

Creation and Context

A Theological Framework for Contextual Theology

Marc Cortez
Western Seminary
Portland, OR

1. INTRODUCTION

It has become commonplace among contemporary theologians to recognize that every theological statement is “inextricably bound to a particular historical, socio-cultural, political, and psychological life-situation” and that in light of this we must embrace some form of contextual methodology.¹ Despite this widespread agreement, a number of factors render this methodological project more complicated than it might first appear.

According to Daniel Von Allmen, three “impasses” have been problematic historically for the development of contextual theology: (1) a colonial mindset that regards the theological products of “third” world theologies as more contextually bound than “mainline” theologies (the problem of paternalism); (2) the difficulties associated with giving room to the insights and constructive developments of particular contexts while maintaining a commitment to the central tenets of the Christian faith (the problem of heresy); and (3) the tendency to view contextualization simply as a syncretistic blending of the Christian faith with some pre-existing set of beliefs (the problem of syncretism).²

In addition to these problems, a number of other concerns have been raised. Some question whether contextual methodologies adequately deal with issues like the unity of the Church, the prophetic and critical dimensions of theology, and the radical impact of sin on human cultural systems. Additionally, many associate contextual theology with the dialectical methodology developed by the Theological Education Fund; a methodology which maintains the interdependence of text and context such that neither takes priority over the other.³ Others point out that the plurality and multi-layered nature of contexts makes it very difficult to determine the parameters and characteristics any given context.⁴

The methodological questions raised by these concerns must be addressed before any adequate contextual methodology can be developed. But, these methodological issues are themselves grounded in grounded in basic theological commitments. As Kathryn Tanner states, “Methodological questions in theology are never finally independent...of more substantive

¹ Emmanuel Clapsis, “The Challenge of Contextual Theologies,” *GOTR* 38 (1993): 73.

² Daniel Von Allmen. “The Birth of Theology: Contextualization as the Dynamic Element in the Formation of New Testament Theology,” *International Review of Mission* 64 (1965): 48-49. The last concern, syncretism, has been particularly prominent in evangelical circles; a concern that Harvie M. Conn points out is legitimately based on worries that “the authority of the Bible will become lost in the plethora of localized theologies” (“Contextualized Theologies: The Problem of Agendas,” in *Constructive Christian Theology in the Worldwide Church* [ed. William R. Barr; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 91; cf. also *idem. Eternal Words and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Missiology in Trialogue* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], 179ff.).

³ See Max L. Stackhouse, “Contextualization, Contextuality, and Contextualism,” in *One Faith, Many Cultures: Inculturation, Indigenization, and Contextualization* (ed. Ruy O. Costa; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 11. See also Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 53-55.

⁴ John Vincent, “Developing Contextual Theologies,” *Epworth Review* 27.3 (July 2000): 69.

theological commitments.”⁵ We must therefore address the methodological questions raised above within a theological framework. While it lies well beyond the scope of any single paper to address all of the theological issues raised by these methodological considerations, this paper will try to establish an adequate framework within which a contextual methodology could be developed by exploring how such key theological loci as the Trinity, creation, sin, and the church can contribute to the discussion. Rather than answering the questions raised above, therefore, this brief theological excursion will propose some avenues that may usefully contribute to that discussion.

2. A TRINITARIAN FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

2.1. God’s Communicative Agency

Anticipating the siren call of postmodernity, Nietzsche famously decried: “What, then is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.”⁶ Having already declared the death of God, Nietzsche is able to sound the death knell for truth as well. As the deconstructionists are so fond of reminding us, the loss of a determinable basis for truth signals the loss of any determinable meaning or meaningful communication.

Of course, there have been many attempts to ground the nature and existence of truth in something other than the person of God including, among others, the rational structures of the mind, commitment to a particular community, and scientific knowledge. While such endeavors might occasionally serve to establish a workable consensus, the deconstructionist critique has usefully demonstrated their limited ability to arrive at any non-trivial, trans-contextual truths. Such truths necessitate the existence of something outside the context, which might ground the truth claims of those within a particular socio-historical situation: a true universal. But, it is against such claims to universality that the postmodern deconstructionist levels his attacks.

Fortunately, God was not as easy to kill as Nietzsche believed nor are truth and meaning so easy to dispatch as the deconstructionist might suppose. Even without developing a complete theory of truth, it seems reasonable to conclude with D.A. Carson that if there is a God who is “a talking and acting God..., there are some massive implications for our understanding of truth and communication.”⁷ If a God did not exist who was able to communicate within and across limited human contexts, we might be justified in concluding that universal truth and trans-contextual communication are in fact impossible. But, of course, we cannot deny the reality of God communicating within and across human contexts, albeit at the same time accommodating himself to the limitations of human contextuality, without also denying the reality of inspiration, revelation, and, most importantly, the incarnation. Considering the communicative activity of God, Janet Martin Soskice concludes: “We are limited creatures, even our speaking of God is limited. Yet for a religion whose central doctrine is the incarnation this should not be a problem. If God did not despise and despair of the limitations of the human condition, why should we?

