6. Contexts and Theological Methods

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"I believe strongly that there is, in reality, no 'theology' as such—no 'universal' theologies—there are only contextual theologies." Stephen B. Bevans makes this statement at the beginning of *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*.[1] To some, this may seem a truism. In a world keenly aware of cultural flows encountering one another, we assume that everything we say and do is influenced in some manner by the contexts in which ideas are born, shaped, and articulated. But embedded deeply within us is also a sense that those things most important to us somehow transcend space and time. We sense too that, if everything we say or do were utterly bounded by our contexts, then communication across those boundaries of contexts would be impossible, and we would all be locked into small enclosed worlds. We are deeply aware of how important it is to be able to cross those boundaries to foster the communion and solidarity necessary to make this a livable world.

In Christian faith we hold that God's revelation, though given "to our ancestors in many and various ways" (Heb 1:1), does indeed speak to every time and place, and that Jesus Christ is indeed "the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6) for all of humankind. Yet it falls to us, as finite beings, to craft that revelation into words. This poses a potential hazard for theology: in trying to speak of the transcendent and infinite God, we can fall into the trap of thinking that our speaking about God bears the same transcendence as its subject. Remembering that we must always use language (and there are over six thousand varieties of language on the planet today), and that we are finite beings, we must constantly remind ourselves that our utterings about God always bear the stamp of our finitude.

Most theologians have been at least somewhat aware of this limitation of theology. It has long been the custom to talk of two kinds of theology: cataphatic theology (what we are able to say about God), and apophatic theology (how God transcends the best human efforts to speak about God). It is especially in the mystical traditions that people become aware of how far human language falls short of speaking about God in any adequate way. Yet the urge to enter into the divine reality urges theologians on to draw near to God as closely as they can.

What has come to be called contextual theology is a way of doing theology that never loses sight of the fact that we speak out of distinctive contexts. This awareness began to coalesce in a special way in the middle of the twentieth century. Important social and cultural shifts going on in the world at that time led to a new sense that all theology was shaped by context: that is, not reduced to its context, but never free from its contexts either.

This chapter explores how theology came to be constructed and read more closely in terms of its contexts. It begins by tracing the history of how this awareness came about. Then it looks at how this awareness developed from the mid-twentieth century to the present time. In a third part it presents one of the significant ways found to show the varieties of interaction between theology and its contexts. And finally, it looks to the future of contextual theologies—the challenges such a way of doing theology will encounter.

HOW CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES DEVELOPED

There has long been awareness that the Christian message must be expressed in ways intelligible to specific contexts. This was already obvious in Paul's attempt to recast the Christian kerygma to the philosophers on the Areopagus in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 17:16–32). Although terms like *context* and *culture* would not be used until much later, references to *custom* and *adaptation* captured some of the spirit of what would eventually come to be called contextual theology. Widely known too is Pope Gregory the Great's admonition to Augustine of Canterbury, as he began his mission to England at the turn of the seventh century: "The temples of the idols in that nation should not be destroyed, but let the idols that are in them be destroyed; let holy water be made and sprinkled in the said temples, let altars be erected, and relics placed."[2]

An even more distinctive moment in Christian history of awareness of context came with the missionary efforts of the East Syrian Church to China in the seventh and eighth centuries when, at the Christian center in Chang'an, there appears to have been close collaboration between Christian and Buddhist monks, so much so that "for the purpose of communicating the Christian Message, and for the deepening of their own faith-life in the Messiah, they [the Christian monks] employed Buddhist terms, expressions, and symbols."[3] A remarkable document from that era gives an explanation of the Christian faith within the contextual framework of a Buddhist sutra.

With the voyages from Europe beginning in the late fifteenth century, the experience of Christians from that region encountering peoples whose languages and customs were utterly different from their own only intensified. The Office of the Propaganda Fide in Rome issued instructions in 1659 that showed a sensibility to context, even though the reasons behind it were not given conscious expression:

> Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their customs, manners and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain,

Italy, or some other European country to China?[4]

But such advice was not always followed; indeed, it may have been honored more in the breach than in the application.

In the twentieth century a number of factors converged that laid the groundwork for doing theology with special attention to context. Four factors in particular may be singled out here.

First of all, what has come to be called the modern sense of culture emerged in the study of human societies.[5] This development began already in the second half of the eighteenth century. Before that time, *culture* referred to the highest artistic achievements of a people in their music, literature, and art. This is an understanding of culture that continues to this day and is often now referred to as the classical notion of culture. Alongside this older approach another meaning of *culture* arose within German Romanticism that saw culture as the genius of any given group of people. Johann Gottfried Herder captured the idea by seeing culture as a trinity of three things: the territory, language, and customs of a people. This modern sense of culture pointed to the fact that every people has culture—not just the elites of a given people. This meaning of *culture* as the combination of territory, language, and customs became the basis for the study of peoples in what was to become cultural anthropology and the other social sciences. As such, it became the place for analyzing the distinctive elements that make up a people's culture.

