

The Helpfulness of Theology in the Life of the Church

THE ECCLESIAL PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

THE RISE OF THE “new Christianity” has led Christian theologians to retrieve insights within Christian traditions that are helpful as the faith takes root and forms new and vital communities and practices. According to these traditions, good theology is not a search for universal truths that can be applied in all contexts and times, but rather an engagement with the lives of peoples and communities. The eschatological framework of Christian thinking and the centrality of theological theories of God’s grace ensure the openness of Christian thinking to new contexts. The creation of new Christian communities is a social and cultural process, which Christian conviction believes is possible for all and open to all. God’s truth is for everyone and is not a preserve of a particular culture and worldview. Contextual theology is part of what God is doing in this world.

Central to the method of contextual theology is the conviction that theology is a response to the self-disclosing initiative of God. Theology is not revelatory, but is a response to revelation. This is why proclamation and worship are not theology, but are intrinsic to the process of theology that acknowledges the relationship between the reality of the object of our worship and the description of this reality that is constructed within the theological process within community life.

In other words, contextual methods in theology are events within the life of the church that express the openness of theology to the concreteness, the diversity, and the freedom of God’s self-disclosure. Contextual theology provides the methodological assurance that the theological process is intrinsically integral to the faith community’s response to its subject, the self-disclosing initiative of God.

The eclectic openness of contextual theology seeks occasions for the alignment of human knowledge and experience with the activity of God, so that the community's response can become communal praxis in the service of God. It is the formative power of the Holy Spirit that gives shape to the Christian life and in so doing provides the theological process with its material.

David Kelsey's description of theology as an ecclesial practice is helpful at this point. He draws a distinction between primary and secondary theology that I will restate here for our purposes. Primary theology, he writes, is the "self-critical dimension of every practice" of the life of Christian faith communities.¹ Primary theology is a communicative practice that takes place within the lively debate of faith communities about how to live as Christians. Secondary theology, he believes, is "inherently an analytically descriptive, critical, and revisionary practice. Going beyond description of what the traditional claims have been, it analyzes how in the past they have been used in the community's common life, how they have been understood to be related to one another conceptually and logically, what implications have been thought to be rightly inferred from them and what apparently possible implications blocked, and why."²

Contextual methods contribute to both primary and secondary theology within the history of the formation of Christian practice by a community of faith. They contribute to the practices of the self-critical dimension of the community of faith. The role of contextual methods is endemic to the practice of theology itself. David Kelsey defines, "Christian theology, whether primary or secondary," as "an activity that consists of enactments of a practice that is socially established by ecclesial communities as part of their common life." Contextual methodology refers to the process that establishes theological reflection at all—the social and cultural conditions that make theological life possible and the reality of the formative power of God that elicits theological response and faithful practices.

In other words, God has created a space in this world for faith communities to "do theology." This space is temporal and cultural, and as such a part of the history and narrative of peoples. The conditions are essential to the context within which God forms community. As those

1. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 13ff., esp. 19.

2. *Ibid.*, 20ff., esp. 21.

who experience the self-disclosure of God, we can only respond with practices that align the knowledge we have gained from the subject of our faith with the ecclesial practices of our faith community. For them to make sense they must be communicative. Theology has always to rely upon contextual methods, if it is to take seriously the creative activity of God and the integrity of theological practice. As Paul Lehmann put it decades ago, the formative power of God “gives to the doing of theology its positivistic occasion and significance.”³

KNOWLEDGE AND HOPE

If we accept that contextual methods in theology are intrinsic to the practice of faithful ecclesial communities, then Christian theology needs to aid communities in forming ecclesial practices that help make sense of the gospel. The place “where they/we are” provides essential resources, as well as interpretive tools for understanding the gospel. This is what the Filipino theologian, Jose de Mesa, affirms by arguing that theology is “never far from home.”⁴ Theology needs to think through the culture to discover linguistic and social elements that are closely interconnected, woven together with Christian understandings of God. Jose de Mesa’s illustration is the Filipino concept of *loob*, or the depth of humanity. Using this interconnection, Jose de Mesa developed a doctrine of revelation that portrayed God’s praxis with creation as the revelation of God’s *loob* in the life of Jesus Christ. For the Filipino Christian community the use of this concept draws the listener to a deeper understanding of God that portrays the *missio Dei* as an act of graceful kindness that liberates.⁵ Theology that thinks through culture and does not just translate theological doctrines captivates and inures. It helps the community open itself to the possibility of the richness of God’s grace and truth.

