

# Why Contextual Theology Matters for the Church

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## Biblical Basis of Contextual Theology

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*  
Colossians 1: 15–20

The passage cited above presents to us one of Paul's theological masterpieces. In this letter, Paul penetrates the heart of Asia Minor, where Colossae is located. He is confronted with a notoriously religious world that has diligently categorized the various pantheons known to them, as well as those unknown. Situated away from the Jewish cultural matrix, cross-cultural preaching is required. But since God is "the Lord of heaven and earth" (Acts 17:24), Paul makes a strong case for the place of Christ among the gods, and he is careful to locate him within that world as the one who made *everything* ("things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities") and as the one who "gives all men life and breath and everything else," as we know from Paul's encounter with Greek scholars in Athens (Acts 17:25). Even though to Gentiles Paul's is a "new teaching" which appears to a section of his hearers as "some strange ideas," he also seems to be "advocating foreign gods," a charge that in his time could be punishable by death (Acts 17:18b, 19b, 20). Indeed, preaching the Gospel is a life and death matter.

As the footprint of the Christian faith extended beyond the Jewish world, the

preaching of the gospel had to take into account the fact that its reception among the Gentiles remained at the mercy of its host and needed to find terms that could connect Jesus with that world and answer its spiritual questions. From the above example and other encounters in the historical movement and expansion of the Christian faith, Christianity may thus be seen to be “always a beggar seeking food and drink, cover and shelter from the cultures it encounters in its never-ending journeys and wanderings” (Mbiti 1970, 438). Likewise, it means that all true theology is necessarily contextual theology, addressing the quests for meaning and wholeness peculiar to each context. For us in our time, by extension, it means that Western theology too, which for a long time was held to be universal theology, is contextual theology, developed in response to Western questions and addressing Western issues. Like all other theologies, it too is open to cultural corruption.

Yet, this coming of the gospel into the world as a beggar may also be described as “the divine invasion of the world of man in the Incarnation,” bringing into unity all things, as had been intended right from the beginning of time when God walked on earth and communed with his creation face to face, and making possible “the mutual indwelling of God and man.” (K. Bediako 2014, 102). This unity of all things pertains also to everything that constitutes human cultures (language, religion, food, clothing, traditional customs, art, music, socio-political organization, etc.). For the fact that “from one man he [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth” and that it is God who “determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26f) implies that people cannot exist meaningfully without or outside their God-given cultures. In other words, it is in their religio-cultural setting that people relate both to God and to their fellow human beings as with the rest of creation, with culture understood as an attribute of the people, at the heart of which, as Kwame Bediako (2004) observes, is “the person, not objects or ritual observances.”

It is fascinating to think that it is God who intends that people, in their own respective God-determined cultural worlds, would “seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” That he is, after all, “not far from each one of us” is a matter that Paul advances further in his letter to the Romans, when he states that the gospel is “the power of God for the salvation of anyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentiles” (1:16). But if the people do not have to leave their world of self-apprehension in order to find God, how is the discovery made? Paul gives us the answer:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

The onus then is on the “sent ones” to relate the supremacy of Christ to the people in their worlds of meaning, without requiring them to be “circumcised,” or to remove their cultural clothing.

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## Importance of Contextual Theology for the Church

This brings us to the importance of contextual theology for the Church. So far I have avoided the complexities associated with the term contextualization. I have also chosen not to succumb to the temptation to define associated terms, such as inculturation, acculturation or enculturation (see Shorter 1988 for definitions; cf. Magesa 2004; Okure, Van Thiel, et al. 1990), and even “indigenization” (for instance, Idowu 1973), all of which can be contentious and confusing to many scholars, let alone ordinary believers. As far as the church is concerned, the discourse on contextualization must take a determinedly theological dimension. For, with regard to Christ and the whole creation, he remains the Lord over all.

Andrew F. Walls (1996), an acute observer of the history of Christian mission, remarks, “we are conditioned by a particular time and place, by our family and group and society, by ‘culture’ in fact” (7). The church is thus “a place to feel at home” (7). (Walls arrives at this understanding after surveying the phenomenon of Christianity in tropical Africa and while relating to the book by Welbourn and Ogot, *A Place to Feel at Home* [1966]). In other words, all theology and mission engagement must of necessity be contextual if it is to be effective in discipling the nations and enhancing the life and witness of the church.