The second factor in the development of contextual theologies was the appropriation of this modern understanding of culture by Christian missionaries and then, shortly after that, by the people to whom the missionaries had been sent. Rather than seeing the worldviews and customs of missionized peoples as either inspired by demons or other form of error, it became possible to articulate an appreciation for how local settings dealt with the problems of human existence and found ways of organizing their lives together. From the side of those who had been evangelized, this sense of culture became a basis for asserting their own human values and also for resistance to efforts to impose foreign cultural ways upon them. By the 1950s and 1960s, a new cultural sensitivity was making itself felt in missionary work. An important text that informed much of this early development was Divine Word Missionary anthropologist Louis B. Luzbetak's *The Church and Cultures: Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker*.[6] With this and similar works, tools were becoming available to analyze the various dimensions of culture.

Raising questions about differences in context between Europe and colonized countries in Africa and Asia came not only from the missionaries but from the peoples themselves. In 1955, a group of young African scholars studying in Paris came together and posed serious questions about the theology they were being taught and how their own cultures were being ignored or depreciated by church leaders.[7] This sentiment would only increase in the subsequent decades, as decolonization got under way. By the 1970s the anticolonial voices of young theologians would gather as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), meeting first in Dar es Salaam in 1976 and then on a regular basis around the world in the years to follow.

In a similar sentiment in Protestant circles, Shoki Coe, a Taiwanese theologian who was to become the director of the Fund for Theological Education of the World Council of Churches, introduced the idea of theology as the interpretation of the scriptures in an ever-changing array of contexts. He called this contextual theology.[8]

A third factor leading to the rise of contextual theologies was the endorsement of the concept of culture by the fathers at the Second Vatican Council. Chapter 2 of the Second Part of the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)* is devoted to the concept of culture, and in other documents of the council—especially the *Declaration of Missionary Activity (Ad gentes)*—attention to culture in the formation of missionaries and others is encouraged. The understanding of culture used in these documents is a combination of classical and modern concepts of culture. In *Gaudium et spes*, *culture* is defined initially as referring to "all those things which go to the refining and developing of diverse mental and physical endowments" (GS 53). But right after that the constitution acknowledges that "culture necessarily has historical and social overtones, and the word 'culture' often carries with it sociological and ethnological connotations; in this sense one can speak of a plurality of cultures" (ibid.). In relation to this plurality of cultures the document states that "the Church has been sent to all ages and nations and, therefore, is not tied exclusively and indissolubly to any race or nation, to any one particular way of life, or to any customary practices, ancient or modern. . . . It can, then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves" (GS 58). Put another way, this means that the good news of Jesus Christ can in principle find a home in any culture and is not beholden to any single culture. In *Ad gentes* the implication of this for education for ministry is made clear: "Therefore, the minds of students must be opened and refined so that they will better understand and appreciate the culture of their own people; in philosophy and theology they should examine the relationship between the traditions and religion of their homeland and Christianity" (AG 16).

Pope Paul VI carried these assertions of the council documents further in his travels and in his pronouncements.[9] In his Apostolic Letter *Africae terrarum* in 1967 and his address in Kampala in 1969 he said that the people there should be both truly Christian and genuinely African. The 1974 Synod of Bishops addressed the question of evangelization in the modern world. The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* that followed in 1975 gave a firm foundation for considering culture and context in theology. As British theologian Aylward Shorter has said, "It offers an advanced theology of a multicultural church that has probably not been surpassed by any other official document. . . . As a basic statement of the issues involved, it is unrivalled. Subsequent papal and synodal documents have been no more than additions or corrections."[10] *Evangelii nuntiandi* recognizes the complexity of cultural settings and the many dimensions of the reception of the gospel message in those cultures. Important too is the fact that it does not focus on the role of the missionary as evangelizer as much as on the role of those receiving the message and how they give it shape within their own ways of thinking.

With Pope John Paul II, the word *inculturation* became part of official Vatican vocabulary. The term was first used in Jesuit circles in 1973 and carried with it an implicit theology of how gospel and context interact. The gospel message enters into culture

just as the Second Person of the Trinity, the Word, entered into human existence: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14). The term *inculturation* is intended to carry echoes of the theological concept of incarnation. *Inculturation* has been the preferred term in Roman Catholic documents. Among theologians and missionaries it is used more or less interchangeably with *contextual theology*.

Pope John Paul II first used the term in 1979, in the Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi tradendae*, which followed the Synod of Bishops' 1978 meeting on catechesis. This pope was deeply committed to an explicit appreciation of the role culture plays in transmitting the gospel. This grew, no doubt, from his experience of how the Polish church carried and sustained Polish culture for the more than 120 years when there was no Polish state itself and rival powers in Germany, Austria, and Russia tried to extinguish Polish identity. In 1982 he established the Pontifical Council for Culture. Although this Pontifical Council has been more concerned with preserving culture in its classical sense, its interest in the consequences of secularization in European cultures clearly intersects with the interests of contextual theology.

