1

What Has Contextual Theology to Offer the Church of the Twenty-First Century?

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INTRODUCTION

What has contextual theology to offer to the church of the twenty-first century? This is the question that we will grapple with and hopefully come to some kind of answer to during the four days of this conference, and this is the question that I will attempt to answer partly in this opening keynote address.

In order to do this—albeit partially—I'm going to proceed in three steps. First, I'm going to try to answer the question, what is the church of the twenty-first century? Second, I'm going to try to answer the question, what is contextual theology? With the answers to these first two questions—ironically, questions of *context*—I think we will be in a position to answer the third and original question, what has contextual theology to offer the church of the twenty-first century?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

A Church of Great Diversity

The first and most important thing one can say about our church today is that it is impossible to say much in general about it. It is incredibly

diverse, and if we can speak about its mark of catholicity, we have to speak about its unity-in-diversity rather than its universality. I'm going to set out a number of characteristics of the church in the twenty-first century in this section, but not everything I say fits every church, and possibly nothing I say will describe one or the other church. This is already a clue to what a theology that is authentically contextual can contribute to the church today—or to churches, because each one has its own context.

A World Church

We can say, however, that our church of the twenty-first century has definitely become a global church, a world church, with the vast majority of Christians from the so-called Two-Thirds World. This is something, thanks to scholars like Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, that we have known for some time, but let's quickly review the facts using David Barrett, Todd Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing's statistics published in the January 2009 issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* and the World Christian Database online.[1]

Just about a century ago, in 1900, there were 521,712,000 Christians in the world. In mid-2009, say Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing, there are 2,149,761,000. At the present rate of growth, which is 1.35 percent per year, there will be almost 2.6 billion Christians fifteen years hence, in 2025. The growth of Christianity is across the board, but where the growth has been most astounding is in the Two-Thirds World. While the growth of Christians in Europe and North America has averaged .12 percent and .66 percent respectively per year since 1800, Africa has grown by a yearly rate of 2.59 percent, Asia—even with its minority of Christians—has grown 2.48 percent annually, Latin America has grown 1.17 percent, and Oceania has grown by 1.10 percent every year. The continent of Europe still has the largest number of Christians—about 531 million, projected to reach 539 million by 2025—and North America has about 221 million, with a projection of about twenty million more in fifteen years. However, Africa in mid-2009 had a Christian population of 447 million, projected to reach 662 million in 2025. Asia is at 366 million and will be at 490 million. Latin America has a population of 531 million, projected by 2025 to reach 623 million, and Oceania now has twenty-three million Christians

1. Barrett, et al., "Christian World Communions," 32; Barrett, et al., World Christian Database.

and will have twenty-six million in a decade-and-a-half. In 1900 the largest Catholic country in the world was France. In 2009 the first three largest Catholic countries are Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines. As Andrew Walls concludes, "Christianity began the twentieth century as a Western religion, and indeed *the* Western religion; it ended the century as a non-Western religion, on track to become progressively more so."[2]

For Many Churches, a Minority Church

In Africa, and the church in Latin America and perhaps Oceania, Christians will make up the majority of the population. In Asia, Europe, North America, New Zealand, and Australia, however, Christians are now and will continue to be in the minority. According to the World Christian Database, Botswana has a population of 1.8 million and has 1.6 million Christians. Other African countries would have a similar ratio of Christians, even though others—like Burkina Faso—might have only a Christian population of about 50 percent. Latin American Countries would be similar to Botswana.

China, however, with 1.2 billion people, has only about one hundred million Christians by a generous count; India's population of one billion contains about fifty-two million Christians, and Indonesia's twenty-seven million Christians make up less than 10 percent of the country's 226 million people[3]—even though these are more Christians than the entire population of Australia.

We all know from personal experience how the Christian population of Europe, Australia, and New Zealand is diminishing. My country of the United States is still quite religious, but it, too, is going the way of Europe and your countries.

