

What's 'contextual' and what's 'theological' about contextual theology? A question from an Australian theologian

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What's 'contextual' and what's 'theological' about contextual theology? This is, of course, a huge question, only the surface of which can be skimmed in this paper. Nor is it an original question. There is a widely acknowledged tension within the discussion of contextual theology of the interplay between context and theology in any particular exercise in contextual theology. And it seems to me that it is very important that that particular tension isn't avoided. My concern, nevertheless, is not at all to question the legitimacy of doing our theology in, before, and for our contexts. Indeed, my reason for raising these questions emerges directly from my own Australian context and a desire on my part to take the Australian context of my work with utmost seriousness. Does that mean, however, that I am doing—or even must do—something formally recognisable as 'contextual theology'? To acknowledge the situatedness of all theology is one thing; to say that all theology is therefore 'contextual theology' is, it seems to me, quite another.²

Moreover, one of the ironies of contextual theology is that as discipline or discourse it is not in fact bound to any context. For instance, an exercise in contextual theology in South Africa can be recognized as something similar in form to an exercise in contextual theology in Japan. Despite the clear differences in context, both know they belong to the category of contextual theology. There are certain conventions, methodological commitments and ideological presuppositions that make contextual theology a particular general form of theological discourse not at all tied to any particular context.

The paper does not resolve these tensions. It simply sets them out, hopeful for advice and suggestions.

How does the appeal to context enter theological discourse?

The appeal to context in theological discourse serves a number of functions ranging from the descriptive to the polemical. It is descriptive when it merely states, for instance, that "Theology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context".³ It is polemical when contextual theology is seen to be a corrective to other forms of theology. Its corrective force can operate at several levels. First, it can correct the lack of historical consciousness which it is argued characterized Christian theology prior to the European enlightenment. Executing this correction, contextual theology has drawn attention to

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² Further on this see Christiaan Mostert, "Is a Non-contextual Theology Viable?" in Susan Emilsen and William W. Emilsen (eds), *Mapping the Landscape: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Christianity. Festschrift in Honour of Professor Ian Breward* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 118-133.

³ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 15.

the socially and culturally conditioned presuppositions and axioms with which the theologian or theological community works. Second, it has sought to challenge the close alliance between theology and the academy characteristic of Western theology from the medieval period onwards. Executing this correction, contextual theology has fostered more populist and transformationist engagement with and explorations of theology in race-, nation-, class- and gender-specific communities. Third, it has drawn attention to the power relations which have surrounded—and perhaps been embedded in—so-called classical theological discourse and its proponents. In executing this correction contextual theology has applied various ideological critiques or received theological discourse, especially the dominant theological discourses as they have moved from Western Christendom to the non-Western communities and to the contemporary non-Christianised West.

Each of these corrective moves can, of course, be defended; there is no question that each in its own way—even if to varying degrees—is necessary. They can, however, combine in a particular way that is not without its problems. Such problems are, in my view, evident in the opening sentence of Stephen Bevans' widely consulted *Models of Contextual Theology*:

There is no such thing as 'theology' there is only contextual theology; feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth.⁴

There are three problems here. First, what makes a Filipino theology Filipino or Australian theology Australian? Are 'Filipino' or 'Australian' sufficiently stable adjectives to identify what would constitute a theology for those contexts? Second, if there is only contextual theology, is it possible to offer theological readings of context? And third, if there is no such thing as theology, then what makes, say, both feminist theology and liberation theology— theology? These issues will be taken in turn.

The instability and disputability of context

It is a theme of the work of American theologian Kathryn Tanner that the encounter between Christianity and context is irreducibly complex with no immediate epistemological access to what the context—or more usually in her writings 'culture'—is. The resistance to hermeneutical naivety in relation to scripture and tradition must be extended to culture itself. Christian engagement with culture is an engagement between two internally differentiated and internally disputable realities. Appeals to the constancy or stability of tradition or culture—be they Christian or other—can often "hide the fact of cultural conflict in one the same historical circumstance". When tradition encounters new circumstances, Tanner continues, "no one interpretation naturally results from their confluence. Instead an argument usually breaks out over their interpretation. The historical circumstance itself is not sufficient to establish the propriety of a particular interpretation."⁵ The form of Christian community which emerges through encounter with another culture is "a step-by-step process of engagement with particulars".⁶ There are no grounds for "any

⁴ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revised & expanded edn. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 3.

⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 135.

