Introduction

Hopes that the future of theology lies among the new "contextual" theologies of the "new Christianity" abound. Could these theologies replace the theologies of the Atlantic cultures with their roots in ancient theology and doctrine? For some this hope has given carte blanche to any theology from the global South that calls into question traditional "Western" theology. For others the emergence of non-Western Christian thinking is insignificant for it seems to have little to add to the theological debate. I believe these claims to be misleading and disingenuous. The theologies of the "new Christianity" cannot be easily pigeonholed in anti-traditional garb, nor are they irrelevant for scholarship. Many theologians from the Third World, for example, are very traditional in their stances. They are struggling to provide theological guidelines for their churches. Our prejudices get the best of us when we picture the theologians of these lands as newly evangelized, for example. This is anything but the case; Latin American and Filipino churches, for example, are centuries old. Imagining their theologians to be new to the faith is evidence of our failure to come to terms with the new reality of the strength of non-Western Christianity.

We will see that what is new about these theologies is that they are holding up the importance of contextual methods in approaching the Christian life and faith. These theologies are new in the willingness to connect the proclamation of the gospel and the living of the Christian faith to the historical, socio-cultural, political and cultural realities of the people who attempt to be Christian in lands of the global South and East.[1] Their faith in Jesus Christ has led them to seek culturally and socially au-

1. A term that refers to global regions that are not "Western" is difficult to find. I will use the phrases "the global South" and the "new Christianity" to refer to the "non-Western" churches that have been established through the mission work of the Atlantic churches—the European and American churches from the continent, the USA, and Canada. Both terms are unsatisfactory in that they are neither all new nor all found in the southern hemisphere. The blurring of the boundaries is part of the discussion being addressed here.

thentic ways to contribute to the building up of the common faith shared by Christians everywhere and in all ages.

The insights of non-Western contextual theologies are to inform more than just their own communities. When insights about the process of theological reflection arise in any context they are commensurable and helpful across cultures. While this is a controversial point, there is a consensus that commensurability is a necessary characteristic of the theological processes of Christian faith communities. This is the common experience of Christian theologies around the globe. Two things that have been learned during the past several decades after contextual theology came on the stage are that Christology is vital and that the problem of the liberation of the oppressed and marginalized is unavoidable, given the depth of human poverty and suffering throughout the world. These insights belong now to the entire Christian tradition, exactly because of the development of contextual theology as part of the theological process of churches, both "new" and "established" worldwide.

The purpose of this book is to examine the changes in our understanding of theological processes in the life of the Christian churches due to the introduction of contextual methods. The examination will lead us to new insights into the nature of theological and ethical work of Christian communities. I will suggest strategies for enriching Christian theology arising from these insights. This introduction has initiated a change in the approach to the role of theological reflection for Christians that is of historic significance. Both scholars and church leaders are doing theology in new ways. They are driven by the conviction that contextual methods make it possible for theology to do what it is supposed to do. Throughout the Third World, for example, the expectation is widespread that the curriculum and theological formation programs of denominations, seminaries, and theological schools must be "contextual". Accordingly, theological education should never lose sight of the problems and realities of the churches and people that they serve. This is much easier expected than realized. There is much to improve, but the hope is authentic. Frequently, faculty and students complain that the expectation is stated but not instituted. The means and the understanding necessary to implement the expectation are not at hand. This has led, on the one hand, to the adoption of theologies that have little to do with contextual methods and, on the other hand, to the uncritical use of "Western" textbooks and modes of thinking. The failure to connect with the churches of the "new Christianity"

has led to works of non-Western scholars being unavailable in their own countries, but available in the West, and to theological developments in the Third World and the West that are not discussed or even shared with other Christians. Among Western theologians this lack of clarity has led to uncritical responses to Third World theology and philosophy, where an attitude of tolerant disinterest and voyeuristic curiosity abound. A goal of this book is to promote a deeper and more global understanding of the promise of contextual methods in theology for theological educators worldwide. My reflections are aimed at retrieving the significance of the use of contextual methods for Christian mission and theology, and thereby to foster ecumenical vision among Christian communities everywhere.