A fourth factor was greater attention among Catholics to the social and urban context. In the 1920s, Joseph Cardijn, a Belgian priest, led efforts to engage young factory workers in responding to their respective situations from the perspective of the gospel. He developed a methodology based on three moments: see-judge-act. People needed first to observe their situation closely, then make a judgment about what was going on in the light of the Gospel, and then act on that judgment. This simple method provided the basis for Catholic social action, in which the social problems facing people could be named, analyzed, and acted upon. As time progressed, that "seeing" came to be known as reading the signs of the times, echoing Jesus's words in Matthew's Gospel (16:3) where he berates his listeners for not knowing how to read the weather and, by extension, what is going on. The concept of signs of the times was taken up in Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in terris* in 1963 and introduced also into *Gaudium et spes* in 1965.

European missionaries who volunteered for work in Latin America starting in the 1950s took this methodology with them, where it melded with parallel efforts being developed in parts of the church there. The social problems facing Latin America—widespread poverty and inequality, oppressive military regimes that replaced democratic government, economic colonization by the United States, and other things—proved to be a fertile ground for the see-judge-act methodology. This came fully into the picture in 1968, when the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America (CELAM) met in Medellín in Colombia to reflect on the meaning of the Second Vatican Council for Latin America. During the council the pastoral agenda had been dominated by European problems, especially atheism and Communism. Latin American bishops tried to draw attention to the problems of poverty and social and economic oppression. They did get a hearing from many sympathetic ears, but the "more urgent problems" treated in the second part of *Gaudium et spes* reflected more on North Atlantic issues.

What the Medellín Conference became, in effect, was the inculturation of the thinking of the Second Vatican Council in the Latin American context. Here the cries of the poor and the need for liberation from all the forms of oppression took center stage. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians had begun working on this before Medellín, but it was that conference that set the tone for an inculturated theology that could grapple with the challenges of social change. Shortly after Medellín Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez wrote *A Theology of Liberation*.[11] This landmark publication caught the tenor of the forces of social change in Latin America. It quickly became clear that it captured the imagination of theologians and church workers everywhere who were dealing with problems of poverty, oppression and, exclusion.

These four factors, then, set the stage for the development of contextual theologies, beginning in the 1970s.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES FROM THE MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the 1970s and 1980s contextual theologies developed along two tracks that often intersected: seeking a genuine Christian *identity* in the cultural context, and responding to *social change* from the perspective of the gospel.

Contextual Theologies as Seeking Christian Identity

One the one hand, there were contextual theologies that focused especially on issues of *identity*. This was a response to one of the defining features that drew attention to context in the first place. As was seen earlier, there was a strong sense in the churches in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific that the theology that was coming out of Europe did not speak to their concerns. This European theology either provided answers to questions no one was asking, or failed to address the pressing issues that local churches had. This was especially the case in countries that were gaining their independence from European colonization in this same period. The theology that had been given them was rooted in Western cultures. Those same Western cultures, as colonizers, had denigrated their local cultures, implying that to become Christian one had to relinquish those cultures and adopt European ways of thinking. Likewise, with independence many of these countries (especially in Africa and parts of Asia) wanted to steer a political path between liberal capitalism, on the one hand, and communism, on the other, which at that time defined geopolitics. Many sought a "third way" between capitalism and communism, echoing the "third-world" vision that had marked the conference of "non-aligned" nations held in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. In Tanzania, for example, President Julius Nyerere spoke of *ujamaa* as such a third way, while Leopold Senghor in Senegal spoke of *negritude*. Theologies that followed this call tried to build an interpretation of the Christian message using local cultural and social categories. Examples of such efforts in Africa would include the work of Ugandan theologian John Mbiti, Congolese theologian Benezet Bujo, and Japanese theologian (working in Thailand)

Kosuke Koyama.[12] Alongside such efforts, books appeared that worked with the anthropological and sociological categories that could help shape a theology in its cultural context.[13]

Contextual theologies in postcolonial contexts were not the only kinds of theologies of identity that were emerging at this time. Especially in the United States, feminist theologies began to appear, appealing to women's experiences as the basis for doing theology beyond the male, patriarchal perspective. These theologies addressed not only cultural issues of how gender was understood, but issues of needed social change in line with the liberation theologies of Latin America.[14]

Also in the United States at this time theologies focusing on race and liberation appeared among Protestant African American theologians. A leader throughout this period has been James Cone, whose publications span half a century.[15] In turn, the work of Cone and other US African American theologians influenced the "black theology" that developed in South Africa that focused upon the struggle against apartheid in that country.

The voices of Hispanic/Latinx theologians in the United States began to be heard in the 1970s as well. The leading figure on the Catholic side was certainly Virgilio Elizondo, whose work on *mestizaje* (the mixing of Spanish and indigenous identities) and popular religion set the stage for a flourishing of theologies from that period on into the present.[16]

Later, in the early part of the 2000s, queer theologies followed a similar trajectory, focusing on issues of identity and distinctness as well as themes of liberation from discrimination and exclusion.[17]

Notable in all of these theologies of identity—feminist, black, latinx, and queer—is that themes of identity and social change or liberation merge. We will return to this theme later. But for now, we need to look at contextual theologies that focus on social change.