⁵ Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 63.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche* (ed. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Penguin, 1968), 46-47.

⁷ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 130.

Why should we aspire to be philosophical angels when God became a man?”⁸ Indeed, H.S. Wilson has rightly asserted that belief in God’s prime communicative act of revelation, the incarnation, has been one of the driving theological beliefs behind the contextual theology movement.⁹ But the possibility of valid communication is also established every time God as communicative agent encounters a person in his or her finite and culturally limited situation.¹⁰

The deconstructionist’s denial of the meaningful agency of the Author is marked by “astonishing hubris, by a focus on the self that is awesomely God-defying.”¹¹ By contrast, a commitment to the communicative agency of God stands as the ground and hope of truth and meaning in a fractured and fragmented world even though it does not diminish the reality of our contextually limited perspectives.¹²

2.2. Servant Theology

We can also find the prime exemplar for theological methodology in the communicative agency of God as viewed through the person and work of the Son. His willingness to accommodate to the needs of our situation to the extent of becoming incarnate in the form of a man, serves as the model for a humble theology that exists primarily to meet the real needs of the context. This is theology that is truly “rooted in context.” Thus, David Wells asserts that contextualization is but another way of referring to the “servant role of theology.”¹³ He calls on contemporary theology to model the incarnation in its methodology: “The Son of God assumed the form of a servant to seek and save the lost and theology must do likewise, incarnating itself in the cultural forms of its time without ever losing its identity as Christian theology.”¹⁴ A truly contextual theology must therefore seek to serve both its ecclesiastical and cultural context.

Servant theology also means that we do our theology with a humble recognition of those who are *other* than ourselves—their dignity as those created in the image of God, and therefore their right to speak, be heard, and engage in the theological dialogue.¹⁵ As David Tracy points

⁸ Janet Martin Soskice, “The Truth Looks Different from Here,” in *Christ and Context: The Confrontation between Gospel and Culture* (eds. Hilary D. Regan and Alan J. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 59.

⁹ H.S. Wilson, “One Faith and Several Theologies – a Plea for Contextualisation,” *Bangalore Theological Forum* 26.2 (June 1994): 63-66.

¹⁰ See Ken Gnanakan, “Christ, Culture and Christianity in India,” in *Doing Contextual Theology* (ed. Sunand Sumithra; Bangalore: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 72.

¹¹ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 133.

¹² D.A. Carson similarly asserts that “a view of God that understands him to be the Creator, to be sovereignly at work in the universe, and to have made us imago Dei ‘affirms that the divine creation and sustaining of the world is the foundation for epistemological confidence of whatever sort’” (Ibid., 131).

¹³ David Wells, “The Nature and Function of Theology,” in *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options*, (ed. R. K. Johnston; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ John V. Taylor’s definition of ‘dialogue’ is helpful here: dialogue is “a sustained conversation between parties who are not saying the same thing and who recognize and respect the differences, the contradictions and the mutual exclusions, between their various ways of thinking.” (“The Theological Basis for Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Christianity and the Other Religions: Selected Readings* [eds. John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981], 212). Luis Pedraja lays out three key elements necessary for such dialogue: “First, both parties must share a mutual willingness and ability to engage in dialogue as equal partners. Second, both parties must share some common elements or points of contact that make the dialogue possible. Finally, there must be sufficient differences between the parties entering in the dialogue to make it meaningful and rewarding to both parties involved in the dialogue” (“Building Bridges between Communities of Struggle: Similarities, Differences, Objectives, and Goals,”

out, the theological imperative not to kill the face of the *other* is the demand of our age.¹⁶ We must therefore develop a “culture of otherness” that respects other contexts even as we insist on our own right to be heard, maintaining not only the possibility but also the necessity of inter-contextual dialogue and critique.¹⁷ Servant theology must be willing to accept the risk of dialogue: the possibility that we will hear things for which we are not prepared.¹⁸ Stanley J. Grenz thus calls for a “generous orthodoxy” that seeks to recognize the crucial and legitimate differences and contributions made by various perspectives while at the same time seeking to remain theologically orthodox.¹⁹

2.3. Pentecost(al) Theology

Several theologians have recently called for an appreciation of Pentecost as a recognition of diversity:

Contrary to what is often claimed, the story of Pentecost is not the undoing of the multiplicity of languages stemming from Babel, but rather a demonstration that multiplicity of languages and cultures does not necessarily lead to division and confusion. In Pentecost the multiplicity of human languages is not denied, but rather affirmed. Furthermore, at Pentecost the Holy Spirit shows that all human languages are equally valid for the communication of God’s revelation.²⁰

The diversity of languages and perspectives affirmed through Pentecost provides yet another reason to accept the validity of theologizing in each cultural context.²¹ Wilson thus calls for “a renewed experience of Pentecost” through which we can affirm the ability of the Spirit to work trans-contextually.²² This Pentecost(al) approach to theology should enable us to view culture not merely as an impediment to the theological process but as a useful and even necessary tool for adequate theological reflection.²³

A pentecost(al) theology will also recognize that the trans-contextual ministry of the Spirit provides a source of hope not only that there will be some truth available in every context but also that the theological process can function effectively in that context despite cultural

in *The Tie That Binds: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a Theology in Dialogue* [eds. Anthony B. Pinn and Benjamin Valentin; New York: Continuum, 2001], 208).

