

## CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

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All theology is contextual. One can even say that there is no such thing as “theology,” because there is only contextual theology: African American, Latino/a, Asian, Liberal Protestant, Neo-orthodox, Congolese, feminist or womanist, Thomist, White U.S. American or European. Theology has always been contextual, whether Elohist or Priestly in the Old Testament, or Matthean, Johannine or Pauline in the New Testament. Ephrem the Syrian in the fourth century did theology in a distinctly West Asian way; Augustine theologized in the context of controversies that raised key questions for Christianity: the validity of Baptism, the necessity of grace, the instability of the present world. Aquinas’s context was the new culture of thirteenth century Europe and the recent re-discovery of Aristotle; Luther’s context was widespread corruption in the church and emerging individuality in Western thought; Teresa of Ávila’s was the Catholic Reformation. De las Casas did theology as he argued for the rights of indigenous Americans; Schleiermacher theologized in dialogue with the Enlightenment’s “turn to the subjective;” Karl Rahner tried to make sense of a world torn apart by war, and Rosemary Radford Ruether theologizes with the conviction that Christianity must include women’s flourishing.

Such consciousness of theology’s contextual nature has not always been the case. Some types of theology (especially that done by Western European males) have claimed universal validity, and this claim still persists in some quarters. What Christians have recently realized, however, is that such a claim actually tries to *universalize* theology rather than produce a theology that transcends history, culture and human circumstances. Doing theology is ultimately the interpretation of experience. This is how the Scriptures came to be written; this is how the doctrinal tradition was formed; this is how theologians theologize today. Theology has *always* been done this way. What contextual theologizing proposes is to recognize this in a conscious and deliberate way.

To ask, then, about the nature of “contextual theology” is really to ask about the nature of theology itself. Doing theology contextually is to do theology in dialogue with two realities: the *experience of the past* recorded in Scripture and the church’s tradition(s) and the *experience of the present* or the context in which Christian theologians live. Contexts consist of at least four aspects: present human experience (a personal health crisis, a presidential election), social location (being a woman, being young), one’s cultural identity (sometimes closely connected with a particular religion, like Buddhism in Thailand), and change within a context (globalization, democratization).

The new consciousness of the nature of theology described here is the result of both *external* and *internal* factors. External factors are changes in the world’s history in the last several decades. In the light of the emerging nationalism at the end of the colonial era there has been a growing consciousness of the irrelevance and even the oppressive nature of theologies that claim universal validity. In addition, the concept of culture has changed, from what Bernard Lonergan has called a classicist notion by which culture is conceived as something universal and normative to a more empiricist notion by which culture is conceived as a set of meanings and values that inform a way of life. In this second understanding, all cultures are equal and all cultures are good, even holy, and so can be valid sources for theology.

Internal factors are aspects in the Christian tradition itself that have come to light as these

external factors have been recognized. Christianity is a radically *incarnational* reality, which calls for God's continued incarnation at all times, in all cultures, and in all circumstances. Christianity acknowledges the *sacramental* nature of reality whereby any person, object, or event can mediate God's saving presence. A third internal factor is a change in Christians' understanding of divine Revelation. Rather than understanding Revelation in conceptual and informational terms, contemporary theology has recognized that it is the offer of God's very self, and so is a divine presence experienced in the weave of history and people's lives. The church's catholicity—that dimension which holds both the universal and the local / particular in creative tension—is a fourth internal factor which calls for local theologies in dialogue with each other. Finally, the unity and diversity found in God's trinitarian existence points to the possibility and even the imperative that Christian theology is to be done in dialogue with the particular.

Seeing theology as contextual raises a number of questions. First, questions arise about the *form* of theology. Doing theology that is rooted in particular experience implies that it need not be confined to an academic or discursive format. While this form of theology remains valid (it is the form of this essay), theology might also be done in the form of hymnody, architecture, poetry, reflection on local proverbs, film, blogging, faith sharing, etc. Secondly, a contextual perspective points to the fact that theology is done most effectively by the subjects of a particular context, and not by outsiders (like foreign missionaries), although the "outside" perspective does have its place. In the same way, professional theologians are understood more in the role of "midwives," to ordinary Christian people, who are the real theologians.

Third, questions arise about the orthodoxy of particular theological expressions. If there is no *one* theology, the question arises as to where can one locate theological norms. Syncretism, in other words, is inevitable; but how does one avoid falling into a syncretism that betrays the essence of Christian Faith? Robert J. Schreier has offered five criteria to ensure the faithfulness of a particular theological expression. First, there should be an "inner consistency" between the contextual expression and the doctrinal expressions of the Christian faith. Arius' denial, for example, of Jesus' divinity was perhaps true to the neoplatonic context of fourth century Alexandria, but it completely undermined the integrity of Christian faith. What was not assumed was not redeemed. Second, the expression must be able to be expressed in the language of worship. Arius was wrong, people argued, because Christians prayed to Jesus as to God. Third, there is the criterion of orthopraxis. The theological expression should lead to the practice of justice, peace or holiness. Any theology that would urge anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim practice could not be orthodox. The fourth and fifth criteria are two sides of a coin: a theology articulated from a particular context must be open to correction by the wider church, and it must have power to influence and enrich the theology of other churches. Liberation theology, for example, has learned from the experience of women and indigenous peoples, and has had a major influence on any theologizing today.

