Contextualization—Everybody’s Doing It

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When some thirty years ago on study leave I began research on what is now generally referred to as the “contextualization” of theology in order to assess what was happening in Sub-Saharan Africa, I discovered very little available either in English or French.¹ Six years in Madagascar had taught me, however, that, whether consciously or not, communities of faith all over Africa were “thinking the faith” each in their own language and from within their own particular context. I heard it repeatedly in local music, sermons, prayers, Bible studies, and pastoral counseling; in public and private conversations; as well as in discussions of local church leaders struggling with issues of faith at congregational, parish, district or synod assemblies. It was evident in their letters, reports, and writings; in the ethics, piety and world view expressed by their lives.

Upon my return to Madagascar from graduate study these earlier impressions were confirmed. It was there. I heard it and saw it and tried to do it myself. Still, although everybody was doing it in one way or another, not many were writing about it with any clear understanding or intentionality. Since then there has been a growing flood of material on “contextualization.” Today it seems like almost everybody is talking or writing about it.²

¹Among those few pioneering works were: Des Prêtres Noirs s’interrogent (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1956); G. C. Oosthuizen, Theological Discussions and Confessional Developments in the Churches of Asia and Africa (Franeker: T. Wever, 1958); Bengt G. M. Sundkler, Bantu Prophets in South Africa (London: Lutterworth, 1948); Fr. Placide Temple, La Philosphie Bantoue (Elizabethtown: Editions Lovania, 1945); several books and papers by Edwin W. Smith touching on the issue; and occasional articles appearing over the years in The International Review of Missions.

²The intention here is to underscore as strongly as possible the large number of African theologians or theologians in Africa who have published work on contextual theology in the past thirty years. Any listing is selective, and an exhaustive one would be beyond the scope of this essay. However, please see the “For Further Reading” section at the end of the essay for representative examples of African and Western literature in this area.

I. CONTEXTUALIZATION: WHAT IS IT?

There are two things about contextualization of which one can be sure: (1) that every Christian community in the world is doing it, and, (2) that Christian communities have always been doing it. They may not always do it consciously and they may not always be doing it well, but they are most certainly doing it!

For Douglas John Hall contextuality is a given for the Christian.

To claim that Christian theology is by definition contextual is to insist that the
Engagement of the milieu in which theology is done is as such a dimension of the doing of theology.\(^3\)

He argues further,

Theology lives between the stories—God’s story of the world, and humanity’s ever-changing account of itself and all things. Theology is what happens when the two stories meet.\(^4\)

The classic definition of theology is that of “faith seeking understanding.”\(^5\) Such seeking does not happen in a vacuum, but happens where faith and life cross. It is a very concrete matter, a matter of urgency and passion. It involves a struggle of ultimate concern with flesh and blood realities and with what lies beyond them. Such concern, as Martin Kähler correctly put it, is integrally connected to the church’s mission: “Mission is the mother of theology.”\(^6\) The contextuality of theology is a product of the church engaged in mission. Orlando Costas has said it well:

Theology is not an intellectual exercise for leisure time; rather it is committed reflection. It is not something one repeats or memorizes, but something one does. It is tying up the loose ends of... [one’s life]...from the perspective of one’s faith.\(^7\)

The question, then, is not whether or not to contextualize theology. Rather, it is a matter of seeing to it that it is done intentionally, responsibly, and well.

Contextualization, however, has to do with more than just theology; it has to do with the shaping of the whole life of every Christian community—including its theology—and needs to be spoken of in those broader terms. For the sake of this present discussion, I take the contextualization of the faith of the church universal to be the shaping of faith that takes place in the life and witness of any particular Christian community as it both thinks through and gives public expression to its faith, while living out its life and apostolate through full participation in the public life and language, that is to say, the culture, of the wider community of which it is a continuing and responsible part.

II. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND APOSTOLICITY

The central theological issue in the contextualization of the faith is that of the

\(^3\)Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress) 75.

\(^4\)Ibid., 91. The emphases are in the original.

\(^5\)Anselm: “Fides quaerens intellectum.”


apostolicity of the church. Apostolicity and contextuality are two sides of the same coin. Each bears the marks of the other and particularity, of which we will say more below, is the key to both. Furthermore, a theology of contextualization makes clear that it is always with people, not ideas, that we are ultimately concerned. Such people are never just isolated individuals or isolated aspects of the human experience, such as “rationality.” They are whole persons in their social context—including its historical, social, religious, political, economic, physical, psychological, and philosophical dimensions. Contextualization has to do with people in community. It has to do with particular Christian communities and with these communities within the wider communities of which they are a part.