Contextual theology is then helpful, in that it opens the minds and hearts of the faithful to the truth about God, the gospel. Christian theological practice enriches any understanding of revelation through contextualization. What is vital to a context can be put into dialogue with the full breadth of cultural insights from other cultural and social contexts.

3. Lehman, “On Doing Theology,” 131f.

4. De Mesa, *Why Theology is Never Far From Home*, 5–12.

5. *Ibid.*, xiv–xv.

Contextual methods are part of the theological process when the activity of the church is faithful and therefore engaged in a conversation with revelation. Only then can it become helpful as a practice of a Christian community. Helpful theology then is local and global, traditional and concrete, ecclesial and engaged in the world. Empowered by the Holy Spirit the community engages in theological work as a practice that is transformative of the Christian life.

According to our understanding of both primary and secondary theology, the practices of theology are ever about our knowledge of God. Theology is not only concerned with contextual resources; it must always be focused upon divine revelation. The text of divine revelation is the sacred text of the Christian scriptures. As a source for the theological life of communities, revelation is a special knowledge that is not analogous to our knowledge of objective and subjective realities. Knowledge of God depends upon the work of God; it is a divine gift, embraced within the narrative of a sacred book.

This is a different understanding of knowledge than that of contemporary philosophy. Such knowledge is not grasped in the same way that we intuit the solution to a mathematical equation or observe the beauty of a painting. God's self-revelation is understood as a gift that has come into the world at a particular time and place and in a concrete person, Jesus Christ. For modernity, this mystery comes as impossibility. The truth about God is not an abstract absolute, but a concrete historical and cultural particularity embedded in a sacred text, the scriptures, and the doctrines, history, and practices of the many peoples of faith. Recognizing this set of convictions is the first step in developing a healthy theology. Contextualization is not just an added extra, but is essential to the task of communicating this mystery. Contextual methods are essential in making the impossible possible and the foreign true.

In the Western centers of theological formation scholars approach the biblical text using modern biblical criticism. In the global South and among the poor, the place of the sacred text has been harbored from the waves of modern Western secular skepticism and hermeneutics. The role of the sacred text differs according to the cultural and social history of peoples. A hermeneutics of suspicion, for example, makes little sense there. This does not imply that there are advantages, but rather differences of place. Post-colonial theory has offered explanations for some of these differences, but does not offer a universal theory that explains

the very core of difference in a way that is relevant for the practice of Christian theology.⁶ These differences do not provide marks that distinguish the true church from the false church—the Christian from the lesser Christian. They mark differences that help define the role of contextual thinking in giving aid to communities, where they are.

Consequently, contemporary thinking concerning the nature of the social imaginary has been particularly important for contextual theology. Charles Taylor's work on secularism has been of great help as well as that of the more mainstream post-colonial and post-modern thinkers. They might offer approaches to the knowledge that concurs with that of theological and contextual methods.

This shift in the intellectual worldview of academic philosophy has been a stimulus for the development of models for contextual thinking in contemporary theology. There are two developments afoot that have contributed to this conversation and are playing a role. The first is that of post-modernity. This broad trend in philosophy discounts universalist claims concerning the nature of knowledge. The second is the trend of post-colonialism. This trend attempts to make sense of the transformation brought about by modernization and the development of "neo-colonialist" economic and political systems. Late modernist and globalized social structures are seen as the result of the rationalization of knowledge and economic systems that collude with the claim of neo-colonialist power.