Contextual Theologies Seeking Social Change: The Theologies of Liberation

As we have already seen, the see-judge-act methodology of the Young Christian Workers helped launch a new approach to the question of social action based on a reading of the context and a reading of the gospel. This methodology found a fertile location in the turmoil of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. What was needed was a way to look at all the dimensions of social change; a way of analyzing persistent social issues such a grinding poverty, discrimination, exclusion, and misuse of power; how the scriptures throw light upon these realities; and what would be Christian responses to these challenges. What became obvious is that all these social forces could not be looked at in isolation from one another; one needed a comprehensive analytic method or tool to lay bare the patterns of power and oppression behind these social realities. The early focus was especially on economic and social factors: What were the causes of poverty? What made poverty persist? How did the use of economic and social power twist human relationships to create and sustain unjust patterns in society? Of the comprehensive critiques of society that had emerged since the Industrial Revolution in Europe, the work of Karl Marx stood out in an important way for its keen analysis of the exploitation of workers in the new industrial arrangements that emerged in the nineteenth century. Other models—such as those of Max Weber in Germany or sociological models such as those developed by Talcott Parsons in the United States—did not exhibit the same incisive power. Marx's early work in the 1840s, prior to his 1848 *Communist Manifesto*, about the dehumanizing features of the emergent capitalism was of special interest to those seeking a vision of a more humane existence under what capitalism had become. To be sure, the social projects based on Marxian analysis that were attempted in the twentieth century (Soviet Communism, Maoism in China, smaller socialist movements elsewhere) raised legitimate questions about the adequacy of his analysis. Latin American scholars were more interested in Marx's analysis of worker oppression than the prescriptions for a new society that people like Lenin or Stalin or Mao had drawn from them. Theologians also heard behind Marx's analysis the voices of the great Hebrew prophets who had spoken out against the oppression of the poor by the rich and the powerful. (Marx's father had converted to Christianity from Judaism as part of a strategy of assimilation found in the German-speaking world of the early nineteenth century.) Some scholars have found the general shape of Marx's thought to be a kind of secularized version of Jewish and Christian eschatology. The privileging of the perspective of the poor and the oppressed (in the scriptures, as especially beloved of God) certainly had biblical resonance, as Gutiérrez pointed out in *A Theology of Liberation*. Jesus's own charter for his ministry, as recounted in the synagogue incident in Nazareth in Luke 4, carries these same resonances. While a few Latin American theologians utterly embraced Marx, the great majority found in his work its actual antecedents in the prophetic traditions of the Bible.

Thus, a focus on the sufferings of the poor and oppressed peoples, and what might count as liberation from this oppression into the fullness of human life, shaped the methodology of contextual theologies that focused especially on social change. From these origins in Latin America, theologies of liberation spread rapidly to South Africa, among the low-caste and no-caste peoples of India (where it came to be known as *dalit* theology), and in the struggles for democracy in South Korea (the *minjung* theologies). Indeed, the theologies of liberation in all their different forms and locations were perhaps the most prominent forms of contextual theologies through the rest of the twentieth century. Efforts were made to develop liberation theologies in Europe and the United States as well, and many theologians, students, and church workers closely identified with the struggles of their counterparts in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. These attempts gave voice to oppressive situations in those parts of the world but never gained the cachet that they experienced in what would come to be called the "two-thirds world" (that is, where two-thirds of world's population lived) or the "global South" (as opposed to the global North, the home of capitalism and empire).

Theologies of liberation experienced two sets of distinctive challenges in the 1980s and the 1990s. When these theologies had begun in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, nearly every country in Latin America was under some form of military rule,

where political power had been seized from democratically elected leadership. This provided a powerful context for theology as a site of resistance to these violent and often ruthless *juntas*. By the end of the 1980s nearly all of these countries had returned to some form of democratic rule. Democracy came after more than two decades of dictatorship in South Korea in the 1980s. Apartheid (at least as a political reality) ended in South Africa in 1994. While poverty and forms of social oppression still remained, the loss of such concrete objects of resistance made maintaining the struggle in its original form more difficult. In the grassroots communities which in many countries had been powerful sources of resistance, people turned their attention from political struggle to other ways of bettering their lot. Not coincidentally, Pentecostal forms of faith began spreading rapidly in parts of Latin America and coastal regions of Africa at that time. The rapid economic growth in South Korea seemed to muffle the militant voices of the *minjung* movement. All of these events showed how deeply context shapes these theologies of social change. When social change does indeed come (however imperfectly, for much poverty, alienation, and oppression still remain), the shape of these theologies has to change.

