiii) The book itself is laid out in a manner resembling the process of contextualization, which fits Koyama’s definition and also resonates with that of Paul G. Hiebert as defined in Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues. The first section of Water Buffalo Theology is, “Interpreting History”, followed by “Rooting the Gospel”, “Interpreting Thai Buddhist Life,” and finally “Interpreting the Christian Life.”

In the first section Koyama specifically evaluates the history, theological situation and past missiological issues in Asia. The section starts with a brief overview of the theological situation, and important historical issues on a country-by-country basis. The author highlights some deeply rooted cultural beliefs and practices, which highlight some of the challenges in understanding Christianity. Koyama insightfully includes not only the importance of history, but also nature. He writes, “Theological thinking must hold both history and nature to be equally important.” (1999:20) Nature is cyclical (rainy season, dry season, rainy season, etc.) and encourages a cyclical view of human history as well. This stands in stark contrast to the “once-for-all” historical action of Christ. Koyama writes that, "God is not cyclical. God is linear. God is not many-times, but is once-for-all." (1999:20) Theological thinking must include consider nature, and the rain must be seen as “His” rain and understood in the linear history of God. Koyama continues by highlighting how the Western missionary presence in Asia has been both “gun and ointment” or had both a wounding and healing presence. (1999:32) Beginning to mold thinking towards the receiving culture, Koyama points out that the “fragrance” of the missionary presence, is dependant upon how it is received. "The missionary ointment itself, then, can be fragrant only insofar as the fragrance of Christ is in it and the same fragrance is appreciated by the ones who repent." (1999:42) The chapter finishes with an unanswered
question, whose answer will either justify or challenge this presence. "Is it possible… for the Christian mission to be 'the salt of the earth' (Matthew 5:13) unless it lives in the confusion of history of ‘guns and ointments?’" (1999:42) In this historical review of mission, Koyama also presents the “inefficient” God who challenges missionaries, and modern culture, in their valuation of “efficiency” as an important personal, cultural and structural attribute. This first section is a preface to what Koyama defines as the first section of contextualization, which is to express the Gospel in culturally appropriate means. In order to be able to make an evaluation on how to appropriate express and communicate the Gospel, one must first know and understand to whom it is being communicated. Therefore this should be considered a critical step in the contextualization process. One must risk being considered “inefficient” in presenting the Gospel, first understand to whom they minister, before beginning to minister to them. One might be anxious to begin their ministry of evangelism and start off with an evangelistic outreach to Hindus by serving hamburgers, and wonder why the Gospel was so offensive.

The second section is rooting the Gospel, which Koyama defines in the preface as the first component of contextualization. In the process of rooting the Gospel one makes use of the information gathered, and relationships formed while getting to know the culture and people with whom one lives. Koyama provides a great example of a failure to root the Gospel culturally in what he describes as “kitchen” theology. In this example, he shares how one might sit and drink tea with the missionaries in the living room, expressing proper theology, but their real life is in the dirt floor in the kitchen. Hiebert provides one such example of going to a Christian preacher for help, but then also turning to the local magician afterwards. In other words, they share what they are “supposed” to talk about with the missionary, but their real conversations happen afterwards. Koyama writes that, “Their theological activity goes on while they squat on the dirt ground, and not while sipping tea with missionary friends in the teak-floored shiny living room.” (1999:60). This results in the Thai people “seasoning” the Gospel with some of their own Buddhist understandings in order to make it more palatable to their beliefs. The challenge in rooting the Gospel is finding the cultural means in order that the Gospel is understood, without the Gospel simply appropriating other terms in a syncretic manner. Koyama writes that, “Our dilemma is this: if we say 'salvation through the blood of Jesus,' our Thai audience is completely lost. If we say 'salvation through the dharma,' they would see no difference between the Christian faith and Buddhism.” (1999:59) Koyama continues with the presentation of neighborology, which highlights the importance of how the Gospel is presented. This also reflects Samuel Escobar’s presentation of the other Great Commission in John 20:21, which is that it is not only important that the Gospel is presented (Matthew 28:19-20) but how the Gospel is presented (John 20:21.) Koyama presents the material through an example of visiting a sick woman, who ultimately responds, “you missionaries are always trying to teach people while you
really do not understand the people. The Buddhist monks are much better than you missionaries... He will understand me.” (1999:65) Such responses are the result of looking at others “in my own terms” (1999:65) and a failure of “exegesis of the life and culture of the people among whom he lives.” (1999:65) The section concludes with discussions on key theological issues in Asia, and the example of re-rooting the Gospel through the theology of pain.

The third section turns to the second part of contextualization, which is an evaluation of culture in light of the Gospel. In this section, Koyama reminds the reader that we do not interact with Buddhism, but with Buddhists, and encourages a very personal interaction. One might extend this to also say that we don’t work with Bolivia, but Bolivians. In other words, this is not a theoretical exercise that can take place within the study, but must take place within actual relationships and within dialogue with real people.