There is a plurality of methods or "models" that may be useful in the construction of theologies done with contextual consciousness. Each of these provides a valid procedure. Its adequacy is determined by how it responds to the experience of the past (Scripture and tradition) on the one hand and to the experience of the present (context) on the other. A situation of "first contact" may call for one model; a situation of secularization may call for another, as may a context of "anthropological poverty" in which a local culture has been long disparaged. The models are not "exclusive," but may be used in creative combinations. Six models might be distinguished.

A *translation* model has as its concern the preservation of the tradition while adapting

faith expressions to a particular context. It has scriptural warrants in a text like Acts 17:2-31 (Paul's speech at the Areopagus in Athens), and examples in tradition of great missionaries like Cyril and Methodius in the tenth century, Matteo Ricci in the sixteenth, and Alexandre de Rhodes in the seventeenth. Many Christians will find a warrant in the teachings of Pope John Paul II. One might characterize the translation model in Bruce Fleming's phrase "putting the gospel into."

An *anthropological* model is perhaps more concerned about relevance to the context than a slavish fidelity to the tradition. It seeks to preserve the tradition by mining it for new developments and expressions that come out of a particular context and can enrich the entire church. It might take scriptural inspiration from Mark's story of the Syro-Phoenician woman in 7:24-30 in which Jesus actually learns something from the woman's faith. The anthropological model would take seriously Justin Martyr's conviction that in other religions and cultures there are found "seeds of the word," that can deepen our understanding of the riches of God's grace. Catholics especially, but others too, might find the authority of the church's teaching office in paragraph 44 of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Modern World, which reflects on what the church receives from the modern world. British missiologist M. C. Warren offers a fine summary of this model when he writes about the necessity of taking off one's shoes when one enters a different culture, a different land.

A *praxis* model is one that is convinced that theology is best done as Christians reflect on their practice of the faith. One does theology, says Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez (paraphrasing Hegel) "after sundown," after the day's work of living the gospel. One begins with action, analyzes that action in the light of Scripture, Tradition and any social science that can help illuminate it, and then—in the light of that wisdom—formulates a plan of action which will be analyzed once more for more faithful action. Theologizing is a never-ending spiral of action and reflection which has the technical name of "praxis." This model finds its basis in the Bible's prophetic tradition, which calls Israel beyond formulas to authentic covenantal living, or on a text in the letter of James that exhorts Christians to be "doers of the word, not hearers only" (Jas 1:22). Karl Barth echoes James with his statement that "the doer of the word is its real hearer." "To know Christ is to follow him," theologian Alfred Hennessey's phrase, aptly sum up the insight of this model.

Bringing all three of these models into synthesis is the genius of the *synthetic* model. Theologians like Filipino José M. de Mesa theologize by sometimes translating, sometimes appealing to revelation hidden within Filipino cultures, and often aiming their theologies at transforming action. In addition, one can sense in this model a need to synthesize one's particular thinking in dialogue with other contextual theologies. Some Asian theology, for example, profit greatly from a study of Western philosophers like Martin Buber or John Macmurray. Appeal is made to the very formation of the Bible, by which the various books developed as women and men of faith interpreted their lives in the light of God's Covenant with Israel, or God's decisive action in Jesus of Nazareth. In the same way, Christian doctrine has developed in a dialogical, synthetic way as various circumstances in history and in the church's life call for clearer articulation of Christian faith. The late Filipino historian Horacio de la Costa, musing about the possibility of a truly Filipino theology, spoke of a diary composed by Filipino statesman José P. Laurel while in a Japanese prison during World War II. Laurel did not have paper on which to write, and so he wrote his reflections between the lines of a Western book. De las Costa suggested that this was a model for any kind of Filipino thought: given the synthetic nature of Filipino culture, any authentic Filipino thinking will be done "between the lines" of the country's

Asian, European and North American heritage. Such an idea succinctly sums up the nature of the synthetic model.

A *transcendental* model of doing theology contextually would focus on the power of an authentic faith expression of one individual to spark authentic theological reflection in the minds and hearts of others. Emphasis in this model is not so much on the *content* that is produced, but on the *process* of theologizing itself. When one theologizes as an authentic cultural subject on the one hand and as an authentic person of faith on the other, what will be produced will inevitably be a theology that is rooted both in a particular context and in Christian tradition. The transcendental model proceeds by a method of *sympathy* and *antipathy*. One listens to or reads a particular theological expression and it may trigger an appreciation of aspects in one's own context that can contribute to genuine theologizing. Alternatively, one may strongly disagree with a theological expression or development that is being expressed, and can then work to see *why* such antipathy is the case from the perspective of one's own context. A phrase that might capture the dynamic of the transcendental model is one by the U. S. American psychologist Carl Rogers: "the most personal is the most general."

Finally, one might have recourse to a *countercultural* model of doing theology. This model is one that takes the context with utmost seriousness, but also looks upon it with utmost suspicion. If theology is to engage the context according to this model, it must confront it with the truth of the gospel, calling it to be transformed by the life-giving power of God's grace and mercy. The biblical basis for this model is found in the prophetic tradition, and in Jesus' challenge to the people of his time. It is also found in prophetic figures throughout history, from Tertullian in the early church, to Francis of Assisi in the Middle Ages, to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Oscar Romero in the twentieth century. Henrik Kraemer's phrase "subversive fulfillment" might capture this way of doing theology in a short phrase.

Theologians use other terms to speak of the contextual nature of theology: incarnation, inculturation, local theology, indigenization, intercultural theology. While these terms are certainly valid and acceptable, the term "contextual theology" has the advantage of pointing to the fact the particularity from which theology must be done today is more than a consciousness of culture, place or ethnicity, but includes every aspect of life.

#### FURTHER READING

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