Contextualization for Social Change

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Assignment #3 – Essay

1. Write a 5-page paper using the outline below. Review the Examples of Contextualization

provided in the PHI 923 Course Resources located in DIAL. Provide responses to the

following based on your selected cultural issue or phenomenon:

a. Present Situation of Social Concern – describe the situation requiring a

contextualized Christian response to a cultural situation or phenomenon.

b. Social Analysis: (Family, Church, Society) – Using the Five Spheres of Life,

develop a cultural analysis to comprehensively describe aspects of the situation

or phenomenon.

c. Theological/Moral Evaluation – Identify Biblical areas or Kingdom principles

relevant to the issue.

d. Issues to Address – Identify underlying/related issues that need to be

addressed in the contextualization strategy.

e. Spectrum of Critical Contextualization (address only relevant ones)

i. Condemnation – includes issues condemned by Scripture (i.e., erroneous

doctrine, idolatry, or syncretism)

ii. Correction of Erroneous Emphases – cultural beliefs/practices containing

true insights but are diluted with wrong focus.

iii. Conversion of Themes – beliefs/practices with no significant negative

influence but can be used to point to Christ.

iv. Commendation of Good Belief and/or Practices – beliefs/practices in

culture that are completely consistent with Scripture but exist without

religious warrant are to be commended.

f. Strategy for Contextualized Communication - develop a strategy by thinking

through all the practical considerations below.

i. Stakeholders - Identify the people or groups who have a stake in the

phenomenon or issue.

ii. Venues of Communication - These could be written or spoken, could

involve media, or social or organizational networks.

iii. Resources - Identify available and needed resources.

iv. Timelines - Begin to think through the timeline or logistical issues

involved in implementing a contextualization strategy.

v. Obstacles to Anticipate - Anticipating obstacles can add practical aspects

to a strategy that can help it to succeed.

2. Paper Guidelines:

a. Begin with an introductory paragraph that has a succinct thesis statement.

b. Address the topic of the paper with critical thought.

c. End with a conclusion that reaffirms your thesis.

d. Use a minimum of eleven scholarly research sources (two books and the

remaining scholarly peer-reviewed journal articles).

The issue of transgenderism is prominent in public consciousness. Responses fall across the spectrum to advocacy to outright rejection. The issue is a confusing mix of ideology and biological realities caught up in the culture wars. In the fray are real people and their families. Ideological pressure on public media fuels bias and misinformed opinions on transgenderism.

Transgenderism refers to individuals who experience different types of gender incongruence. (Beek et al., 2018, p. 5) Gender incongruence refers to feeling one’s physical body is not in line with one’s experienced gender. (Keukels & Gullamon., 2018, p. 120) Gender dysphoria refers to the incongruence creating unease and distress. (Greydanus, & Codde, 2021, p. 327) These individuals have an elevated risk for suicide and other serious mental health issues. (Bouman et al., 2018, p.44) It is important for the saints and the shepherds of the church to be better equipped to minister to these individuals.

Transgenderism is fraught with social implications. Most people experiencing gender dysphoria will first experience impact in their family relationships. (Littman, 2021, p. 3358) It often does not go well for the relationship with estrangement not uncommon. (Giangrave, 2024)

Trans people and their families find themselves thrust into the culture wars over whether truth is a given or constructed. (Veith, 2020, p. 27) Constructivists quickly advocate trans people are bravely creating their identity dismissing the body as unimportant in a modern form of Gnosticism. (pp. 162-163) (Guizzard, 2024) Many argue human identity is not static or given but mutable, fragmented, changing. (Schwartz 2024) Evidence is accumulating of the gender dysphoric being pressured by online peers to adopt a trans positive view and to transition. (Evans & Evans, 2021, The societal, cultural trends section, para. 18) Many advocates promote the idea that gender is by nature fluid. (para. 27) More than 1/3 of trans transitioners reported they felt pressured to do so by friends, partners, and clinicians. (Littman, p. 3360) Validating online spaces do have a positive impact on mental health while idea of gender transformation is reinforced. (Aldridge et al., 2024, p.10) Clinicians report pressure to suppress studies that do not support the advocated for narrative. (Sey, 2024) Now there is growing political resistance with arguments that transgenderism is morally wrong, an ideology dangerous to social and individual health. (Evans & Evans, Forward by Stephen Levine section) Yet genetic factors do often form a biological basis for gender incongruence. (Keukels & Guillamon, p. 121) Individuals may be suffering dysphoria from social or biological influences or a mix of both or possibly in open rebellion against God’s design. The LCMS identifies three aspects of the issue: chromosomal disorders, emotional struggles with dysphoria, and expressive individualism rejecting biological reality (CTCR report with presidential letter, 2022, p. 18). The church plays a vital role in supporting trans individuals, as caring relationships can help alleviate dysphoria (MacMullin et al., 2021, pp. 823-839).