The impact of the two broad trends, while frequently unsympathetic to Christian belief and the methods of theology, has stimulated recognition of the importance of the social context for all knowledge. The nineteenth century philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, and contemporary philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Michael Foucault, point out the vital role of social and biological context in the creation of knowledge domains and content. They show how knowledge and perspective are inseparable. Our experience shapes the insights we gain. Knowledge is produced through culture and history and not by them. This is a point that contextual methods acknowledge, although that is not the last word for the theologian. The way we shape our knowledge depends upon our experience of knowledge and power. It is given form according to the

6. Cf. Wallenstein, *The Modern World-System*; Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*. Wallenstein's work can help us understand the impact of colonialism upon local cultures.

perspectives we have gained. Arriving at insight involves conflict and it is confrontational. This has been true throughout Christian history as well as throughout human history. Yet insight is dependent as well upon theories grounded in a consensus of like-minded individuals, such as among the scientific community.⁷ While post-modernity's narrow focus on conflict and power is just that, narrow, it has helped us retrieve a realistic picture of human culture and social life.

The contrast between modernity and post-modernity has been helpful for theologians who are seeking to apply contextual methods, in that they acknowledge that the modern framework is not hegemonic. Elieazar Fernandez, a Filipino theologian working in the USA, borrows insights from Foucault in constructing his theological anthropology. The new hegemonies, he argues, should be avoided, so that liberation theologues do not become oppressive through the misuse of power. Regimes of truth, he argues, can seek domination and become violent even if they are seeking to be counter-hegemonic. In other words, trying to destroy the master's house can itself become an act of hate.⁸

The "Western" understanding of truth is not meant to colonize the mind of all peoples. It was arrogant and flawed, often providing justification for racism and oppression. While modern philosophers sought to ground the nature of knowledge upon rational principles, contemporary philosophers advocated neo-pragmatism and post-modernity, seeking to portray how power and language games explain the function of knowledge. Knowledge is useful or it is powerless. Fewer philosophers are speaking of truth and falsity, reality and appearance. The problem of human nature has been replaced in some neo-pragmatists' minds by the problem of human relationships. The centrality of reason has been replaced by the centrality of self-identity. In the end, post-modern theorists argue that we are no more than bodies, whose thinking has been constituted in relation to biological and social context and environment.⁹

7. The deliberation over a feasible understanding of human nature has taken many turns in recent decades. The debate between Noam Chomsky and Michael Foucault as well as the stark differences between Richard Rorty and Steven Pinker reflect the divisions emerging over the problem of human nature. Cf. Chomsky and Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate on Human Nature*; Pinker, *The Blank Slate*; Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 117f., 126f. Foucault and Rorty emphasize socialization and social power-flows, while Chomsky and Pinker recognize something deeper in human nature.

8. Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 15f.

9. Richard Rorty and other neo-pragmatists argue that this leaves no room for be-

This is, of course, too reductionist for Christian theology, but its thinking provides some help in overcoming the modernist *sackgasse*.

Critical theory has also contributed to this conversation by challenging the narrowness of neo-pragmatism with openness to social theory and rational ethical planning. This approach freed social theory to study how humans organized knowledge in order to improve and enrich human life. Its most influential advocate, Jürgen Habermas, speaks of knowledge as based upon communicative action.¹⁰ Knowledge, so conceived, results from the interplay of power and the use of language. In this interplay what we experience as real is a social and biological construction.

As a consequence of contemporary philosophy's rejection of the narrow rationalism of modernity, the "sociology of knowledge"—founded by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber—has a new place in philosophical thinking, as it helps the philosopher to analyze social context in terms of the flow of information and expertise within concrete cultural and social settings. Both empiricism and idealism have been replaced by communicative discourse and/or the analysis of social and ideological power-flows as the question of the role of knowledge in the interplay of social and rational discourse takes center stage.

Pluralism in method is now the rule and not the exception. Knowledge is constructed within a "conflict of interpretations." Insights do not shape universally valid principles, as they might have during the modern period. Neither empirical nor hermeneutical foundations are viewed as having the last word on what is real and true. Ideologies are interpreted in terms of power-flows and communicative and cultural interactions, instead of theories grounded in methods that are modeled on foundational logic. Deductive and inductive methods of interpretation are linked together in order to shape our perspective on reality so that our understanding becomes useful.