¹⁶ David Tracy, “Fragments and Forms: Universality and Particularity Today,” in *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* (eds. Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklos Tomka; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 124.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Ruggieri, “The Unity of the Church through the Unity of Humankind,” in *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity?* (eds. Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklos Tomka; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997), 147.

¹⁸ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 79.

¹⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 325-326.

²⁰ Justo L. Gonzalez, “An Historical Survey,” in *The Globalization of Theological Education* (eds. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, David A. Roozen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 13.

²¹ Grenz critiques Western theology for over-emphasizing the church as “the *sole* repository of the truth and the *only* location in which the Holy Spirit is operative” and not paying adequate attention to the fact that “the life-giving Spirit is present wherever life flourishes” (“Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection,” *AsTJ* 55.2 [2000]:128).

²² Wilson, “One Faith and Several Theologies,” 69.

²³ See Hall, *Thinking the Faith*, 72.

hindrances. Thus, the ministry of the Spirit of truth (John 15:26; 16:13) serves as the ground for both context-specific and trans-contextual theologizing.

3. A CREATION FRAMEWORK FOR CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Sallie McFague points to another important but often neglected theological perspective for contextual theology; that is “the context of human beings as a species among species in a home we all share. Although it is by no means the only context, it is surely the broadest one, the one in which other contexts, those of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so forth, exist and qualify what we say about ourselves as a species.”²⁴ Despite the many differences that separate us, humans all share this same creation context, which provides a means for engaging the basic universality underlying the phenomenological variety of human experience.²⁵

3.1. The Universal Humanum

Theologically, it would seem that whatever particular understand of the *imago Dei* one proposes, the idea of humanity as created in the image of God establishes a minimum basis for the *universal humanum*.²⁶ On this basis, we can at least assert that there is *some* commonality shared by all.

It would seem that the sciences also favor ascribing some form of universal reality to humankind.²⁷ Charles Kraft asserts, “Beneath the vast array of differences between human cultures lies an equally impressive substratum of basic human similarity. The Scriptures as well as the behavioral sciences assume this similarity.”²⁸ He notes that Eugene Nida has expressed this same idea stating that “the similarities that unite mankind as a cultural ‘species’ are much greater than the differences that separate.”²⁹ Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt also states that

²⁴ Sallie McFague, “Cosmology and Christianity: Implications of the Common Creation Story for Theology,” in *Theology at the End of Modernity: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Kaufman* (ed. Sheila Greeve Davaney; Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), 34. Although McFague uses this creation argument to assert the intrinsic interdependence that exists between humans and the rest of creation and therefore the necessity of having an ecological perspective in our theology, her point certainly applies to contextual theology as well.

²⁵ In theological circles, many use ‘experience’ to refer specifically to spiritual experiences or experiences of the divine. Allister McGrath, for example, critiques the use of experience as a source of theological reflection because we could never know for sure whether or not it was an “experience of God” (*Christian Theology: An Introduction* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], 24). He goes on to ask, “On what grounds are we entitled to identify a moment or moments as charged with the fragrance of divinity, and not simply an experience which is human and mundane?” (Ibid.). But such an understanding of experience is entirely too limited. All human experiences, whether ‘mundane’ or divine are vital aspects of theological discourse. “Experience” will thus be used in this paper to refer to human experience broadly and will cover all forms of experienced reality.

²⁶ The precise nature of the *imago Dei* is not something that needs to be addressed at this point, it suffices to say that it is something that can be positively predicated of all people universally.

²⁷ As Nancey Murphy notes, belief in such a universal human experience “does not (necessarily or generally) involve the empirical claim that there is an experience phenomenologically the same in all cultures and traditions. Rather, it is a theoretical claim: there is an inward religiousness that manifests itself differently depending on cultural and linguistic conditioning, yet that which is so manifested is a universal human phenomenon” (*Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996], 52).

²⁸ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 88.

²⁹ Ibid.

“people are more alike than cultures; that...the average behavior under any culture tends toward the center of the range for humans as whole....There is...a good deal of evidence that, for instance, the average Zuni and the average Kwakiutl man behave a good deal more like each other than the normative patterns of the two cultures are alike.”³⁰ Thus, it seems that there is both biblical and scientific support for the *universal humanum*.