What this means for the church of our twenty-first century is that many of us exist in a kind of diaspora situation. For some churches, like those of Indonesia and India, for example, it means living, worshipping, and doing mission in the context of an overwhelming non-Christian population. For others, like China and Vietnam, it means being Christian in a situation of suspicion and even persecution, subtle or not so subtle. Still other Christians, like those here in Australia and those in North America, will live out our Christianity in a state that is more and more secular and

2. Walls, "From Christendom to World Christianity," 64.

3 World Christian Database.

a society that is more and more multicultural and multireligious—which is our next point.

For the Churches of the One-Third World, a Multicultural Church in a Multireligious Population

We live in a world today of significant shifts in population. Since about the mid-1960s we have seen major movements of migration from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and Latin America to the wealthier parts of the world that a century ago were the colonizers of these areas. There is significant migration from Africa to Europe and North America; from Asia and Oceania to Australia, New Zealand, North America, and Europe; and from Latin America to North America. The migrant populations today are not like those of the past, whose goal was to assimilate themselves into the receiving culture. Rather, there is a strong effort to maintain cultural and religious identity. Our churches reflect the richness and the difficulties of these situations, and profiting from this multiculturality is a major challenge.

At the same time, there is and will continue to be a kind of assimilation of the various cultures. However, this assimilation seems more and more to be not so much an assimilation into the dominant culture as an assimilation into a totally *new* culture, one resulting from the blending of many diverse cultures in today's world. Soon after the election of Barack Obama, I saw a video essay on public television about an art exhibit at an American university. The exhibit consisted of a collection of portraits of young women and men who were of mixed race, like the newly elected president, and next to each face was listed the combination of races and cultures that contributed to each person's identity: one young man described himself, for example, as Filipino, Kenyan, White, and Chilean, while a young woman described herself as African-American, Samoan, and British. Next to his picture, another young man wrote, "I am the face of the future." This is a future that is not far away; in fact, it is with us now in our churches as we try to live the gospel in our twenty-first century.

A Young Church

Once again, this description might not fit all the churches of the world—however, it does fit the churches of Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, as well as the large numbers of people from these churches who

have migrated to the churches of Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and North America. According to the World's Youth 2006 Data Sheet, posted by the Population Reference Bureau in Washington, DC, by 2025 only 17 percent of the population in affluent countries (e.g., Australia, United States, France, Japan) will be under twenty-four years old (in 2005 it was 19 percent). In contrast, in countries with the least affluent populations, around 27 percent of the population will be twenty-four or younger.[4] One would think that these statistics would obtain, as well, among peoples who have migrated to more affluent countries. Our church of the twenty-first century, especially where the church is flourishing, will be young, with more than one in four under twenty-four years old. Our churches will have to work at reaching and keeping the young.

A Persecuted Church

The church in the Minority World of the Global North is and is increasingly becoming a marginalized church. In many parts of the world, however, the church is a persecuted minority. In the last years we have heard about church bombings in Pakistan and Iraq, and the murders of missionaries and local Christians in India. In Latin America we hear of church leaders and church members being murdered for their stands on social justice. Several countries, like Indonesia, have laws that forbid citizens from converting to Christianity, and some states in Nigeria have decided that Muslim *Sharia* law is the law of the land. Barrett, Johnson, and Crossing perhaps exaggerate, but they estimate that there have been 17,600 Christian martyrs in 2009 alone. For a good number of our churches today, being a Christian means taking a risk, being under persecution.

A Poor Church

In the past, the majority of Christians lived in the most affluent part of the world. Now the majority of Christians live in the poorest part of the world: the church of the twenty-first century is and will continue to be a poor church. This is particularly the case since, with the decreasing numbers of church members in the One-Third World, there will be fewer and fewer funds available to share with other, less affluent churches. One example of this is my own Catholic missionary congregation, the Society

4 See http://www.prb.org/pdf06/WorldsYouth2006DataSheet.pdf.

of the Divine Word. In the past, our generalate in Rome was able to distribute tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands of dollars for the work of our congregation in Papua New Guinea, Mexico, the Philippines, Ghana, and elsewhere. In the last several years this "annual distribution" has simply not been able to do what it had done in the past. The money is simply not there.

