

Preface

THE RECOMMENDATION TO USE contextual methods in theology is not new. As the global South began to recover from the blanket domination of the developed nations after World War II, theological educators assessed the situation and proposed new models of theological formation. Soon the expectation arose that theological education should be contextual. While there is some confusion about what this means, there is a consensus that the core curriculum for theological study in the global South should be contextual. This expectation is growing and not waning as the decades go by.

The situation is once again changing. As a new post-colonial reality took form, the failure to acknowledge the contextual nature of theology became acute. The advocacy of a link between Western culture and theology was discovered to be a danger weakening the integrity of communities of faith. Colonialism had led to ethnic humiliation and racist ideologies embedded in the sense of local identity. The distrust of local culture was and continues to be bound up with power struggles, social hierarchies, and social policing.

Some leaders believed that Western scholarship did not understand or address these issues and tended to ignore or marginalize the problems that they raised. The Western churches had their own problems and challenges. One has only to think of the current debate over homosexuality in the West as evidence for the current distrust that is evident around the world.

In addition Western missionaries and ideas are often experienced as foreign and unacceptably alien. The old question of cultural mediation has risen in a new context with new challenges. As modernization has raced in nations like India and China, the turn toward contextualization has taken on a new urgency. The struggles of the powerless have been fundamentally transformed and have consequently set the stage for new ecclesial realities. Around the globe these transformations have engendered new

spiritualities and a hunger for religious experience. The extraordinary growth of charismatic movements has altered the religious landscape so that it is no longer familiar. This lack of familiarity makes church leaders and theologians nervous. It is easier to react than respond.

Theologians today are facing a significantly different world than that of the 60s and 70s when the proposal to contextualize theological education was first made. A “new Christianity” has arisen as the epicenter of Christianity has moved away from the West and to the global South. We are just now beginning to realize the differences and what they may mean. Contextual theologies in the 60s and 70s became identified with the liberation theologies of Latin America and colluded often with the growth of nationalism in the Third World. These theologies could become ideologically laden and/or ethnic expressions. They are being re-configured and new theological and ecclesial paths are being forged. Current transformations are calling for the use contextualizing methods. Something new is happening and the need for contextualizing methods is apparent.

We can no longer simply repeat the traditional answers to old questions; we need to respond to the questions that are rising as the problem of what it means to be Christian in this new situation is being faced. As the profundity of the gospel is experienced in new contexts, the implications of this message for Christian living are being illumined. We are seeing this happening in new approaches to biblical and theological interpretation. It is becoming clearer that theology is not the work of an individual, but of the praxis and cultural mediation of concrete communities of faith. As Christians are facing new challenges of Christian living they are regrouping Christian traditions and wisdom for new purposes. The new search for understanding by the faithful around the globe can become a way to protect the “new Christianity” from the lure of illusion and preserve the desire for truth. Contextual theology’s role in making this happen is essential. Perhaps it can restore theology to its proper role to invite all to live according to the purposes of God. Contextual theology can remind us of the dangers of ignoring God in the face of the threat to life that our new situation entails. It can cement for us the connection between our work in the local church and the purposes of God for all of creation. It reminds us that our mission is part of God’s mission for the whole world.