The neologisms, contextual theology and contextual method, are a product of the theological ferment during the period after WWII and the founding of the World Council of Churches. The concepts appeared in theological literature in early forms as the discussion about the theology of the "emerging" churches flared. In 1945 the first Henry W. Luce Professor of World Christianity at Union Theological Seminary in New York, the Chinese scholar Francis Cho-Min Wei, argued that Christianity must find an Asian cultural foundation whereby it could foster the mutual enrichment of Christians and cultures throughout the globe. He prophesied that the future depended upon the willingness of every culture and expression of the Christian faith to contribute to the dawning of a global Christian fellowship.[2] Soon afterward, Henry Paul Van Dusen proclaimed that "to an age destined to survive, or to expire, as 'one world,' we bring a world church." Van Dusen believed that world Christianity had become a world reality.[3] These insights were to be re-confirmed repeatedly in the decades ahead, with layers of new perspectives, promises, disappointments, and transformations.

The sense that something was dawning had sparked enthusiasm for the ecumenical movement and for theological education. In 1957 the Rockefeller Foundation established a fund for "contextualizing the gospel." In the 60s and 70s new ideas were floated that responded to the needs of newly post-colonial nations. In the 60s the scholars, Paul Lehmann and Daniel Van Allem, worked out a theological framework for contextual theology. In the 70s, Shoki Coe and the staff of the Theological Education

2. Wei, *The Spirit of Chinese Culture*, 28.
3. Van Dusen, *World Christianity*, 248ff.

Fund of the World Council of Churches, including James Burtness and Aharon Sapsezian, proposed using contextual methods in order to reform the theological education of the churches recovering from colonialism and world war.

One of the most influential developments of the new interest in contextual methods in theology was the birth in 1976 of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians or EATWOT. It was organized as a means to encourage Third World theologians. The first meeting occurred in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania and the focus was on the "emergent gospel." The struggle continues today. One of the more recent meetings occurred in Manila, Philippines in 1996 where they focused on the challenge of a just world order for Christian theology. Kofi Appiah-Kubi speaking at the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians held in Ghana in December of 1977 summarized the upshot of these new developments for theologians. He declared, "African theologians" are trying to "find a theology that speaks to our people where we are, to enable us to answer the critical question of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Who do you (African Christians) say that I am?'"[4]

Another organization that arose in response to the new interest in contextual theology is the Association of Theological Education in South East Asia. It was to this organization that Karl Barth wrote his final pastoral letter for *The South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Autumn 1969, encouraging them to "say that which you have to say as Christians for God's sake, responsibly and concretely with your own words and thoughts, concepts and ways! The more responsibly and concretely, the better, the more Christian!"[5] Later in 1972 this organization formulated a Critical Asian Principle with the intent to transform theological education and mission in South East Asia according to "contextual" principles.[6]

4. Appiah-Kubi and Torres, eds. *African Theology en Route*, viii.

5. Karl Barth, "Barth's Last Pastoral Letter," v.

6. The *Critical Asian Principle* was adopted by the ATSEA to provide the basic guidelines for doctoral research conducted by their graduate school, the South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST). It was proposed first in an article written for ATSEA by Ermito Nacpil in 1972 and then in the assembly of the Senate of SEAGST. Theology was to be conducted in terms of a frame of reference circumscribed by situational, hermeneutical, missiological, and educational areas of concern. These areas correspond to culture, scripture, tradition, experience, and reason serving as sources for theological work in the process of "contextualization," however it is perceived. See *Minutes of the Senate of SEAGST*, Bangkok, February 1972 and *Minutes of the Senate of*

In addition to the theologies from scholars from the global South, theologians from Atlantic nations, such as Lesslie Newbigin, James Cone, Douglas John Hall, and Jürgen Moltmann, have taken contextual methods seriously in their work. The theory of contextual methods is now part of theological study throughout the globe. It is becoming clear that contextual theology is necessary for helpful awareness of our era's reality, characterized by suffering, modernity, and political, philosophical, and economic pluralism. Mission, evangelism, and scholarship need to tackle the questions of context, or those of the quotidian breadth of everyday experience. The thin and abstract theologian of the past needs to be replaced with depth and concreteness in order to face the challenges of our global Christianity and the needs of local church communities rooted in their culture and their struggles.

The trenchant point of contextual theology is that theologians and pastors should take the lives of people seriously. It provides us with a means to measure the quality of our theology according to this expectation. Good theology keeps the church in touch with reality. It forces the church to see the world of its mission, work and proclamation. Through the use of contextual methods, theologians, pastors, and lay people can learn to speak each other's languages. In order to ensure that a healthy theology takes place, reality must be faced as we participate in the *missio Dei*. Contextual theology is the part of the theological process that intends to do just that. Many believe that the way we do theology has been changed forever by the recovery of the contextual. It is time to examine with rigor and faithfulness the drama that is unfolding.

SEAGST, 1972, GS7209. According to such an understanding, the task of theology and the mission of the church in a particular context were never to be separated.