This conclusion, though, must not be taken to mean that there are no significant differences between various peoples in various cultures or that we are attempting to somehow minimize or even eliminate the tremendous diversity of the human race through an appeal to some form of totalizing framework. We must certainly be wary of the tendency that people have to ascribe the common traits of *their* culture to the *universal humanum* in an ultimately oppressive manner. This understanding of the *universal humanum*, rather than reducing the *otherness* of diverse human experiences, simply seeks to build on the insights of the “creation context” and recognize that to speak only of the diversity of the human race is not to tell the whole story. Diversity is always grounded in similarity; otherwise, it cannot be recognized and appreciated as diverse. Actually, far from eliminating diversity, this theological perspective is uniquely capable of affirming plurality by acknowledging the diverse nature of creation; not only material diversity but also psychological, spiritual, and cultural diversity.³¹ The *universal humanum* thus provide us a schema for affirming both the unity and particularity of humanity.

3.2. The Globalization of Theology

This appreciation for the “creation context” of humanity has recently found an echo in the modern globalization movement. Although not an explicitly theological movement, globalization shares some of the same concerns as creation theology.³² According to Carson, globalization refers most broadly to the changes brought about in nearly every aspect of modern society because “the various parts of the world are demonstrably more interdependent than they have ever been.”³³ Increasingly, almost every endeavor in any discipline requires that this growing global context be taken into account. From a more specifically theological perspective, David Roozen has described the definition of globalization in theological education provided by the Association of Theological School’s Committee on Global Theological Education as

a complex concept involving content and structure, ‘a prismatic combination of human relationships, ways of thinking, ways of learning, and ways of Christian living.’ Minimally it involves escaping from ignorance and provincialism; in its

³⁰ Walter Goldschmidt, *Comparative Functionalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 134. While this may overstate the case somewhat, it does seem to express the common notion that some aspects of human reality are shared trans-culturally. Of course, the far more challenging task is to identify those aspects of human existence that qualify as such transcendent predicates of humanity. But that lies outside the scope of this paper.

³¹ See Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 97-98 and Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 84-89.

³² For good background on the globalization movement see William Leshner, “Meanings of Globalization: Living the Faith Under the Conditions of the Modern World,” in *The Globalization of Theological Education* (eds. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, David A. Roozen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 33-63.

³³ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 538.

most serious consideration, it involves us in questions regarding the church's mission to the entire inhabited world.³⁴

A global perspective on the theological endeavor moves us in two directions. First, in accordance with the insights provided by the *universal humanum*, globalization calls on us to recognize that there is a universal dimension to human reality and that there should therefore be a correspondingly universal aspect to our theologies. Despite the emphasis in this paper on the contextuality of theology, the universal dimensions of reality must not be lost.³⁵

Second, globalization has not only resulted in a closer connection between various cultures and a resulting appreciation for various trans-contextual realities, it has also brought about a recognition moving in the opposite direction:

On the one hand the earth is becoming an increasingly global village, with an increasingly unified language, and with the possibility of ever-increasing communication 'in real time', for which distances are totally abolished and every man and every woman can from their own room become 'contemporary' with any person or event taking place anywhere on the face of the planet. However, on the other hand, despite this globalization of human relationships, or perhaps thanks to them, a different pattern of otherness is emerging. In the very period in which ethnic differences and religious fundamentalisms seem to be establishing themselves as causes of violence, a new 'innocence' seems to be springing up in the world, a desire for profound peace with creation, and ultimate legitimating of the 'different' and the 'other'.³⁶

In other words, "the pressures we face from globalization have the effect of making people in defined cultures think more clearly about their own contexts as the place where they 'do theology.'" ³⁷ The recognition that each culture has the right to speak and be heard is one of the more valuable insights of the globalization movement and one that will need to be addressed more specifically in the next section.

3.3. Christ, Culture, and Relative Frameworks

Some definitions of culture focus on the total set of learned behaviors passed on from one generation to another or, even more broadly, on the "sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings" and passed on socially.³⁸ Others focus more specifically on the linguistic or symbolic structures by which a culture interprets the world or, more narrowly, on the endeavors of 'high society' (e.g., the arts). An understanding of culture that is more specific

³⁴ This from a definition given by the Association of Theological School's Committee on Global Theological Education as cited by David A. Roozen in his introduction to *The Globalization of Theological Education* (eds. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, David A. Roozen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 5.

³⁵ The relationship between the universal and local aspects of theology will be addressed more explicitly in a later section.

³⁶ Giuseppe Rugierri, "The Unity of the Church," 147.

³⁷ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 541-542.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 538. H.S. Wilson points out that culture must be understood as something that affects us at an unconscious level "shaped by primordial archetypes, symbols, images expressed through rituals, festivals, social customs, oral narrations like proverbs, etc." ("One Faith and Several Theologies," 64).

to the purposes of this paper is “the constant and curious conversation that goes on between every one of us and the environment in which we reside”³⁹ through which we learn the basic schemata needed for explaining, evaluating, integrating, and adapting our various experiences.⁴⁰ So, Clifford Geertz defines culture as: “an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life.”⁴¹ From this perspective, a culture serves to provide a general framework of meaning that conditions our understanding of reality.⁴²