Doing contextual theology is thus a cross-cultural as well as inter-cultural process that seeks, in Paul’s words, to “present the word of God in its fullness—the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations” and “to make known among the Gentiles [all nations or peoples] the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:25ff.).

Herein lies an even more fascinating thought, that those entrusted with the gospel, Gentile peoples, who might themselves be uninitiated into or unfamiliar with the biblical world of literature (Law, Prophets, and the Psalms/Holy Writings) as well as its customs and theological perspectives, also qualify as “agents” or operatives of the kingdom of God, having found the church a place to feel at home. He is, indeed, “God of the ‘heathens’ also” (Rom. 3:29; cited in Walls 1996, 56).

Because “all churches are culture churches, including our own,” theologizing in context is a task and a process that ends only with the attainment by the body of Christ of “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13; cf. Lk. 2:52 and 1 Sam. 2:26). God’s testimony among the nations (Acts 14:16-17)

is only possible when the peoples of those nations are able, in their own deep thoroughgoing knowledge, relationships, and practical situations, to proclaim Christ as their Lord and Master!

Walls (1996) is right to insist that “no group of Christians has therefore any right to impose in the name of Christ upon another group of Christians a set of assumptions about life determined by another time and place” (8). Because “we all approach Scripture wearing cultural blinkers,” says Walls, “different things from those hidden in our own blind spots” will emerge in connection with our growth as believers (12).

This point on unity is particularly urgent in a time of societal polarization along tribal, political, religious, and nationalistic ideologies, which threaten to tear communities apart. Yet, since cursing of others is done only in the mother tongue, it is deep indigenous theology, emerging supremely from theologizing in the mother tongue and illuminated by the mother-tongue Scriptures, that will cleanse the cursing mind (K. Bediako 2007, 28).

Also, with the rise of secularism in many societies in Africa and with the attendant tendency of the advocates of secularism to dismiss religion in general and Christianity in particular, it is incumbent upon the church to seek to first understand the concerns raised but then respond in the light of the gospel. Three major areas are desperately in need of Christian voices and action: the mainstream media, international conflicts, and the arts. The disregard for the *truth* and traditional societal values in the leading media is a concern that the church cannot ignore. Similarly, the church appears to have nothing to say or do in relation to the relentless beating of war drums and military interventions in foreign lands. Within the domain of the arts, a cursory glance at the recent creative writings in Africa reveals a well-articulated resistance towards, and even to a great extent a concerted assault on, the Christian faith that needs to be addressed.

If Jesus’ coming represents the new ideal, a divine-human incarnational ideal, this in itself is a new creative stage upon which the “things of God” and the “things of humanity” converge, without leaving any area untouched, in the eschatological resolution of the human predicament. But in specific terms, human beings at different times and places are endowed not only with indigenous resources for comprehending afresh the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all cultures but also with new treasures of knowledge, wisdom, and (mutual) understanding. As Christ is revealed anew, unknown aspects of the gospel become the vital correctives that in turn revive and sustain our own self-understanding, for example, in the understanding of worldviews and the role of the Holy Spirit, or his role in the transformation of ways of knowing, worldviews, and the interpretation of life and its meaning. In the same light, Christian faith is even more deeply anchored in

human history as a whole (Walls 2004, 6). Since the Incarnation was a cultural event and continues to be so as we reflect on the impact of the gospel of Jesus Christ upon our own lives and that of others, our theological engagement with culturally rooted questions becomes a deeply satisfying experience. To the African, for instance, an African-looking Christ becomes the answer to African religious and cultural questions and religious expectations. This is truly liberating in terms of our self-understanding as well as in relation to others outside our cultural matrix. Paul's exhortation in Colossians 2:8, 16–17, and 3:11 speaks to us all:

*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. ... Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ... Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

Jesus' own admission that everything about him "must be fulfilled that is written in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms [Holy Writings]" (Lk. 24:44) presents to us a Hebrew canonical framework that is useful in our affirmation of his appointment as "the heir of all things" (Heb. 1:1-2). It is not a surprise that Jesus' preaching, like that of Paul, was critiqued from within the Jewish context. He was in the world, but he was not captured by that "world," something that applies to all Gentile cultures too in which he has been named.