The second set of challenges to the theologies of liberation came from within the churches, especially the Roman Catholic Church as regards Latin America. Before that time the church was often closely allied with the wealthy sector of society, an arrangement that went back to colonial times when colonization and Christianization often went hand in hand. The "irruption of the poor," as it was so graphically called in Latin America, challenged those social arrangements and alarmed those holding ecclesiastical power. Although there were bishops who stood in solidarity with the poor, the Vatican under Pope John Paul II and his Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (who would succeed Pope John Paul II as Benedict XVI in 2005) worked to stop theologies of liberation. The concern was not just a shift in ecclesiastical power; there were theological concerns as well. It was felt that the prophetic dimensions of liberation theology owed more to Marxist revolutionary thinking than the prophetic tradition of the Bible; that liberation theology sought too much salvation in this-worldly change; that the anthropology at the basis of liberation theologies was built on antagonism between the classes rather than a vision of *koinonia* or communion. All of these points would be debated by those for or against the theologies of liberation, but it gave the church authorities the basis for action against this kind of contextual theology. Bishops were named who took a strong anti-liberationist stand. The major theologians of liberation all came under scrutiny and in some cases were silenced. Institutions teaching theology from the perspective of liberation theology were shut down.

In the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century efforts were undertaken to reorient theologies of liberation, especially in Latin America. Theologians there reexamined their work and made some important adjustments. Most notably, the plight of indigenous peoples on the continent had never received the attention that working-class people and peasants had received. This was now righted, as a *teologia india* or *teologia indigena* was developed to complement what liberation theologies had been doing. In Africa, theologians such as Charles Villa-Vicencio in South Africa and Kenyan theologian Jesse Mugambi proposed theologies of reconstruction. Both tried to maintain the prophetic energies of the theologies of liberation but suggested that the efforts required a new focus on what kind of social change was needed. In the case of South Africa, now that apartheid was being overcome, the guiding biblical metaphor for theology would no longer be the Exodus story, where God led the Hebrews out of slavery, but rather would be the story of the return from Exile and the need to rebuild the Temple and Jerusalem. Mugambi suggested that the focus of social change should be shifted away from apartheid to Africa's current problems, such as corruption, lack of democracy, and alleviation of poverty.[18] In a somewhat similar manner Francophone theologians of Western Africa had been doing this combination of cultural identity and social change for quite some time.[19]

A significant part of the energy that once guided theologies of liberation found a new focus in anti-globalization movements. Globalization appeared to many as the successor to the colonial empires that had shaped the previous generation of theologies of cultural identity and social change—and there are great continuities. Some of this theology has been given voice in a second generation of postcolonial theologies. The first generation, as we have seen, worked to find a "third way" between Cold War ideologies. This second generation mapped out more clearly the enduring effects of the colonization that continues in what might be called a "colonization of the mind" that continues to haunt the life and theology of formerly colonized peoples today. That analysis is enriched also by race and gender studies that have grown since the 1970s.[20]

The voices of the theologies of liberation continue to be heard in venues such as the World Social Forum, founded in 2001 as an alternative to the World Economic Forum, which meets in Davos, Switzerland. The World Social Forum is a space where anti-globalization movements, initiatives in social and ecological justice, and other alternative movements seek to show that another world is possible, that is, one in which the vision of social change found in the contextual theologies of liberation might be realized.

MAPPING CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES: THE WORK OF STEPHEN B. BEVANS

Is there a way of making sense of, or ordering, the many different approaches to contextual theology that have developed since the 1970s? A book by US theologian Stephen Bevans in 1992 provided a way of mapping the array of contextual theologies that had grown up in the world up to that time. In 2002 he published an expanded and revised edition of the book that reflected developments since the first edition. It remains one of the most widely used sources for understanding the various contextual theologies that have been mentioned so far and how they relate to one another.

Models of Contextual Theology provides six models of how theology and context have been related since the rise of contextual theologies in the 1970s.[21] Bevans uses *model* in a sense similar to that of Avery Dulles, whose book *Models of the Church* brought

this way of thinking into theology, defining a model as "a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated."[22] A little earlier, anthropologist Clifford Geertz had made a distinction between "models of" and "models for": "models of" provides a framework of describing a phenomenon, and "models for" offers also implicit guidelines for evaluating a given phenomenon in light of similar phenomena.[23] Bevans explicitly moves between these two meanings of models and notes too that the use of one model does not preclude working with other models as well. Models, as Dulles had put it, are artificial constructions; they do not exist in pure form in reality. But they help us guide our thinking and make differentiations in a more responsible way.