Christian theology cannot be post-colonial or post-modern in the sense of being theology constructed using post-colonial and post-modern frameworks of thought and content. Post-modernity in its neo-pragmatist and neo-Marxist forms de-construct our pictures of reality, leaving no room for the transcendent or the numinous. There is no value

lief in God and practices based upon such belief. Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, 156–58.

10. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*.

in talking about something like God as real, because nothing could be real in that sense. There is no need to recommend rational moral and scientific theories, because theories are no more than constructs, which are created by regimes of truth for their own benefit. The narrow focus of post-modernity is unacceptable for theology, in that Christian belief cannot avoid talk about God being *real* and faith being *rational*. Yet Christian theology has been aided by these reflections, because they help the theologian to do theology, in that they provide tools for disclosing cultural, historical, and social reality.

Theology that is contextually engaged is critical and traditional exactly because it is an ecclesial practice. Theology in both its primary and secondary forms is catalytic. It incites the Christian community to be authentically Christian in the context where they live. Contextual theology creates a dialogue with tradition that presses its inherited expressions to have greater integrity. Its own confessional practices are called into question and thus it introduces into the field of discussion the limits of other perspectives in understanding and insight. Theology is responsible for identifying what is genuinely human about life with God. It is challenged to express what it means to have life and communicate the truth in the world where we live. In this way theology is catalytic. Paul Lehmann, quoting T. S. Eliot, called it the “guardian of the human”. As “guardian” it “refuses either to subordinate the human to its own confession or to exclude from any identification of the human, the self-disclosing initiative of the God,”¹¹ the creator of our context and the shaper of revelation.

CHRISTIAN WISDOM AT WORK: A THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF CULTURAL MEMORY

Another important turn in thinking is the character of the problems we now address. The awareness of the social character of knowledge carries with it recognition that the problems we raise are addressed due to social and cultural dynamics. Effective thinking should not raise questions that are not helpful. David Kelsey and Kosuke Koyama have applied this insight to their theological work.¹² They will address questions that people actually ask. Theology, like contemporary philosophy, should be clear from the beginning for whom the problem exists and what new

11. Lehmann, “On Doing Theology,” 136.

12. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 1–3.

understanding concerning this problem can mean for those concerned.¹³ Debates between scholars concerning problems that Christians do not struggle with as they seek to be faithful should not be begun.

As philosophers of liberation theology have argued though, the difference in problematic does not imply a “hermeneutics of incommunicable histories.”¹⁴ If this were true, then the suffering of the global South would leave the oppressor of the developed North untouched and in rational distance and therefore innocence. The cruelties of the world’s economic reality committed throughout the modern and post-modern era would be irrelevant. This is to forget the violence of European colonial expansion. Such forgetfulness removes those who live on the periphery of the “developed nations” from sight. Is the world of the poor majority so unrelated to that of the wealthy minority that their incommensurability excludes helpful communication. The point of departure for liberation theology is that the reality of the social imagination of the wealthy can be related to that of the poor. As a result a global vision for a reconciled and humane world based upon a deeper understanding of the human condition will be possible. Liberation theology reminds us that when we discern the origin of problems we discover a critical framework for Christian responsibility. Understanding non-Eurocentric perspectives helps us to understand our own perspectives. The minimum requirement for the future of theology is the discovery of the commensurability and communicability across cultures and societies of the problems of human living and of faith.

13. This issue has been particularly important for liberation philosophers of the global South. Enrique Dussel, in speaking of the lack of “openness” and “creative capacity” among philosophers of the North, says that “the North has not paid any attention to the philosophies of the South when the former departs from its own problematics, from its own reality . . .” Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 213–17, esp. 213.

14. Cf. Stackhouse, “Contextualization, Contextuality, and Contextualism,” 8. In this article, Max Stackhouse rejects “contextualism” as an acritical acceptance of what is happening in a specific culture based on the argument that only those of that culture can understand it. Max Stackhouse supports the argument that there are boundary-crossing theories of justice and truth against theologians, such as Roger Haight and ethnic theologians such as Muriel Montenegro, who argue that cultural wisdom is not commensurable. Max Stackhouse argues that such theories cannot help us solve the problems of Christian theology, either global or local. They are anti-ecumenical and anti-ecclesial. Stackhouse’s point against ethnic theologies is well taken.