Although culture is thus an ubiquitous factor in our epistemological endeavors, we should not view culture as *determining* our interpretations but rather as *conditioning* them in particular ways: “One’s culture, rather than forcing only a single response to given stimuli, ordinarily presents one with a culturally allowable selection of alternatives, one of which a person selects, usually as a matter of habit.”⁴³ Peter Berger views these allowable alternatives in terms of the “plausibility structures” that serve to guide our understanding of which ideas and experiences we will see as plausible in a given situation.⁴⁴ Thus, although our cultural context can seem to be so all determining that people from different cultures appear to be living in a different reality altogether, the fact that a given culture constitutes a range of acceptable options allows for the possibility that there will be significant overlap between two cultures enabling them to communicate and interact within the framework of quite similar ‘realities’.⁴⁵

Cultures must not be viewed in a deterministic fashion for another reason; we are active participants in the culture-shaping process: “Humans thus may be regarded as culture-shaped and culture-transmitting beings. But we not only are shaped by and participate in the transmission of our culture; we also influence it and contribute to its reshaping.”⁴⁶ We are not only shaped by our environment but we are also a part of that environment which shapes us. The influence between the person and the context is not a one-way street but a traffic circle by which we and our culture are continually shaping each other.

³⁹ Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 104.

⁴⁰ Kraft, *Christianity and Culture*, 54-57.

⁴¹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89. As Grenz helpfully explains: “Viewed from this perspective, people may be said to share a culture to the extent that they have similar experiences...mediated by shared humanly created products and learned practices, which lead them to develop a set of similar meaning-creating cultural schemas. These schemas provide the tools for ongoing identity formation, in that they comprise the framework for reconstructing memories of past events, for imparting meaning to ongoing experience and for devising expectations for the future.” (“Culture and Spirit,” 39).

⁴² We should be careful not to confuse culture and world view here. A world view is the framework that we have for viewing reality while the culture is the mechanism by which a world view (or some portion of that world view) is (normally) transmitted. The definition of culture being used here is admittedly quite broad and touches on nearly every aspect of life. This has been done intentionally and reflects the conviction that culture plays an essential role in all human endeavors.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁴ Peter L. Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City: Anchor, 1970), 34ff.

⁴⁵ Alsdair MacIntyre similarly argues that interpretive communities operate with different paradigms and thus different criteria of rationality but that they not therefore incommensurable (*Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). See also Terry Godlove, “In What Sense are Religions Conceptual Frameworks?,” *JAAR* 52.2 [June 1984]: 289-305.

⁴⁶ Kraft, *Christianity and Culture*, 47. See also Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 28.

At this point, we must briefly address one of the perennial issues facing contextual theologies: the question of cultural relativity. As difficult as this issue has been, we can best respond to it by simply summarizing and applying a number of ideas already discussed. First, our Trinitarian framework and belief in God's communicative agency strongly suggests that trans-contextual truth does exist and can be adequately known by human beings. Second, cultures, though often quite different from one another, are not so radically distinct as to disallow any possibility of trans-contextual dialogue and critique. Third, all cultures should be treated with dignity and respect in the theological process.⁴⁷ With these three points in mind, we can affirm cultural relativity as a methodological beginning point from which to accord cultures their full right to speak and be heard as fellow participants in the theological endeavor but not as an epistemological conclusion in which we assert the complete validity of all perspectives.⁴⁸ Contextual theology rooted in the biblical narrative can never lose the prophetic dimension of biblical discourse that critiques and challenges the culture when needed.⁴⁹ However, good contextual theology strives to ensure that such critiques and challenges are in fact needed.⁵⁰

4. THE PROBLEMATIC OF CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

One of the overriding realities of the human situation that must be accounted for in any attempt to make the context a serious part of the theological task is the problem of sin. The fact that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23) should be a serious reminder that all theologizing is done with a significant handicap. This problematic should cause us to be theologically aware of at least three realities: the need for suspicion, the problem of oppression, and the inequality of cultures.

With respect to the need for suspicion, we should embrace the insights of the deconstructionists and postmodernists on the underlying power moves that often lie behind authoritative statements particularly in light of the realities of sin. This does not mean that we should abandon the basic trust that lies at the heart of all communicative endeavors. We must still grant the 'other' the benefit of the doubt in order to ascertain the content of the communicative act. But, having done so, we should be willing to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to determine if, buried in the background of that particular construction, there are (1) unintentionally reflected sinful practices or ideas that have arisen as a part of the other's perspectival framework or (2) intentionally chosen deceptive techniques meant to further sinful practices or ideas. Given the seriousness of the sin problem, we cannot preclude the possibility, even the likelihood, of such problems arising in our own theologizing or that of others.

⁴⁷ It certainly must be affirmed that not all cultures are equally biblical and that there are gradations in the extent to which various cultures are just and true. But this does not detract from the fact that all cultures should be treated with respect even as we seek to point out the areas in which they fall short.

⁴⁸ On the notion of cultural relativity as a methodological beginning point see David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003), 100-101.

⁴⁹ For a good discussion of the relationship between relativity, cultural context, and an evangelical view of inerrance, see Harvie M. Conn, "Normativity, Relevance, and Relativism," in *Inerrance and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, A Challenge, A Debate* [ed. Harvie M. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1988], 185-210.