The first of Bevans's six models is called the *translation model*. Here attempts are made to translate the divine revelation into terms intelligible to one's interlocutors. Paul's speech in Athens on the Areopagus (Acts 17:16–32), in which Paul tried to communicate Hebrew realities into Hellenistic terms, is an example of this. A translation-model approach lay behind many of the early attempts at contextual theology in the twentieth century. It was especially strong in Protestant circles, where the missionary task was seen first of all as a translation of the Bible into the local language. Indeed, that was behind the earliest usage of the term *contextual theology;* it was a translation of the (biblical) text into a new con-text. This seldom meant a literal word-for-word translation. Rather, following the growing sophistication of translation in linguistic circles, it was an attempt at "dynamic equivalence," that is, a translation that captured the wider resonances of the original text inside the world of the hearer. A translation model approach to contextual theology is often still the first attempt at a contextual theology that is plied by the outsider to a culture trying to make sense of the biblical message in a new setting.

The *anthropological model* is a second approach to contextual theology. Here one tries to correct or somehow overcome the shortcomings of the translation model by shifting the emphasis away from the speaker to the hearer. The emphasis is on the cultural integrity of the one receiving the message, which may mean that the message being communicated may in the first instance end up looking very different from what the speaker had intended. An early example of this is Justin Martyr, who in the second century spoke of the "seeds of the word" being planted in different soil. The seed is the authentic revelation, but the shape it takes as it grows will be shaped by the soil in which it has been planted. The anthropological model was used especially by theologians who wanted to use the language and thought categories and patterns of a local people to bring forth a new yet authentic presentation of the Gospel. Theologians such as José de Mesa in the Philippines, Diego Irarrázaval in Peru, and Laurenti Magesa in Tanzania are examples of how to use the anthropological model.[24]

The *praxis model* is the third model that Bevans presents. If the anthropological model focuses especially on issues of cultural identity and authenticity, the praxis model tries to capture the dynamics of cultural change. The word *praxis* has different meanings, but here it is most often meant to represent the dynamic of action and thought in tandem. Action is always informed by some existing pattern of thinking. When action is analyzed, these patterns of thought should come to fore and, in turn, be changed by the experience of action itself. Hence, action and thought mutually qualify, challenge, and develop each other. The theologies of liberation discussed earlier are perhaps the best examples of this. The prophetic Christian message demands action. And that action returns us also to reflecting once again on that message. This approach to contextual theology is, then, in constant dialogue with the changing social situation in which Christians find themselves.

Bevans's fourth model, the *synthetic model*, might be considered an attempt to keep the dynamics of the previous three models in constant relation with one another. The emphases of each of these models—the integrity of the gospel message, the dignity and authenticity of the culture to which the gospel message is addressed, and the need to confront the social environment with the message of the gospel—can, by themselves, become one-sided and miss the important emphases of the other approaches. Bevans suggests that another name for the synthetic model might be a "dialogical model," since it emphasizes holding the values of all three of these models together. US theologian David Tracy's understanding of theology as conversation would be an example of this approach, working toward what he calls "mutual critical correlation" of revelation and human experience.[25]

The fifth model Bevans presents is the *transcendental model*. At first sight this may sound confusing, in that calling something transcendental implies that it rises above or beyond context. In his later reflections Bevans has suggested that it might also be called a *subjective model*, that is, it strives to refine and express the subjectivity and the authenticity of the one doing theology.[26] The use of the philosophical vocabulary of the transcendental can be traced back to Kant, who sought to have the human subject be the sole agent of genuine thinking, unencumbered by other influences. One might question whether this model really can travel out of its own cultural confines—a Western and Kantian heritage. Nonetheless, the theology that has flowed from this concentration on human subjectivity has been immensely influential in Roman Catholic circles, with thinkers such as the German Karl Rahner and the Canadian Bernard Lonergan among its users. Whether human subjectivity sorts itself out in transcendental reduction in the same way across cultures remains a contested point. Nonetheless, the widespread use of such an approach needs to be taken into any consideration of contemporary theology.

The sixth model Bevans proposes is called the *countercultural model*, something he first proposed in the second edition of his book on models. This model acknowledges the importance of the cultural context in which theology is being done, but unlike the previous ones, is highly critical of the context in which it finds itself and wonders whether such a culture can be a partner to the theological process without substantial revision. This model can be seen in theologies that are highly critical of Western modernity (such as Radical Orthodoxy), or what is perceived as the church's "Constantinian compromise" with European civilization that has blunted the true message of the gospel about "the world."[27] In its highly critical stance toward European modernity, it is somewhat reminiscent of the legacy of Karl Barth, but it genuinely engages the world it criticizes rather than simply dismissing it.

Bevans's models are extremely helpful in sorting out some of the methodological issues of contextual theologies, regarding the

relative weight to be given to the partners in the theological enterprise: revelation and tradition, culture, experience, identity, and social change. They are not intended to be the final word on any of the attendant issues, but they do offer a way of seeing the range of potential interactions of these important elements.

THE FUTURE OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

In his study of contextual theologies Stephen Bevans not only asserts that every theology is contextual (as we have seen). He goes on to say that doing theology from a contextual perspective is a "theological imperative." That is the guiding message of his *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*. Contextual theologies, in all of their many forms, have been with us as a conscious project for nearly half a century. What might be said here in conclusion about the future of contextual methods?