MEMORY, PRAXIS, AND BELONGING

A valuable contribution to the study of culture has been recognition by scholars of the role of memory in social life. Paul Ricoeur and Jan Assman are but two thinkers who have contributed to this discussion. Both are aware of the potential value that their work may bring to the discussion of the theological process. They begin with general observations about the social role of memory. Here are some of their insights.

All culture and society struggles with oblivion by remembering. Societies and communities labor ceaselessly to make visible, to articulate, preserve, and construct memories that struggle furiously against the disappearance and forgetfulness of meaning and identity. Culture creates markers on the road of history that prevent disintegration and stop the past from becoming meaningless. Language and other elements of culture are inseparable from the notes and content of memory itself.

The trauma of death through “disappearance” is rehearsed over and over again in Third World countries where governments practice murder against their critics. Can there be a greater threat than annihilation from the memory of one's own society? Language, politics, styles, artistic expression, and cultural developments unfold in time and space as expressions of memory. People attempt to preserve technologies of living in order to enable us to live well. Their formal consistency and guidance enable us to turn to the resources of culture to face challenges and gather wisdom for the future.

Language, culture, and political life are molded together as communities organize possible understandings of the world. They provide human beings with social reality and the capacity to imagine change. They form long-term memories and short-term memories. Long-term memories, for example, construct markers of belonging to a particular era or social group, like a family or the 60s. Short-term memories, in contrast, are reminders marking vital and not so vital moments of everyday living that affirm identity and meaning. Memory is by its very nature a confession that things change. Our expressions of memory are articulations that speed the cultural meaning of change. They hide under the cover of invisibility in the art of expressing the past. As Jan Assman put it, “the more actively the project of objectification, articulation, and notation is advanced, the more change there will be and the more forgetting.” In short, the more we embody our traditions the

longer they will be preserved.¹⁵ As Jan Assman puts it, “culture is not simply a matter of memory.” It constructs “techniques of preservation and principles of avoiding change that can effectively counter the tendency to vary, innovate and make accommodations. These strategies can be subsumed under the concept of ‘canonization.’”¹⁶ Culture is the way we hang on to the past. The canonization of texts is the way we shape our culture. In this way wisdom is not forgotten in the struggle against annihilation by time.

Language in written and oral forms serves the public memory of cultures as they strive for meaning. Such language makes visible authority in society, by structuring its display. Language within a Christian community, for example, is language that speaks of the past in order to prepare for the future. Public memory seeks to create monuments within our cultural space for the conveyance of wisdom and knowledge. The language of faith is such a language, when it is spoken in worship, for it fosters public memory for the purposes of the life of the community. As both Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas have noted, writing is an attempt to expand communication into time and space, while speech is a conveyance of lived and communicated meaning. It is not symbolically and culturally encoded so that it requires an interpreter, for if it were it would not be communication. Writing strives for the permanence of meaning and the preservation of wisdom, but it cannot ensure it. Writing is a medium of memory and not communication, and in so being aims at preserving culture so that the community can inhabit a meaning embedded environment.¹⁷ It is writing then that makes community possible. This is reflected by the fact that in the history of humankind writing appeared at the moment in human history when social structures such as states or cities appeared. Writing is what makes it possible to inhabit communities. It is cultural memory that makes a community of faith possible. The texts that enforce this cultural memory we call the Christian scriptures. They are the canon that makes Christian belief and practices possible.

Belonging to a faith community means sharing in the historical memory of that community. The past is the resource for cultural identity and group memory. Collective memory is what makes cultural mem-

15. Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, 83.

16. *Ibid.*, 84–85.