⁶ Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 117

easy confidence in the theological adequacy of speaking simply for and from the present situation." In fact,

[i]n any one time and place, theological disagreement is as intense as across differences of time and place; rather than being in any one-to-one correspondence with a particular time and place, theological constructions tend to drift across them. Context then provides no sufficient direction for theological decision.⁷

The theological freighting of context

Even as the appeal to context is descriptive and polemical, it is also explicitly theological. Again to quote Bevens, contextual theology is itself a "recognition of the validity of another *locus theologicus*: present human experience".⁸ Furthermore, Bevens justifies contextual theology with appeals to "the incarnational nature of Christianity", the "sacramental nature of reality", "the nature of divine revelation", the "catholicity of the church" and "the doctrine that is at the heart of Christianity—the Trinity".⁹ In other words, the discussion about contextual theology is itself a discussion about the way the different sources and themes of classical theology are combined or reconfigured. Indeed, in a recent and vigorous scholarly discussion about Australian theology, the debate was at one point construed in terms, not of some self-evidently distinctive Australian issues, but rather in terms of the value to Australian contextual theology of the resources respectively provided by the Catholic and Protestant traditions. It was argued, for instance, that Catholics were more inclined towards contextual theology because of some of Catholicism's axiomatic theological positions:

[T]here is a sense in which the primary style and focus of Catholic theology have always been more conducive to contextualizing than have those of Protestant theology. Protestantism's focus on the 'interruption of the Transcendent' leaves fewer footholds for cultural interpretation than does Catholicism's emphasis upon continuity between divine grace and human culture.¹⁰

As one of the subsequent contributors to the debate commented: "whatever approach or method we adopt in theology, that method already implies some things about the character of God and the means of our knowledge of God. Method in theology is not

⁷ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), xviii.

⁸ Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 4.

⁹ Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 11-15. For an examination of the way contextual theology combines already recognised sources of theology in particular configurations see Neil Darragh, "Contextual Method in Theology: Learning from the Case of Aotearoa New Zealand", *Pacifica* 16 (2003), 48.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Lilburne, "Contextualising Australian Theology: An Enquiry into Method", *Pacifica* 10 (1997), 350-364. This debate has been continued in Tony Kelly, "Whither 'Australian Theology?': A Response to Geoffrey Lilburne" *Pacifica* 12 (1999), 192-208 and Frank Rees, "Beating Around the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology", *Pacifica* 15 (2002), 293-266.

¹¹ Rees, "Beating Around the Bush", 278.

theologically neutral.”¹¹

What makes theology theology?

Is it really the case, as Bevans suggests, that ‘there is no such thing as theology’ and only a variety of contextually specific theologies? The polemical point of Bevans’ claim is fair enough. But is it equally valid as a definitive statement? These questions are hardly new. Moltmann’s open letter to Bonino in 1976 remains a classic expression of the concern that intentionally contextual theology can deny to Christian discourse the universal scope which at the very least seems to belong to the nature of the gospel and is also the presupposition for speaking across contexts.¹² To raise such questions is not at all to gainsay the recognition of the diversity of Christian theology which—no less than its universal scope—belongs to the nature of the gospel. Nevertheless, we cannot say ‘there is no such thing as theology, only theologies’ without raising some fundamental questions about the nature of the Christian community. Indeed, the following remark from Clemens Sedmak brings such questions to the fore—at least implicitly. In defending the idea of local, culturally-specific theologies, Sedmak proposes: “Christian identity is constantly negotiated within local cultures. Christians live within local cultures. They do not live within a Christian culture. There is no such thing.”¹³

Of course, we all know what Sedmak means. Such a statement within a work on contextual theology is part and parcel of the polemical appeal to context which I briefly summarised earlier. And, of course, there are all sorts of nuances about how we respectively understand ‘culture’, ‘community’, ‘location’, ‘context’, etc. Nevertheless, the potential to slide between ‘no such thing as theology’ and ‘no such thing as Christian culture’ is disquieting. Can we say ‘there is no such thing as Christian culture’ without evacuating the adjective ‘Christian’ of any force at all and by forcing the word ‘culture’ to dangerously isolate itself from ‘community’.