First of all, as a global church or world Christianity comes more and more into focus, we are constantly confronted with the unity and plurality of the Christian reality. How are we to affirm unity and plurality at the same time? Here the theological understanding of the incarnation plays an important role. The Word Made Flesh did not assume a generic humanity but took on flesh and blood in a certain time and place. But even within the limits of such an incarnation, the fullness of divinity can be revealed. That should say to us that culture and context are not simply an accidental envelope for a greater substance, but that accident and substance are always given together. A human being utterly devoid of culture is no longer a human being. Likewise, cultures are fluid, changing realities—perhaps even more so in a time of nearly instantaneous communication and connection. We live in a "liquid" reality, as the Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has said.[28] Thus, social change—and social issues—impinge upon the contextual nature of theology ever more.

What has been said thus far shows how changing contexts call for shifting approaches to understanding and engaging contexts and, therefore, how theology is done. The theologies of liberation have undergone significant change as the social contexts they wished to address have changed. The same could be said for theologies focusing on cultural identity. After the early attempts to ascertain Christian identity in non-Western contexts, Europe discovered the possibility of doing contextual theology as a means of revitalization of the churches facing secularization there. At the turn of the twenty-first century, countries in Europe that had been under Soviet occupation turned to contextual theologies to reconstruct a public theology where religion had been brutally suppressed.[29] So changing contexts will always call forth new efforts in contextual theology.

Contextual theologies have already been grappling with the phenomenon of globalization and all of its many consequences, both positive and negative. From a perspective focusing upon Christian heritage, "catholicity" has become a renewed effort to deal with this issue of the global reality in which we find ourselves.[30] The theologies growing out of the World Social Forum and among postcolonial writers keep on the track of the profoundly negative effects of globalization in the world today. Within that, themes such as migration, multicultural societies, growing economic inequality, discrimination, trafficking, consequences for the environment, and other spin-offs from the tide of globalization will continue to need theological attention. As the contexts and the issues within and among contexts change, so too will the lenses focused upon the Christian message. And as we have seen in the case of some of the North American theologies and also in post-apartheid South Africa, focus on cultural identity and social change is more commonly undertaken together. This is a point that has been made recently by Henning Wrogemann.[31]

A second front for contextual theologies is the interaction of Christianity with other religious traditions. Tensions both among and within religious traditions need a closer attunement to context. The world, it appears, is more religious than it was a quarter-century ago, with positive and negative extremes of religiosity and religious belonging making themselves felt. The interaction of the intercultural and the interreligious will need greater attention.

One final point may be made. Contextual theologies often began in local contexts, local communities. The local has been attenuated by the global, and their interaction must continue to engage our attention. One new form of the local has emerged as of this writing. This is the local becoming identified with populism. This kind of local tries to cut itself off from the larger social realities around it. If history proves any guide here, the recrudescence of such militancy will betray the basic Christian message. We have seen this most recently among the so-called German Christians in Germany in the 1930s.

To reiterate Stephen Bevans here, contextual theologies are a theological imperative for Christians in our time. Not to attend to this is to not take the incarnation seriously as our theological premise and to underestimate the breadth and depth of a genuine Catholicity.

Notes

1 Stephen B. Bevans, *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 3–4.
2 Venerable Bede, *The Ecclesiastical History of the British Nation*, Bk. I, ch. xxx.
3 John Kaserow, "Christian Evaluations of Buddhism" (doctoral dissertation, University of St. Michael's College, 1976), 716. Cited in Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 105f.
4 *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, Collectanea* 10/300 (Rome 1907), 103.
5 On classical, modern, and postmodern senses of culture, see Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).
6 Louis B. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures: Applied Anthropology for the Religious Worker* (Techny, IL: Divine Word Publications, 1963). This classic book is still in print and available from the William Carey Library in Pasadena, California.
7 *Des Pretres noirs s'interrogent* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1956).
8 See "Text and Context: Keynote Address at NEAATS Inauguration," *Northeastern Asian Journal of Theology* 1 (1968): 127–38.

9 An excellent overview of the Catholic Church's developing understanding of contextual theology at the official level may be found in Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 177–238.
10 Ibid., 215.
11 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973). The Spanish-language original was published in 1971.
12 John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1969); Benezet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Contexts* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992); Kosuke Koyama, *Waterbuffalo Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974).
13 On the Protestant side, see especially Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979); on the Catholic side, see Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).
14 An important figure throughout this period was Rosemary Radford Ruether. Among her many works, see especially *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
15 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970) has remained a classic work in African American theologies.
16 See, for example, Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future Is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet* (Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone Books, 1988). This has been an influential work.
17 For example, Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000).
18 Charles Villa-Vincencio, *Toward a Theology of Reconstruction: Human Rights and Nation Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); J. N. K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).
19 Among the most widely known of these in English were the Cameroonian theologians Engelbert Mveng and Jean-Marc Ela. The political dimensions of their theologies were costly to them; Mveng was assassinated, and Ela ended his years in exile.
20 See, for example, the work of Susan Abraham, *Identity, Ethics, and Non-Violence in Post-Colonial Theory: A Rahnerian Assessment* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
21 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992; revised edition, 2002). For his most recent thought on the models, see Bevans, *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 167–88.
22 Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 30.
23 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 87–125.
24 José de Mesa, *Doing Theology: Basic Realities and Processes* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1990); Diego Irarrázaval, *Inculturation: New Dawn of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000; Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).
25 David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).
26 Bevans, *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 182.
27 See, for example, the charter text of the Radical Orthodoxy movement, John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). The Gospel and Our Culture Network is an important resource for this countercultural approach (www.gocn.org).
28 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity, 2000).
29 These are reflected in the introduction to the German translation of *Constructing Local Theologies* in the case of church revitalization, and in the introduction to the Russian translation of the same work for the former Soviet bloc countries.
30 See Bevans, *Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, chap. 9.
31 Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