⁵⁰ As Darrell L. Whiteman aptly states, "Good contextualization offends people for the right reasons" ("Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 21.1 (Jan. 1997): 2.

Secondly, given the sin problematic and the tendency that humans have to ‘totalize’ their own perspectives, the possibility of using our theological constructions in an oppressive manner is a significant concern. Fernando Segovia describes the modern appreciation for this difficulty:

...in the last twenty years or so, the myth of a systematic and universal theology, as well as the myth of an objective and universal interpretation, have been exposed as highly uncritical constructs which reflect a very definite, though largely implicit, ideological stance, which ultimately involves the universalizing of one position or reading (and hence on social location) over all others, favoring and exalting thereby the one reading or position (and thus social location) in question while bypassing and denigrating all others in the process.⁵¹

So, according to Justo L. Gonzalez, the dominant tendency has been to take “North Atlantic male theology” as the “normative, universal theology” to which other theological perspectives must respond.⁵² Though this totalizing perspective is most often associated with the dominant theologies of North American and European white males, the temptation to such domineering universalization is the bane of every theology. While we don’t want to fall prey to the idea that there are no universal realities and that we therefore cannot speak to the ideas and concerns of other contexts, we do want to make sure that we have accorded dignity to the other context, listened carefully to all that they have to say, and applied a hermeneutic of suspicion to our own theological positions before attempting to speak to a trans-cultural situation (or even an intra-cultural situation for that matter).

Finally, given the pervasive influence of individual and corporate sin in every cultural context, we must recognize that not all cultures are created equal when it comes to theological reflection. Thus, “although all interpretations are in some sense invalid, they are not all equally invalid” and must be carefully evaluated accordingly.⁵³ In our attempt to take culture seriously, we must acknowledge those aspects of culture that are inadequate to the task of Christian theology and challenge those realities carefully.

5. THE CONTENT AND CONTEXT OF THEOLOGY

5.1. Primary and Secondary Sources of Theology

One of the tensions arising out of the contextual theology movement is the question of identifying the proper source(s) for contextual theology.⁵⁴ Using the Reformation principle *sola Scriptura*, many evangelicals argue that the Bible alone should serve as the source for

⁵¹ Fernando Segovia, “Two Places and No Place on Which to Stand: Mixture and Otherness in Hispanic American Theology,” in *Mestizo Christianity: Theology from the Latino Perspective* (ed. Arturo J. Bañuelas; Maryknoll, Orbis, 1995), 29.

⁵² Justo L. Gonzalez, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 52.

⁵³ Stanley J. Grenz, “Star Trek and the Next Generation: Postmodern and the Future of Evangelical Theology,” in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (ed. David S. Dockery; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995, 2001), 83. As Shoki Coe states, not all contexts are “equally strategic for the *Missio Dei* in the working out of His purpose through history (“Contextualising Theology,” *Missions Trends*, no. 3 [eds. Gerald H. Anderson & Thomas F. Stransky; New York: Paulist, 1976], 21).

⁵⁴ Musa A. Gaiya, “Contextualization Revisited,” *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 13.2 (1994): 123.

theological reflection. There seem to be three responses to this argument. First, and most simply, we might note that *sola Scriptura* does not necessitate that Scripture is the *only* source for theology any more than it must mean that it is the *only* source of authority for evangelicals. Most would recognize that there are many other legitimate sources of authority for the believer but that all other sources stand under the ultimate or *primary* authority of Scripture. Similarly, the Bible can be understood as the *primary* source for theology in such a way that it stands *over* but not *alone* with respect to other sources for theology.

A second response is that this perspective seems to misunderstand the relationship between the Bible, the theological task, and our culturally influenced frameworks. If all interpretation is done via a person's interpretive perspective, then no one has any *direct* access to the biblical data. All of our hermeneutical endeavors are processed through an interpretive grid that includes at least certain basic philosophical presuppositions, prior theological conclusions, and cultural biases. Even those theologies that attempt to present themselves as mere summations of biblical data are still using both culture and the Bible as sources for their theological constructions but are doing so more or less unreflectively.⁵⁵ As Craig Blomberg states: "An awareness of the process of contextualization offers a sober reminder that every attempt to systematize the biblical data or to extrapolate the most essential, unchanging elements of the Gospel is itself a product of changing cultural forces."⁵⁶

Third, it is not necessary to proclaim the Bible to be the *sole* source of theology in order to protect ourselves from cultural relativity. Evangelical theologians are often accused of trying to seek an "Archimedean point outside the human situation, which would save us and all humankind from relativism."⁵⁷ But, as we have already indicated in earlier sections, such an appeal is unnecessary to avoid the problem of cultural relativity. Blomberg notes that despite the manifold contexts present in our culturally diverse world, "there are limits on this diversity, and cross-cultural similarities of emphasis remind one that contextualization need not (and should not) lead to pure relativism."⁵⁸ While the Bible does indeed serve as one of the limiting factors, it can do so without being the *sole* source of theology.