One implication of this situation for theological and church leadership is that there will be less funding for women and men from the Two-Thirds World to travel to more affluent countries for their theological and graduate education. Theological education will be more homegrown, more local, or students will be sent to other parts of the Two-Thirds World. In our religious congregation we already see this: many of our young confreres from India, Indonesia, and China are being sent to the Philippines to be educated rather than to Rome, Europe, or the United States, and Filipinos, too, are staying at home for their education. This may not guarantee a more contextual theological education, but the possibilities are there.

This new situation of the twenty-first-century church certainly causes difficulties, but it may also be a blessing. It will perhaps ensure that local churches live more simply and identify more with the situation of the people they serve. Perhaps for the first time since before the Constantinian era, the church of the twenty-first century is in a position to be a poor church—for the poor, with the poor, and of the poor.

This is a thumbnail sketch of the church of the twenty-first century. There may be other aspects that I have not treated (e.g., the church in the midst of drastic climate change), but I believe that what we have sketched here gives us a pretty good picture of the church to which contextual theology might have something to offer. It is an overwhelmingly Majority World church, one that is concerned with local cultures and social locations; one that is richly multicultural and lives in a multireligious world; one that is very young; and one that is a minority and often persecuted. In the One-Third World, the church is marginal to society and composed of many cultures and traditions. In sum, our church in the twenty-first century is a far cry from the church of a century ago, or perhaps even half a century ago. Ours is a church, as we will suggest, that needs a theology that is thoroughly contextual on the one hand and global or *intercultural* on the other.

WHAT IS CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY?

As I have described or defined contextual theology in the second edition of *Models of Contextual Theology*,[5] contextual theology is a way of doing theology that takes into account (or we could say puts in a mutually critical dialogue) two realities. The first of these is the *experience of the past*, recorded in Scripture and preserved and defended in the church's tradition. The second is the *experience of the present* or a particular *context*, which consists of one or more of *at least* four elements: personal or communal experience, "secular" or "religious" culture, social location, and social change.

Depending on a number of circumstances—one's understanding of God's Revelation, one's attitude toward human experience, one's understanding of the normativity of Scripture or tradition—one might choose to enter into the mutually critical dialogue between past and present according to one—or a combination—of the six models I attempt to sketch out in my book. Each one of these models, I believe, is valid. There is not one model that is objectively better than the others. And yet the true validity of a model comes with its experience within a particular context. If the context is a homily that one has to give as a result of the recent Victoria bush fires, one might draw on the cherished values of courage and sacrifice that are found deep in the Australian psyche. Or, as a friend of mine told me who is a pastor in the town of Alexandra, which was in danger of being in the fires' path and near many of the burned areas, his congregation came together often and just kept silence, since there were no words to express their grief, although they did pray occasionally from the Book of Lamentations. If one is leading a discussion of white, middle-class Australian youth, one might reflect on how counter-cultural the message of Jesus could be in this affluent society today. Or, finally, if you are trying to give examples from a context that is not your own—like I have done in the three previous examples—you make an attempt to *translate* your experience and faith into examples and language that the people in that context might understand.

The key thing, though, as I have come to understand contextual theology and have reflected on it through the years, is the centrality of *experience*. It is the honoring or testing or critiquing of experience that makes theology *contextual*. What this means is that, for contextual theo-

5. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (2002).

logians, *anything* can be a source of theology: an experience of a sunrise in the Central Australian desert; a particular film, such as the critically acclaimed *Samson and Delilah*; a national event of tragedy (the bush fires) or wonder (Kevin Rudd's apology to Aboriginals); values in one's own culture; one's experience as a male or female; one's experience as a marginal person in one's culture; one's encounter with another religion; the experience of multicultural tensions in one's society; or the challenge of technology today.