The fourth section describes the process of interpreting the Christian life. While one might be quick to be a “prophetic” voice to a culture, the Church is often slow, and reluctant, to search for its own cultural personality, in fear of syncretism, or possibly simply in the fear of losing control. One must be reminded that any worship, any theology, any expression of our beliefs, are only a partial representation of the truth. Koyama speaks of developing a “personality” of theology. Too often, theology is itself considered as the truth of the Gospel, while Koyama reminds us that “Theology can only stammer about the person and work of Jesus Christ.” (1999:134) For Koyama, theology must have a starting point in history, and in the reality of the world. He writes that, “third world theology begins by raising issues, and not by digesting Augustine, Barth, Rahener. I must say, though, that they do help in raising theological issues.” (1999:15) If theology must start by raising issues, which differ by each culture and within cultures, one must assume that the resulting theology will explain these issues within the framework of the core Christian beliefs. In other words, theology is a human understanding and expression of God, and God’s work in history, and therefore these understandings may safely differ in expressing the same core truths of God’s work in history. Extending this “personalization” of history, Koyama asks “Is Christ Divided?” in discussing differing denominational views. The existence of differing theologies across denominations, while retaining core Christian beliefs, is an example of how theologies have been personalized over the years. Koyama reminds the reader that we must understand that the theological differences expressed through denominations are minute in comparison to the core theological beliefs that are shared. "But it is of great importance for us to remember that these theological insights are humble theological insights. They are servants, not masters, to the 'inexpressible gift' of God in Christ (2nd Corinthians 9:15.)" (1999:142) In the end, the Church is the Church of Christ, who holds all things together, was crucified for us, and into whom we were baptized. Such an
understanding requires an appropriate humility, and a crucified mind. Koyama reminds us that the life of Paul, and the life of a missionary must not be theoretical, must not simplify human history, or human nature, and must be able to recognize God at work throughout the world. The communication of the Gospel, is not simply the communication of a news cast, or an information bulletin. “What is to be communicated, however, is something more than an idea. It is life, history, hope, and love… This communication is only possible through the medium of a living person, the communicator himself or herself. The God who says 'Your problem is my problem' cannot be made real through 'communication-logy,' but only through the life of the communicator… If the message is incarnated in the messenger and produces a messageful person, the message will be communicated.” (1999:155)

One must use great care in reading and understanding the message and principles of Koyama and Water Buffalo Theology. One core understanding is that Koyama does not advocate for a simplification of the Gospel, nor a watered down Gospel. Whether talking about presenting the Gospel in palatable terms, or “personalizing” theology, it would be a great misunderstanding to assume that Koyama is talking about creating a “palatable” Gospel. Explaining the Gospel in “palatable” terms is vastly different from adopting the Gospel to cultural beliefs. There is a vast difference between the recognition that theology is a human expression and creation, is also vastly different from assuming that a theology only must respond to culturally relevant questions.

One might argue that through contextualization Koyama distinguishes between the work of the missionary and the work of God, the Gospel. The heart of contextualization is allowing the Gospel to be communicated through a crucified mind, and Christ providing a prophetic voice. Through so doing he is able to focus on how a missionaries work, style of communications, and words must be chosen in a way that is culturally palatable and understandable. This must be balanced with the Gospel retaining its full message, and being able to challenge the beliefs and the culture. In other words, the Gospel must be understandable, but in its full reality. Syncretism must be avoided.

One example, of a failure of this balance, experienced in my own life is what I discovered on a visit to Huatulco, Mexico. Hautulco, I am told, means “people of the wood” in an ancient language in the region. Huatulco was originally evangelized by the Catholic Church, where the missionaries found a people who worshiped a wood pole. In their attempts to help the locals convert this worship towards the one Lord, they converted this wood pole into a wooden cross, in the same place, which proved to be a palatable form of worship to the people. Today, a Catholic church exists on the beach in that same place. Yet, in an example of “kitchen” theology, with a short hike one can find a place where those same people offer another type of prayer for their
wellbeing. About a 30 minute hike from that same location one can find a stone, where the
tradition continues to offer requests to the divine by placing miniature objects around the stone
and offering an animal sacrifice. During our visit there we were able to see clear examples of
recent animal sacrifices. While the Catholic missionaries where able to present the Gospel, in
this case, in a very palatable form, the Gospel was failed to be understood in a manner that would
lead to a complete contextualization, where the Gospel is able to prophetically speak to the
cultural traditions.

Contextualization raises questions within the Latin America context. In particular one must
analyze the rise of the “Faith and Prosperity Gospel”, which is experiencing tremendous
popularity. This is coming as a result, largely, of the charismatic church (in particular the
Assembly of God) having largely local leadership, and through the great expansion. Is this an
example of contextualization of the Gospel or simply bad theology? What about Liberation
Theology? Is this a contextualized expression of the Gospel responding to the experience of
cyclical poverty in Latin America? What about the division between the Catholic and Protestant
Churches in Latin America? Is Christ divided? Is the global Church allowing structural sin in
creating such a division? If one argues that Christ cannot be divided, how does one express this
great division in the Church?