Prima scriptura thus calls us to embrace a plurality of sources (Bible and culture) while continually and unabashedly acknowledging the primacy of Scripture in all things.⁵⁹ We recognize that the Spirit speaks in and through every cultural context but that his voice can only be adequately heard, understood, and responded to in concert with his speaking in and through the Word.⁶⁰

⁵⁵ In Paul Ricoeur's words, "to narrate is already to explain." (*Time and Narrative, vol. 1* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 178).

⁵⁶ Craig Blomberg, "Implications of Globalization for Biblical Understanding," in *The Globalization of Theological Education* (eds. Alice Frazer Evans, Robert A. Evans, David A. Roozen; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 226.

⁵⁷ Clark Pinnock, "New Dimensions in Theological Method," in *New Dimensions in Evangelical Thought: Essays in Honor of Millard J. Erickson* (ed. David S. Dockery; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 201.

⁵⁸ Blomberg, "Implications of Globalization for Biblical Understanding," 226.

⁵⁹ Note that the way 'culture' is being used in this paper means that personal experience, tradition, and structures of reason are all included under this broader category. Although he does not use the same terminology, Stephen Williams argues this point by stating that "experience and discernment of life and of our times, when rooted in the habit of faithfulness to Christ and to Scripture, must be allowed to shape our interpretation of the biblical kerygma." ("The Theological Task and Theological Method," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 171.

⁶⁰ See Stanley J. Grenz, "Articulating the Christian Belief-Mosaic: Theological Method after the Demise of Foundationalism," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method* (ed. John G. Stackhouse; Grand

5.2. Interwoven Contexts and the “Catholic” Church

“There is one body and one Spirit – just as you also were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4-5). No matter the extent of diversity, plurality, and disconnectedness in the world, Paul’s words forcibly remind us that there is at least one source of unity, though we have already seen that there are others.⁶¹

However, this unity must be envisioned not in terms of monolithic singleness but as an interdependency of diverse entities united through their common connection to the Lord Jesus Christ. We should embrace the idea of the one true ‘catholic’ Church, understanding ‘catholic’ according to its etymological sense of an element that is ‘according to the whole’ and thus underscoring the interconnectedness of parts rather than the simple unity of the whole.⁶² In this vein, Charles Cousar, states that Paul’s ‘body of Christ’ metaphor (1 Cor. 1:12-31; Rom. 12:3-8) calls for “the recognition and importance of difference and at the same time critiques the tyranny of any one part of the body over another. It envisions a unity that functions properly only when distinctions are valued.”⁶³ A truly ecclesiological perspective for contextual theology thus affirms both the universality and locality of the theological enterprise.⁶⁴

We can thus make a distinction between two kinds of contextual theology: an *intra-contextual* theology, which attempts to interact primarily with the concerns and ideas of a limited context, and a *trans-contextual* theology, which focuses on relating the theological perspectives of its context to those originating from other contexts.⁶⁵ But these two tasks should not be viewed in isolation from one another. “Contextual and trans-contextual theologies should not be

Rapids: Baker, 2000), 128. Regardless of whether one wishes to affirm Grenz’s particular understanding of how the Spirit, the Word, and culture are related, his basic point holds.

⁶¹ Charles B. Cousar points out Paul’s own ‘politically incorrect’ perspective: “At one level, Paul certainly fails the postmodernistic text of ‘the politics of difference’, in that he pushes for diverse communities to ‘be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind’ (Phi. 2:2), communities whose identities and loyalties are determined by the event of Jesus Christ” (“Paul and Multiculturalism,” in *Many Voices, One God: Being Faithful in a Pluralistic World* [eds. Walter Brueggemann and George W. Stroup; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 56).

⁶² See Justo L. Gonzalez, “An Historical Survey,” 14.

⁶³ Cousar, “Paul and Multiculturalism,” 57. We must therefore seek to carefully distinguish between the legitimate diversity that is a natural expression of the dynamic unity which belongs to the church as part of its “very essence” and the sinful expression of disharmony and disunity that has plagued the church throughout history (see T.F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconciliation: Essays towards Evangelical and Catholic Unity in East and West* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976], 20).

⁶⁴ Edward T. Oakes notes that many churches are “increasingly stressing their specific heritage and theological uniqueness while the culture at large moves almost *en masse* into postmodern philosophies that explicitly deny the possibility of finding any common ground of discourse across disciplines or cultures” (“The Scandal of Particularity: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Limits of Ecumenical Dialogue,” in *Ecumenical Theology in Worship, Doctrine, and Life: Essays Presented to Geoffrey Wainwright on his Sixtieth Birthday* [eds. David S. Cunningham, Ralph Del Colle, and Lucas Lamadrid; New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 231). In the face of the postmodern rejection of universal commonalities as being inherently ‘hegemonic’ and ‘controlling’ we must continue to assert the unifying factors noted in this paper (e.g., God, human nature and experience, etc.) and defend these unifying factors as life- and context-affirming realities while acknowledging that they have at times been (mis)used in the past.