When we recognize that Scripture and tradition are *records* of experience—the experience of liberation from oppressor Egypt, or of deliverance from starvation in the desert, or of the disappointment with kings, or of the encounter with Jesus of Nazareth, or of Paul's struggles to persuade communities not to insist on Jewish traditions, or of Arius' insistence on Jesus' creaturehood, or of a controversy over eucharistic presence or justification—we will recognize that doing contextual theology is doing exactly what the authors of Scripture and the makers of tradition did. While there is no question of the normativity of these sources of theology, we have to realize that when *they* were doing the theology that resulted in a particular book of Scripture or a particular doctrinal expression, the only thing they had was their present experience in their particular context and the norming texts, doctrines, personages, and art of their past. In that way, we are just like them—like the compiler of the prophecies of Isaiah, like Paul, like Athanasius, like Hidegard, like Luther or Wesley, like Mary McKillop or Dorothy Day. This is why I strongly believe that even though Scripture and tradition are our great sources for theology as well as for norms for theology's fidelity to the gospel, our present experience, our context, needs to be regarded as equal to them both. Our experience today—of reconciliation between the Aboriginal People and Australians, of the fear of terrorism and the need for interreligious dialogue, of our being marginalized within the context of secular culture—can and will be the tradition of tomorrow.

For me, then, contextual theology is a theology of rich and challenging dialogue: dialogue that tries to articulate my context, my experience, and dialogue of this experience with the experience of Christians down through the ages that we find in Scripture and Christian tradition.

WHAT HAS CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY TO OFFER THE CHURCH OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY?

I hope that, as we have sketched out the shape of our church today and of the future, and as we have reviewed our understanding of contextual theologizing, it has become clearer what contextual theology has to offer to today's church. A theology that honors the experience of context will be one that is not tied to Western ways, themes, and methods of theology. This may be very good for the West, but for the churches of Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania, and the churches of particular ethnic groups within the churches of the West (Aboriginal, Maori, African-American, etc.), theology should only be done from local experience and local context. The non-Western churches can also contribute to the global church by showing the church what it is: not a Western religion, but one that has been and is again a non-Western religion.

In churches that are in a minority status within secular or non-Christian minorities, their context might very well impel them to do theology—on the one hand—that emphasizes the uniqueness and difference of their Christian faith, and—on the other hand—that helps Christians "give an account of the hope that is within them" (1 Pet 3:15) in the face of indifference, opposition, or even persecution. This latter may not be unlike the early apologists in the church, and the experiences of Justin or Origen may well be important sources for their own efforts. Multicultural churches need to explore this unique, challenging experience. There needs to be a dialogue between and among cultures, ethnic identities, and social locations.

In many churches, not only must a theology be done that engages the young, but young people need to be trained and cultivated as theologians. One of the great contributions of contextual theology is its insistence that theology is not something confined to highly trained academics. Indeed, as I point out in my book on models of contextual theology, contextualization is too important to be left only to the theologians. Theology is the birthright of the entire church, and this includes the world's youth. The evening before I wrote these pages in late March 2009, one of my students at Yarra Theological Union shared in class how she attended a day of reflection for youth, and one of the young people, a seventeen-

year-old, gave a stunning presentation on spirituality that absolutely blew her away.[6]

The poverty and vulnerability of the church is also an experience that might very well take the twenty-first century church back to its origins, when it was a struggling minority religion in the vast and powerful Roman and Persian Empires. A theology that is done out of poverty and vulnerability will be able to inspire and uphold the church, as it did in those formative times.

These are some of the contributions that a theology that takes experience seriously—a contextual theology—can make to our global, minority-status, multicultural, young, persecuted, and poor church of the twenty-first century. It takes these situations seriously and does theology out of them. I think, though, that we might be able to summarize what contextual theology has to offer our church today and tomorrow in four additional points. Contextual theology offers the church a new *agenda* for its theologizing; it offers it new *methods*; it offers it new *voices*; and it offers it a new *dialogue*. Let me speak briefly about each of these offerings.