Finally, and most importantly, in contextualization we are concerned for the implications of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). That gospel has to do with the saving, liberating, eye-opening, life-transforming entry of the living God into our lives. Contextualization deals with the Gospel in all of its particularity and universality.

1. An Apostolate from Creation

Even though in an ultimate sense God’s continuously creative and redemptive engagement in human history always remains from beginning to end God’s activity, the role to which God has called humankind is an awesome one. The writer of Genesis 2:19-20 speaks of the mystery and wonder as well as the particularity of that task:

So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field.

(NRSV)

In this remarkable passage, the Yahwist deals among other things with the origins of human language. Here is a picture of humankind reflecting on the external created world, objectifying it, appropriating it and developing a system of symbols by which to order it. This account underscores, on the one hand, the rational nature of God’s creative activity evidenced in the structures of reality and, on the other hand, the God-given human capacity creatively to grasp and shape that reality, identifying and ordering it symbolically.

God’s invitation to humankind to “name” all things and to “rule over” them was not simply an invitation to apply their rationality to and impose their will and purposes upon the external world, but to “love” it with something of the love with which God loves it. It is clear when both the Priestly and the Yahwistic versions of the creation story are considered within the context of the whole of Genesis, that

Gerhard von Rad, Genesis: A Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 80-81. Fuller discussion of the symbolic nature of human language and culture, open to a so-called “thick description,” and certainly appropriate to the issue of contextualization, is beyond the scope of this essay. Reference should be made to Paul Tillich’s reflections on “symbol” and his religious analysis of culture in his Theology of Culture (London: Oxford, 1959) and his Systematic Theology, vols. 1, 2, and 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951, 1957, and 1963). For a
God’s invitation to name and rule was an invitation to love and care creatively for ourselves, all others, and the world around us as God-appointed stewards. That is to say that it was an expression of a creation-grounded apostolate. Such an apostolate is one to which every human community is called and in which it is grounded by the gift implied in the “image” of God and in God’s continuously creative activity.

2. An Apostolate from the Gospel

It is painfully obvious that under the conditions of the fall human stewardship of creation has become in large measure greed-driven, abusive, and destructive rather than responsibly caring, creative, and constructive. That does not negate the original mandate. What it does is to leave the whole of creation “groaning in travail” and “waiting” together with us for redemption (Rom 8:18-25). Accordingly, our hope as well as that of the whole creation now rests in God’s redemptive activity in Christ Jesus.10

While our God-given stewardship grounded in the creative activity of God is marked by the holism of human participation in the created world, our apostolic calling as an elect people of God, as a “royal priesthood,” is grounded in God’s self-giving redemptive activity in Christ Jesus and is characterized by that redemptive mission (John 20:19-23). So it is the case that just as our calling and capacity to “name” the world around us in not simply a matter of rationality but includes participation, a recognized responsible interdependent relationship of love, concern, and appropriate action; so our apostolate in Christ Jesus is indelibly marked in its mission with the sign of the cross of Christ—the ultimate expression of self-giving participation.

It is precisely in this two-fold dynamic—the Christian community’s engagement in mission as Christ’s ambassadors and its participation in the common life which it shares with the wider community of creation of which it is always a part—that genuine contextualization finds expression.

III. CONTEXTUALIZATION AND THE PARTICULARITY OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel is profoundly particular and it is precisely in its particularity that its universality finds expression. The gospel promise is centered in the story of a first-century male, a Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth; it announces that he is the Messiah, that in him God has come to be with us as Savior and Lord in an ultimately decisive and final way, that in him a new age is ushered in, and that through faith in him any and all who believe are set free from the kingdom of darkness and are brought into the kingdom of God. That gospel is further of cosmic import, affecting the whole of creation and the entire human race with specific promise for every human community and every human being in particular.

Although the gospel’s universality is grounded in that cosmic impact of God’s self-giving redemptive act of love in the Christ event, it is actually realized only in its capacity for
expressing that universality with particular eye-opening, faith-eliciting, life-transforming power—when it actually delivers what it promises in specific situations. The Spirit of God, who gives the realization, always does so in particular human communities and in particular human languages and cultures.