17. *Ibid.*, 87.

ory possible. For Christians, the memory of Jesus' crucifixion or of the Exodus event binds us as a people for whom knowledge conveyed by these memories is necessary for identity. Paul Ricoeur, a contemporary Christian philosopher, has discussed in detail the power of forgetting and of remembering. Memory is the capacity used in society to connect us to the cultural, political, and social resources that structure our lives.¹⁸ He argues that literary narratives (writing) and life histories (connective memory) are "far from being mutually exclusive," they "are complementary, despite, or even because of their contrast. This dialectic reminds us that the narrative is part of life, before being exiled from life in writing; it returns to life along the multiple paths of appropriation . . . at the price of unavoidable tensions . . ."¹⁹

Memory is the cultural resource that binds us together. Liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez are intent on reminding us of the violence of forgetfulness, with justified reason. He argues, it is only when we remember the poor and the victims of history that the "present acquires density and substance"; and only when we remember the suffering of the past that our memory conditions us for "creative liberty."²⁰ When we forget those who have "disappeared," we are participating in the act of violence that separated them from the world and us.

Recollection commits us to a religious and social identity. Our social culture, its institutions and structures, exists for the purpose of creating a framework for teaching and remembering. The canonical texts that engrave the truth upon the hearts of believers are the scriptures of our faith. They provide the symbolic markers that sustain the signs of Christian identity. The biblical texts of the Christian scriptures and the narratives they share offer the literate reader and listener cultural knowledge, which becomes cultural memory, when heard as a moment of public memory.

Writing and the community form a semiotic system of cultural memory that gives stability to the traditions, beliefs, and practices of

18. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, 152–63. Ricoeur's position can be contrasted with that of Nietzsche and Foucault who see memory as the will's memory, undergirding culture and community. For Nietzsche, especially, it is the will to power of the "civilizing process." For both, memory is the decisive precondition for human community and the precondition for culture.

19. Ibid., 163.

20. Gutiérrez, *Las Casas*, 457; Gutiérrez, "God's Revelation and Proclamation in History," 12.

the local church. Post-modern thinkers follow Nietzsche in regretting, what they call, the devouring spirit of cultural memory. According to Nietzsche, cultural memory subjugates and pacifies human beings according to the disciplines of modernity. Christians reject the nihilism of Nietzsche and recognize the power of memory to redeem us from destruction. In the Christian community, memory is the means for belonging to the resurrection people, the power of cultural wisdom, and the redemptive force that leads us to creative freedom and redemption. It is for this reason that the Christian community, the church, is essential for the formation of Christian identity. It is the church that offers the techniques whereby the wisdom of cultural texts can be retrieved.

The implications of these reflections for the theological process and for a theology of mission are broad and deep. Central to any understanding of the theological process, for example, must be the problems of memory and belonging. This recognition came early in the history of contextual theology. For example, Paul Lehmann noted as early as the 60s, prior to the rise of contextual theology, that the problems of theology cannot be abstract problems, which no one would ever ask about. He proposed this as the context of a reform in theological and ecumenical education. The problems should belong to those who reflect upon them. Theological problems are identifiable as they are recognized when the theologian “takes the concrete situation out of which it arises as a discipline of reflection and inquiry.”²¹ This recommendation was ahead of its time. Theologians are not accustomed to “listening” to the problems or questioning that arise on the periphery of their traditional problematic—that is, from the church itself. The concrete reality of the Christian community provokes theology. The practical reasoning of everyday Christian living is a provocation for theology because it gives prominence to the immediacy and concreteness of “doing theology” for the benefit of the Christian community. Theology serves the community as it seeks the integrity of its Christian praxis and practices. Theology accompanies the movement of ecclesial reflection, which “lives always in the present *out* of its past and fully *open* to the future.”²² The Christian community provokes theology as it lives with the faithful of the past and beyond them through its own witness.

21. Lehmann, “On Doing Theology,” 132.

22. Ibid.

Authentic theology, I argue, begins by asking who is asking the questions and what is involved? Theology begins when the search for God begins among people. Theology cannot simply be resolved by discovering the preferred discussion partner. It is not set in motion by our preferences, but by God's involvement in the world. Theology begins with the grace of God. For this reason the problem of revelation has priority over all other problems for theology, not just the problems raised by contextual theology.

When we identify God at work among people, we have no choice but to begin asking questions about the meaning of God's work here with the people whom God has touched. The sources of theology are not the result of doctrine, but of faith empowered by the work of God among a particular people. In this sense theology can be scholarly, but it originates in the church. In this sense theology can never belong to a particular individual, but always belongs to a particular community.