If, as proclaimed as a central theme of the New Testament, the effect of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is the creation of community where there once was no community,¹⁴ then this must be reflected in our language about culture and context and theology. In fact, if there is such a thing as Christian culture, there must be something identifiable as *Christian* theology.¹⁵

I raise these questions as a white Anglo-Saxon Australian male whose inheritance of dominant Western modes of theological discourse and ecclesial community will be self-evident. Nor am I unaware of the potential for misunderstanding. Yet the relationship between the universal and particular—whether in theology or other discourses—is a

¹² See Jurgen Moltmann, “An Open Letter to Jos? Miguez Bonino”, in *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (March 1976): 57.

¹³ Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 80.

¹⁴ Classically expressed in 1 Cor 1: 11-22; Gal 3:26-29ff; Eph 2:11-22.

¹⁵ I assume here the link between language and community identity commonly made in discussions concerning communitarian and postliberal retrieval of communal practices. See Reinhard H?tter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

pressing question in Western culture over and above the way these issues are raised within the ecumenical church. Ultimately my reasons for raising these issues come from my own Australian context. Indeed, they come from my own engagement with a notable Australian humanist and prominent social commentator who laments the loss of a universal story—a loss which he says is crippling the young people of the West. I now turn to his concerns and my response.

The Fragmentation of the West

The spirit cannot breathe without story. It sinks to a whimper, deflating its [hosts], and condemning them to psychopathology—literally disease of the soul. So it is for the young in the contemporary West—teenagers, those in their twenties, the hope and pride of their societies—and with them, swathes of their seemingly more assured elders. A malaise holds them in thrall, struggling to live in a present without vision of any future, or connection to...their own personal past.... They are dying for want of a story.¹⁶

John Carroll explicitly distances himself from the postmodern celebration of the loss of a grand narrative. Indeed, he insists on confronting his readers with the cultural, social and personal costs incurred as culture has fragmented—its constituent parts unanchored by a story that would otherwise hold them together.¹⁷ The abandonment of meta-narrative—celebrated by Western postmodern theorists—is, according to Carroll, destroying Western culture and its inhabitants. Without story, he says, “the temptation has been withdrawal into self”; a vision of reality in which “each puny ego is left alone to whimper *me-me-me* at the void.” There has arisen, he claims, a “fear of big story”, a fear, that is, that your and my story will be swamped by any larger claim to truth (p. 11). Somehow the West has lost its “grand elusive story of what it means to be human” (p. 217). At the same time, he is no modern foundationalist; his appeal to the categories of narrative, story and myth separate him from modern epistemologies.

Carroll is a humanist. He rejects the Christian faith, and its invocation of a ‘magical God’. Yet, he says, what the West has lost is the story of Jesus! “Jesus dwells constantly as the enigmatic *I am* pivot to the Western Dreaming” (p. 236). His story is “the story of Western stories” (p. 207). Carroll insists that Jesus has again and again visited Western culture. Jesus has returned “many, many times, his story forcing itself incessantly upon the West” (p. 208). Fundamentally, he says:

We receive him...in the form of a story. If that story is told in the right way...and the

¹⁶ John Carroll, *The Western Dreaming: The Western World is Dying for Want of a Story* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2001), 6. Hereafter all quotations from this work will be cited in parentheses within the main body of the text.

¹⁷ See, for instance, the disturbing vignettes of contemporary life offered by Carroll on pp. 6-8.

people...are receptive—the story cryptically intersecting with their own and then the very foundations of being may be illuminated by the light of Truth. (p. 6)

This proposal is remarkable, and it constitutes a significant challenge to the Australian Christian community, not least its theologians.¹⁸ For all the good reasons set out in the first sections of this paper, and for reasons pressed upon us by postmodern theorists, we have rightly developed a proper nervousness about meta-narratives and universalizing discourses. Correspondingly we have learnt to privilege the particular. In fact, the Australian church and Australian theologians have in all manner of ways sought to, and been summoned to, exercise a relentlessly critical eye over our received Western European modes of theological discourse and theological emphases. At the same time the problems intimated in the earlier sections of the paper are now shown not merely to be methodological problems for contextual theology. At the heart of it is whether there is a Christian story to tell, something one particular Australian humanist says there is. The challenge is to re-think—hopefully in dialogue with others wrestling with similar issues—the relationships between the universal and the particular, between doing

¹⁸ I have set out a fuller response to Carroll in “‘The Spirit Cannot Breathe Without Story’: The Gospel Narratives and the West’s Grand Narrative” in Ian Weeks and Duncan Reid (eds.), *A Thoughtful Life: Essays in Philosophical Theology, A Festschrift for Rev Professor Harry Wardlaw* (Adelaide: ATF, 2006), 97-112.