10For an extended discussion of the image of God as it relates to human stewardship, see Douglas John Hall, Imagining God: Dominion as Stewardship (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

The gospel itself is thus an enculturated word. It is both a divine and human word. It is a divine word and so a power-filled eschatological word that always comes to us from the outside, from beyond all human culture as a creative word of judgment and grace. At the same time, it is a human word, as human as all other human words—frighteningly frail yet profoundly rich and deep and nuanced—that can and needs to be spoken and heard and understood in every human language.11

The witness of the Christian community is a witness to the gospel as a word that comes to it from the outside, but in seeking to understand that word for itself and to share it intelligibly with those around it that witness demands contextualization. It is an enculturated witness to the gospel even as it is an enculturated understanding of it. Such contextualization includes not only an understanding of the gospel but a realization of its power and imperatives in a fully engaged participation of the Christian community in the life of the wider community of which it is invariably a part.

IV. CONTEXTUALITY AND APOSTOLICITY: THE PRIMARY ISSUE

The apostolicity of the church can be described in terms of its participation in both the faith and the sending of the apostles.12 Any particular Christian community is “apostolic” insofar as it belongs to Jesus Christ, its life and mission are grounded in him, and he continues in their midst as Savior and Lord. Or, to put it yet another way, a particular Christian community is apostolic when it is living its life under his Lordship and is intentionally bearing witness to him in the wider community of which it is a part.

The two decisive reference points for any Christian community’s contextual apostolate, therefore, are: (1) its apostolic witness to the Christ event and the catholic understanding of it, and (2) the particularities of the total context of its life and witness. Both aspects are profoundly important in a mutual shaping of that community’s worldview, priorities, faith, life, piety, worship, ministry, and witness. Though the roles of both are substantive and substantial, that of the apostolic witness is finally normative, while that of the context is basically formative, the roles of each deriving significance from its own particularities.

The health and vitality of the life and witness of any particular Christian community can be seen in the manner in which, under the decisive power and guidance of the Holy Spirit, it is shaped by and gives expression to the creative tension of the dynamic relationship between these two poles of apostolicity. Accordingly, the apostolicity of any particular Christian community is to be seen in the witness it bears locally to the work and promise of God in Jesus Christ. Both in its message and in its life and ministry such a worshipping community of ordinary people will:

(1) while consciously living under the direct Lordship of Jesus Christ, continue to give critical attention and central place to the norming, original apostolic witness to the Christ event in
all of its particularity; and,
(2) while being fully and responsibly engaged in the life, language, and culture

12For a helpful discussion of the apostolic nature of the church, see Carl E. Braaten, *The Apostolic Imperative* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985).

of the wider community in all of its particularity, prayerfully seek to understand its faith and live out its life of witness with clarity and integrity in the public sector.

There remains no question then not whether or not to contextualize the Christian faith. Rather it is our responsibility to attend to that contextualization intentionally, responsibly, and well. It is a matter of immense concern to all of us that every Christian community’s understanding and expression of that faith and apostolate which we hold in common interdependence (or, perhaps better, in which we are held by God), be vitally, authentically and identifiably both Christian and contextual. All of us have a profound stake in this task and need each other’s understanding, concern, and critical—as well as prayerful—support.

FOR FURTHER READING
1. *African Theologians*

2. *Western Theologians*
He does not do enough to contextualize the novel for those who've never read it. It is not sufficient to merely reproduce narratives without contextualizing them within a larger social and political framework. SMART Vocabulary: related words and phrases. Linking and relating. affiliated. AL. appertain to sth. applicable.Â context. contextual. contextualization. contextualize. contextualized. contextualizing. contextually. contiguity. Test your vocabulary with our fun image quizzes. Question: "What is contextualization?". Answer: Generally, to contextualize an idea, statement or event is to place it within its larger setting in which it acquires its true and complete meaning. Contextualization aids comprehension. For example, an arithmetic problem may not seem very practical until it is seen within a story problem; the real-life situation contextualizes the math problem and makes it more understandable. In Christian evangelism, to contextualize is to tailor the presentation of the gospel to the wider sociological context in order to achieve greater understanding. Contextualization is all about making adjustments from one way of looking, communicating, and explaining to another way of looking, communicating, and explaining. The challenge, of course, is to make those adjustments without obscuring or downgrading biblical truth. So how do we contextualize across multiple cultures and still communicate the one true gospel? First, we contextualize our lifestyle to identify personally with the people we're trying to reach. Our food, homes, clothing, schedules, and transportation may all change. Contextualization is a theory within the field of linguistics that is based on the idea that words cannot be completely understood without also considering their context. Linguists study the structure, meaning and use of languages and how these languages relate to one another. Contextualization represents a theory within the field of linguistics that is based on the idea that words cannot be completely understood without also considering the context in which they are used. By ignoring context, speakers and listeners open themselves up to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. Linguists who s