### — Theological Education, Christian Scholarship, and Indigenous Knowledge

Yet what of contextual theological education? Clearly, since the 19th century, the church has played a major role in the development of education in Africa, but Africa's scholarly credentials reach much further back than that, with the catechetical school founded in Alexandria by Pantaenus in the 2nd century and developed by his successors, Athanasius and then Origen (Walls 2006a, 19), constituting the first theological academy anywhere. Andrew Walls (2006a) reminds us how the church's role in scholarship has always been in line with Paul's vision in 2 Corinthians 10:5 to bring "every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ" (16). In the first century AD, the highest pursuit of the Jews, the Greeks, and the Romans may be summarized as light, knowledge, and glory respectively (2 Cor. 4:6), and it was with these aspirations that the church needed to engage in each context.

In terms of the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning, the university was set up to bring unity in diversity. From the oldest universities in Europe, we note that these were Christian institutions

with Christian, often biblical, mottoes and that theology was a pioneering discipline. Yet this history has been submerged in more recent times, with most modern academic institutions defining themselves as secular. In view of this historical development and the fact that culturally rooted questions for Christian scholarship arise whenever the gospel encounters people in their contexts, Christian scholarship becomes again a frontline vocation (Walls 2006b; Walls 2006c). It therefore remains the calling of the church, in the spirit that animated early Christian intellectuals such as Justin, Clement, and Origen, those exemplars whose task involved “thinking the Christian faith into the fabric of thought” (Walls 2006a, 21) of the societies they represented, to proclaim the supremacy of Christ in life and thought and to acquire the tools to do so.

In connection with Christian scholarship, the church must heed the warning that Andrew Walls (2006d) sounds: “We should be wary of using a particular period of Christian history as our main reference point, such as, for example, the Protestant Reformation of sixteenth-century Europe” (34). His assessment is that “the redemptive process of God is *cross-generational*” as well as cross-cultural (35), and the church must expand its theological horizons accordingly to meet contemporary challenges. In this way, the church would stand a chance of rescuing the academy from inevitable decay, just as it rescued the Greek academy in the early centuries (Walls 2006a, 19).

In specific terms, however, indigenous knowledge systems must be taken not only as intellectual resources but also as spiritual resources, for in these cultural treasures are to be found new perspectives for the propagation of the gospel. (For a European example of the way in which indigenous resources are drawn upon in the affirmation of Christ, see G. Bediako 2006.) This is so because, in the words of an Akan Christian scholar who followed in the footsteps of early Christian thinkers:

Ancient wisdom is the testimony of God’s presence in the culture, and therefore needs to find a place in the new dispensation in the continuing renewal of society. In other words, the renewal of society is not achieved by jettisoning the spiritual roots of ancient wisdom but by the redemption of the totality of culture and history and their application in new settings (Danquah 1927, 11; Danquah 1997; cf. K. Bediako 2006, 36).

## Conclusion

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If indeed in Christ are found the fullness of God and the glorious treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col. 1:25, 2:3), this understanding ought to compel us all to reach out to others and in openness learn to share in their discoveries about Christ, even as we share with them our cultural treasures. This is the role that the Gentile culture played when the gospel crossed the Jewish frontier into

the culturally pluralistic Greco-Roman world and beyond and secured the faith for future generations. Contextual theology thus becomes a corrective to the tendency towards theological imperialism that has infected Christian affirmation for several centuries. It provides a valuable perspective for the Western church, for in addressing human issues that are culture-specific, it points the way for Western theology to reconnect with the church's witness to the cultures in which it is set and strengthen its prophetic voice. Because everybody's contextual theology matters, we must learn from one another.

Also, if incarnation is “the Scriptural paradigm of all cross-cultural transmission of the gospel, whereby Jesus is to become incarnate in all cultures,” as Gillian Bediako notes (2011, 2), all theological questions, then, must be rooted in the cultural context of the people. With as many valid ways of reflecting Christ as possible, the church is better equipped and empowered in knowledge, wisdom, and understanding to promote a fellowship and a unity among the faithful that defies all those things that point away from Christ. In other words, all the life-giving essences in creation are unleashed against any death-dealing aspects that threaten the wellbeing that Christ promises. Also, as the things that unite us continue to hold fast in Jesus, the influence of Christ increases among the nations, whilst the things that divide us diminish. All of this is in preparation for that New Jerusalem, where “a great multitude that no one would count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (Rev. 7:9), shall display “the glory and honour of the nations” (Rev. 21:26), singing the one song in honor of the Lamb.

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