A New Agenda

Contextual theology offers the church of the twenty-first century a new agenda. The church of the New Testament did not have the same agenda as the post-Constantinian church, the third-century East Syrian Church, the medieval church, the Reformation church, or the sixteenth-century Chinese Church. The church of the New Testament, for example, did not have a proper *Christological* agenda, as it emerged as the church had to think through its understanding of Jesus in the light of its encounter with Greek thought. The church of the fourth century did not have a proper *eucharistic* theology, as it emerged in northern Europe as the more symbolic worldview clashed with the more concrete worldview of the Germanic tribes. Context not only shapes the content and method of our theologizing. It also determines the questions we ask and highlights the things we see as important.

Up until our own time, with a more "universal theology" being studied in Basel and Brisbane, at Cambridge and at Trinity in Singapore, in Dunedin and Nairobi, there has been a basic shape to the theological enterprise. Catholics call these the basic theological tracts; Protestants call

6. The student's name is Denise Lyons.

them the basic loci: God and Trinity, creation anthropology, grace, sin, Christology, church, and eschatology. In today's global, minority-status, multicultural, vulnerable church, however, other issues may well emerge, and already have. A major issue that has emerged is ecology, and in many ways it has reshaped the theology of creation. Groups such as Aboriginals and Native Americans have emphasized the importance of a theological reflection on space and land. Asian theologians have proposed a theology of harmony. Latin Americans have insisted that no theology can be worthy of the name without the centrality of the experience of the poor and God's promise of liberation. Latino/a populations in the United States, and several other groups, have begun to theologize around the experience of migration. These issues certainly do interact with the more traditional topics such as Christology, grace, and so on. But they are new questions, and will develop not only new answers but also new ways of understanding the classic questions of God, of church, of creation, and of the end of the world. This is part of what contextual theology has to offer the twenty-first-century church.

A New Method

Contextual theology offers the church of the twenty-first century a new method. My book *Models of Contextual Theology* gives an overview of some of the new ways that a theology that takes experience seriously can proceed: more cautiously by a method of translating traditional formulations into particular languages, cultures, situations; taking more risk by trusting the context to guide new ways of thinking about the faith; letting action take the lead to forge new or deeper understandings of God's transforming grace in the world; and trusting the gospel story to challenge and critique an experience or a context. Other theologians, either in response to my book or independently, have proposed other models and methods. Theologians such as James and Evelyn Whitehead, Don Browning, Thomas Groome, and Neil Darragh have proposed models of practical theology that also propose, in various ways, a dialogue between tradition and context for transformative action. The Lumko Institute in Johannesburg, South Africa, has proposed a method of Bible sharing that helps people read the Bible out of their daily experience.

But contextual theology has also opened up the notion of theology as something wider than mere verbal discourse. It can be the works or interpretations of local artists: poets, novelists, playwrights, painters, and sculptors. It can be the skilled use of proverbs. It can be the doing of or reflecting upon dance, or liturgy, or music. Last year at our annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology, I was enthralled by a presentation on the theology in the hymnody of the people of a very small tribe in (I believe) the Republic of Cameroon. Recently, I have been touched in a way that no discursive Christology could do by the "Jesus Laughing" exhibit on the Internet sponsored by Australia's Major Issues and Theology Foundation, Inc. (MIAT). During this past Holy Week I was awed by the paintings on the church walls of Santa Teresa, a small Aboriginal town south of Alice Springs. The paintings were done by a number of local Aboriginal women—none of whom had any special training in theology or art. Contextual theology can offer the twenty-first-century church new and creative methods for probing experience in the light of faith.

New Voices

There have been strong, clear, and beautiful voices in the past: Perpetua, Bardaisan, Alopen, Aquinas, Luther, Sor Juana, Barth, Dorothy Day. Theology that comes out of a world church, a minority church, a multicultural church, a poor church can open our ears to new voices—some right in our own back gardens, as it were, and others from contexts very different than our own. Several months ago, on a visit to the Philippines, my friend José de Mesa introduced me to a former doctoral student of his, Estela Padilla. As we talked I realized that she was one of the freshest voices in theology that I had heard for a long time. Her new voice needs to be listened to in the Philippines, and in other churches of our twenty-first century. My own US church needs to listen to older voices like Roberto Goizueta, Orlando Espín, Diana Hayes, and Peter Phan, and to younger voices like Miguel Díaz, Nancy Pineda Madrid, Vanessa White, and Jonathan Tan. The Australian Church needs to listen to its indigenous theologians, its young theologians from the Pacific and from Asia.