7. From Ecclesiology in Europe to Contextual Theology for the World

Thomas F. O'Meara, OP

After a century marked by two horrendous world wars and by constant social alteration and scientific discovery, Christian reflection and community are still called to live in the midst of change. Despite an absence of ecclesiastical direction, Roman Catholics continue to draw currents of contemporary culture into theology, ecclesiology, social ethics, and liturgy.

WORLD AS SUBJECTIVE AND CULTURAL REALITY

Modern thought changed the meaning of the term *world.* A world was not just unfettered nature or a monarchical realm but the existence and milieu of the person. Reflection creates subjectivity: the subject has its world. Around 1800, Friedrich Schlegel said that the new modern world revolved around three things: the structures of the knowing self, freedom, and history. The self fashions, interprets, and expands the reality it knows. Walter Kasper writes: "European thought is determined by two basic possibilities. The first is a thinking proceeding from being, essence, nature, fact; the second begins with freedom understood as an activity disclosing the world."[1] Not an assembly of objects like trees and bears but the forms of the human spirit, a world influences how people think and live through natural science, styles of art, psychology, and religions in history. Martin Heidegger wrote: "World is not the mere collection of things at hand that are either calculable or not, known or unknown. World is never an object that just stands before to be looked at. . . . World is always the non-objectifiable before which we stand."[2]

After 1790, the Roman Catholic Church saw itself threatened by what was modern, such as analytic psychology, democratic society, and the theory of evolution. Nonetheless, in the first half of the nineteenth century there were Catholic theologians who developed theologies from the ideas of Friedrich Schelling, G. W. F. Hegel, and others.[3] These, for instance, restored Pauline and patristic perspectives of the Christian community as a charismatic and ministerial organism. And too, Romantic Idealism accepted a positive history of human religions before and outside Christianity. If in the nineteenth century the Vatican began to repress Catholic usages of what was modern and worked to have neo-Scholasticism replace every philosophy and theology with neo-Aristotelian metaphysics, Catholic thinkers like French Dominicans and German Jesuits still pursued a dialogue with modern thought ranging from economics to sculpture.[4] In the 1950s, however, ecumenism, modern mosaics in churches, liturgical renewal, and movements to aid the working class emerged to offer new directions, although most found censorship from Vatican bureaucrats. Vatican II brought two new dynamics together: Christianity outside of Europe and history. Looking at the council Yves Congar—his life work was to research and present the historical forms of the church—summarized as follows:

> Everything is absolutely historical including the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is historical. Thomas Aquinas is historical, Pope Paul VI is historical. Historical does not mean just that Jesus came at a certain point in time but that one must draw the consequences of this fact: he is thoroughly conditioned by the time in which he lives. He develops like every other man; his consciousness grows, his knowledge expands.[5]

The dynamic self is subjectivity as world-creating through new forms within a cultural history.

Today's expressions of Christian revelatory grace employ approaches from modern thinkers.[6] Goethe said: "Each person in his or her interior experience is an entire world history."[7] Today's theologians would expand that, to say that each person shares in the religious history of the human race through the cultures of the globe. Transcendental analysis and historicity illumine the realms of grace and faith. The underlying and active ground of the Holy Spirit is at work in ministries, liturgies, and in the expression of the Christ-event in languages quite removed from Aramaic, Greek, and Latin.

Contemporary theology has set goals that are variously local and daringly universal. It sees beyond the past ethos of seminaries and ecclesiastical institutions and faces challenges created by continents of peoples, for in feudal or exclusivist forms the church is not credible, and in a provincial or xenophobic community it is not seen and heard. The starting points (either stated or implicit) of vital currents in Christian theology in the West are ways of expressing experience or analyzing existence in life and in society.

THE CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY OF STEPHEN B. BEVANS

Stephen Bevans has pursued a contemporary theology of a world church that begins with a view of Christianity as a global missionary enterprise. His subject is the world, not the world of mental forms or of nature but the global world, expanding, disclosing. His book *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*[8] provides a fundamental theology for this project; it interprets the gospel in different cultures through contextual theologies treating revelation and religion, faith and theology, and