In that theology belongs to the church, it will need to examine what this entails by raising the question of revelation. Revelation is the knowledge we gain when God is made known among us; this is something that happens because God participates in the life of peoples and individuals.

Therefore, the primary measure of good theology is its accountability to revelation, understood as theological interpretations of biblical texts read and understood as scripture. As the biblical texts are interpreted their meaning for the faithful is remembered. This is the essential distinction. The wisdom that faith communities have gained is gleaned from such theological interpretations that shape our experiences of God's presence and involvement with the world and us. Such wisdom arises as the community of faith remembers the acts of God. Experience becomes revelatory for us when it gains the status of Christian wisdom within the Christian community. It gains this status through remembering. Such authority is then rooted in the experience we have of biblical texts when they are understood to be canonical for our faith community.

The relation of faith and the life of the church is built upon the authority of scripture. The practice and process of theology critically examines its own beliefs for the purpose of shaping the common life and religious identities of the community and its individual members. Theology is enmeshed in the process by which faith communities face problems inherent in the practice of churches. It can never be disentangled. The authority of scripture is appealed to whenever practices and

beliefs that are part of the life of a church are examined for their integrity and truthfulness. It is revelation, shaped by theological understanding, which helps the community preserve its integrity and remain faithful. Through practicing their beliefs in ways that are appropriate and adequate to the context of the members lives, the biblical story remains formative. This is how communities remain faithful to the mission of God in the world. It is how they remain faithful in their context.

Such theology is authentically contextual, due to the methods it uses to conduct its work. It can be articulated in a variety of modes. It can be stated in theological proposals about the way God relates to people and the world. It can be articulated as theories about how best to respond, so that the common life is properly shaped and aligned. It can recommend to the community that its response to God take forms of silence or artistic expressions that preserve an authentic and faithful common life.

Because the questions of Christian communities can never be resolved without reference to the person and work of Jesus, all theology begins with revelation in Jesus Christ, the one in whom their faith in God is based. Christian faith assumes that the knowledge of Jesus is decisive for understanding of God. Without knowledge of Jesus, it is impossible to live our faith with integrity and faithfulness. Our knowledge of God is aligned with and arises from our knowledge of Jesus, who is remembered to be God *pro nobis*.

Christian theology is not authentic, if it is not measured in terms of an adequate Christology. The person and work of Jesus is decisive for Christian practice and life. The Christian life is such, because it seeks to live responsibly in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Its practices have integrity if they comport with the canonical scriptures and therefore appropriately witness to the God implicitly or explicitly communicated in the sharing of the biblical story. Contextual theology is one of these practices. Contextualization shapes the theology of community life in terms of an adequate Christology. This is measure of its authenticity.

In that contextual theology is a reforming practice of Christian churches, it is constructed, not in terms of particular problems, as in the loci method of scholastic theology, but according to the praxis of community living. The locus is the quotidian reality of living in community. The ecclesial practices of theology are related to how theology is taught and is constructed by the believers and theologians. It also relates

to the context and the praxis of the Christian life. Systematic theology and scholastic theology can become artificial. Paul Lehmann called this the “creative iconoclasm” of theology. Doing theology prepares the community for the collapse of “its own idols,” as it exhibits the idolatry of other perspectives. The activity of theology is ecclesial reformation. It participates in the life of the church with the “ongoing dynamic character of the relationship between theory and praxis.” Theology arises as the church seeks integrity and faithfulness. It is not an intellectual system that prioritizes ideas and theories so that practices can be identified. The two, theory and practice, are inseparable. Clovdis Boff called their relationship a “mutual overlap that provides the possibility of both a theory of praxis and a praxis of theory.”²³ Praxis informs theory in that the practices of a community of faith shape and articulate the problems. The reform that arises is due to the fact that faith informs theory. In this way the pastoral practices of a church, as well as its history, traditions, memories, and the experiences of both the theologian and the community are elements of theological reflection that always inform the theoretical part of theological work.

23. Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, 211.