I could go on naming names, but I think my point is clear: The voices of contextual theologians are one more gift that contextual theology has to offer the church of the twenty-first century.

A New Dialogue

Lately, I have encountered a real problem with doing contextual theology, and this problem prompts me to suggest that we can take the doing of contextual theology one step forward. The problem with contextual theology, as I express it often these days, is that it is *contextual*. What I mean by this is that contextual theology can be so rooted in its own context that it can no longer communicate or talk with the theology of other peoples or other churches. I mentioned above that I have recently met Filipina theologian Estela Padilla and thought hers was one of the freshest voices in theology that I have ever heard. The problem, though, is that only Filipinos can read Estela's work, because she insists in writing in Tagalog. Any other language, she says, could not capture the full reality of what she wants to say. However, my sense is that Estela's work must get to other people around the globe. Her thought will not be fully translatable, of course, but I think that she can enrich and challenge other contextual theologians to do some of the creative thinking that she has done. And, I believe, responses to her could deepen her own efforts at developing a theology of the body, and a theology of ministry out of that theology, in Philippine context. What I propose, therefore, is that we need a wider dialogue among contextual theologians. Besides specific, focused contextual theologies, we need a theology that is done out of the dialogue *among* contextual theologies: a theology in global perspective.

The reason for this is that besides *our own* particular contexts, there is another context for doing theology in the church of the twenty-first century, and that is the global context. I think that integral to the development of our own contextual theologies is the need to enter into conversation with other contextual theologians and theologies. The dialogue will deepen our own insights, perhaps, as we see similarities between our own theology and that of a very different culture or social location. Or perhaps our understandings will be challenged by the insights that another context can provide. Or perhaps in the conversation both contextual theologies will be stretched and enriched. I have begun to speak of the need to read other theologies *analogously*—to realize that there might be a similarity-in-difference between the theology of my own context and that of others—one that can enlighten, stretch, challenge, and inspire my own efforts. My Filipino friend José de Mesa speaks of the need for *intraditionality* in theology, whereby one comes to a deeper understand-

ing and articulation of one's own tradition in a conversation with other traditions. As I say, I see this as a next step for contextual theology. It is one that still honors one's own context and experience, while seeking a dialogue with others for the sake of that contextual understanding, and for the sake of the wider context in which we all live: our global church of the twenty-first century.

This is where my own work has taken me in the last several years. I have just finished writing a book titled *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*. It will be published by Orbis Books later this year and is part of the series of theology in global perspective edited by the Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan.[7] The book is an attempt to introduce students to doing theology—a theology that is always contextual—but it draws on the wisdom of many theological voices from many different parts of the world. It is, as I describe it, a "baby step" in the direction of a global theology, but I think it is one in the right direction. I've tried as well to take this approach in courses that I teach on the Trinity and on the church. I've published a reflection on the Trinity course in the Summer 2008 issue of the journal *Theological Education*.[8]

CONCLUSION

We are at a new crossroads in the history of the church, one that is perhaps as important as the decision, recorded in Acts 15, not to burden Gentile believers with Jewish customs; perhaps as important as when Constantine declared the rapidly growing Christian church a legal religion in his empire; perhaps as important as when Luther nailed his ninety-five theses on the church door at Wittenberg; perhaps as important as Europe's encounter with Americans, Asians, and Africans at the end of the fifteenth century. Contextual theology can help us deepen our appreciation of God's gift of our senses, our cultures, our genders, and the circumstances of our lives. It can offer the church, perhaps for the first time in its history, the gift of its own multi-splendored identity, a new appreciation of its unity and catholicity, its amazing holiness and its being rooted in those who knew the Lord in his earthly ministry. What has contextual theology to

7. The book was published in September 2009.

8. Bevans, "DB 4100."

offer the church of the twenty-first century? In a word, I think, it offers the church a new look at *itself*.