Gender dysphoria and the broader umbrella of transgenderism is not a matter of adiaphora. Many progressive theologians oppose application of Biblical passages inerrantly understood to issues of gender diversity. (Neumann, 2022, p. 128) Some argue God created them with a gender fluid identity and thus it must be good. (Giangrave, para. 3) Conservative orthodox traditions such as the LCMS believe God’s Word speaks truthfully to issues of sexuality and gender and seeks to follow natural law as revealed in Scripture. (Gender Identity Disorder in Christian perspective, 2014, pp. 1-5) We cannot assume this to simply be a matter of rebellious sinful behavior. Intersex and other individuals with biological disorders do exist reminding us we live in a fallen and broken world with consequences outside God’s original plan for creation. (Schulz, 2024, He/Him, para. 6) Congenital disorders are understood as examples of our bondage to creation. (Gender Identity Disorder, p. 7) When dysphoria is not connected to our biological reality, are an emotional condition or a willful action, individuals are encouraged to seek mental and spiritual help to bring emotions and desires more in line with godly living. (p. 5) In the end a Christian approach that seeks to be faithful to Scripture cannot accept the view we have autonomy regarding our sexual nature. It is a rejection of God as creator. (CTCR report, p. 19) Because of the fallen nature of all creation life is simply not fair. The church recognizes that this involves more than stubborn ideological rebellion; it includes suffering individuals influenced by a misguided culture, often experiencing emotional distress and sometimes biological disorders.

We are reminded in Matthew 28 that Jesus sent the church to all nations and in 1 Timothy 2 that God wants all to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth. Our ministry is one of reconciliation (2 Cor 5: 18-20) proclaiming the Gospel to all for all who call upon the Lord will be delivered from this corrupted world and will be saved. (Rom 10: 12-13)

Thus, there are several practical issues for the church to address to minister to trans people threading the needle between affirmation and rejection. For instance, the conversation around the use of preferred pronouns ranges from do it to never do it. Some interpret the use of a preferred pronoun as a lie, violating Biblical obligation to always speak the truth. (Schulz, He/Him, para 3) Some trans people share that refusal to use their pronoun communicated they were not valued but were toxic lepers not welcome in the community. (Schulz, Pronouns part 2, paras 5-6) The LCMS recognizes that compassionate response is needful for dysphoric individuals and family members while also affirming God’s design of male and female meaning in some cases admonition is necessary if individuals identifying as trans out of a desire for creative individual expression rather than because of a present emotional or biological disorder. (CTCR report, p. 18) However, a faithful and loving response will be difficult if the environment of the congregation is one generating fear of stigma which leads many dysphoric to remain in the closet or absent themselves. (Layland et al., 2023, p. 2027) LGBTQ folks expressed appreciation for one intentional encounter with LCMS pastors whose response was to communicate you are not alone to struggle with your burdens, we are here to listen and support you. (Mertz, 2015, p. 19) Embedded in this issue is the question of identity, forefront today. (Veith, p. 259) Today we are instructed by the culture to “discover” our authentic self by looking inside and examining what feels right. One homosexual woman contrasted this to the Christian perspective where we find our identity in who God says we are as his “child, beloved, friend.” (McLaughlin, 2019, Isn’t Christianity Homophobic Section)

Thinking critically placing reason and experience in ministerial position to Scripture, we consider how the church may engage with people experiencing this personally or in their family. We begin by recognizing the impact that the corruption of the world has on our mind, heart, and bodies. No one is immune to it. And life is not fair. We cannot as faithful Christians accept the claim that gender is fluid, and identity is about autonomous creation. Nor can we relinquish Scripture’s revelation of gender is binary. (CTCR report, p. 19) But we can certainly employ an empathic attitude toward human suffering whatever form it takes. Using preferred pronouns is more complicated. Schulz recommends this as it helps protect trans people from those who might harm them if they knew, and it communicates that you value the person. (Schulz, He/Him, paras. 7-9) However, the concerns about enforcing a lie are worth noting. Alongside this comes the recognition that some intersex people are born with female external parts and raised female, only to discover they are male after being socialized as female. Luther himself in the small catechism in the fifth command says we are to look out for one another’s wellbeing. Here the best answer may not always be clear and will be contingent on the individual, the context, and what the speaker knows. In general, Brath recommends recognizing that all our sexuality is broken, though it is not reasonable to support his idea of simply avoiding the conversation because LGBTQ folks will never recognize their feelings manifest sinful brokenness thus living in a type of ignorance to which we should just proclaim the Gospel. (Michigan LCMS, 2019) This would turn the Gospel into license and affirmation of human created ideology. Rather than ignoring realities, perhaps the church can lovingly acknowledge the brokenness of reality with those who suffer it and journey together toward a rediscovery and restitution of our humanity created in God’s image, never perfect on this side of heaven, but something to not be ignored. (McGrath, 2022, p. 252) We can faithfully advocate for medical care where biological disorder exists, mental and spiritual care for emotional distress and a clear communication of our identity as grounded in Christ and when necessary, admonition but erring on the side of caution with a Gospel emphasis.

As a strategy, bridging is useful in reaching out to trans individuals and their families to counter the supposed stigma and ostracism often experienced. Bridging builds relationships without denial of differences, but transcending differences. (Chun & Evans 2018, p. 1) This will allow for faithful response that fits with the situation of the individuals. Given social media is a key community for these folks it would be wise for the church to have a social media presence addressing these issues with compassion and faithfulness. Training for pastors in seminary and continuing education would enhance engagement skills. Pastors should engage in self-study to understand how to equip the saints for this issue. Those with training and experience in this arena who manifest faithful Christian witness should be encouraged to step forward to teach and lead. It is expected that any discussion that smells anything like tolerance will engender pushback from traditional Christians but highlighting the personal needs and teaching of the spiritual truths that can speak to suffering individuals may help to mitigate this response.

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