⁶⁵ Both of these might still be contextual theologies even though their concerns are somewhat different. Both would also be distinct from an *a-contextual* theology, which attempts to develop a universally applicable theology with no significant attention given to context at all.

regarded as mutually exclusive. Within the church catholic each calls for the other.”⁶⁶ While intra-contextual theologies are vital for the ongoing effectiveness of the church, they must not remain isolated from theologies developed with a more global perspective or they risk becoming ‘locked’ in their contexts.⁶⁷ Similarly, trans-contextual theologies must not become so concerned with the global perspective that they lose sight of their own situatedness and fail to become actuated in local theologies.⁶⁸ In developing a model for contextual theology, we must therefore emphasize the context of the local church and local theology as a legitimate and sometimes overlooked domain for theological reflection while at the same time echoing Wolfhart Pannenberg’s call for theologies to transcend their own particularity.⁶⁹ As Blaise Pascal realized many years ago: “A plurality that cannot be integrated into a unity is chaos; unity unrelated to plurality is tyranny.”⁷⁰

But if we affirm such a basic plurality of theological contexts, how do we determine when a particular theological contextualization has fallen into the error of syncretism and really is no longer a Christian theology? This presentation would suggest that such a task is one that must be done in dialogical participation with the whole church operating out of a variety of contexts, respecting the right that the context in question has to be heard, and ultimately exercising its right to speak trans-contextually. There do not seem to be clear-cut rules for this process and, as Daniel Hardy comments, this leaves the church exposed to the risks endured by those exercising compassion and love:

But at the same time, it leaves uncharted the kind of congruence, which we should expect in love, as well as the nature of the openness and risk which are needed for the flowering of compassion and love. Does congruence mean sameness? For if so the braiding together will sacrifice the distinctness of those so interwoven, whether they be individuals, peoples, cultures or nature. Do openness and risk mean openness to anything and everything, so that every kind of difference is

⁶⁶ Christian Mostert, “Is a Non-Contextual Theology Viable?,” in *Mapping the Landscape: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Christianity: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Ian Breward* (eds. Susan E. Emilsen and William W. Emilsen; New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 127.

⁶⁷ “The production of intentionally local (context-specific) theologies is essential for the liturgical and missional life of every local Christian assembly. But such theologies must not be regarded as self-contained or complete in themselves” (Ibid., 126-127). It is at this point that David Tracy’s notion of a ‘classic’ becomes useful (see *The Analogical Imagination* [New York: Crossroad, 1981], 99-192). From his perspective, a ‘classic’ is a work that, though having a *particular* expression for a *particular* audience, has been recognized to have a *universally* effective impact. A good local theology is thus one that engages its contextual situation in all its particularity in such a way that it attains universal relevance *through* its particular focus.

⁶⁸ On the idea that trans-contextual theologies need to be actuated in local theologies, cf. Petros Von Vassiliadis, “Orthodoxie und kontextuelle Theologie,” *Okumenische Rundschau* 42 (Oct 1993): 457. According to Mostert: “The second impetus for pursuing the question is the fear of a narrow contextuality, in which people not only cease to be interested in the insights and experiences of people in other contexts (other times as well as other places) but increasingly lose the capacity for trans-contextual theology” (“Is a Non-Contextual Theology Viable?,” 121). He further indicates that Jurgen Moltmann warned Jose Miguez Bonino about “putting their eggs so emphatically in the ‘context’ basket that they risked losing the capacity to speak across contexts” (Ibid.) and that in “a church which confesses itself to be catholic, the surrender of the trans-contextual would be a contradiction” (Ibid., 122).

⁶⁹ Ibid., 125-126.

⁷⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensees*, 809.

legitimate? For if so, we will be back in that ‘inclusion for the sake of inclusion’ which we mentioned before.⁷¹

The unity of the body of Christ should also remind us that theology is a properly communal activity. Rather than the Enlightenment model of the solitary scholar espousing rationally constructed systems of theology or the Romanticist model of the isolated individual communing with the god in nature, many thinkers have called for Christian theologians to remember that theology should be an activity of the Church as it seeks to understand and express its faith commitments. Stanley J. Grenz has been prominent among theologians making such appeals as he calls for evangelical theologians to replace “the modern paradigm with its focus on the self-reflective, autonomous subject and the modern ideal of the self-determining self who exists outside any tradition or community” with the “individual in community.”⁷²

A truly contextual theology must dialogue not only with the contemporary context but with historical contexts as well. Failure to do so would blind theology to the insights of the past and disastrously limit our perspective to the questions and concerns of the present. As a previous cultural context, we must accord the historical *other* the same dignity and respect accorded to contemporary contexts.

The theological formulations of other historical contexts (e.g. creeds, confessions, etc.) that have proven their value both trans-contextually and trans-temporally should be listened to very carefully. Any approach to contextual theology that fails to grant sufficient weight to these historical contexts is, therefore, inadequate.⁷³ But, having accorded this level of respect and dignity, we must deny that such formulations have an authoritative function beyond that of a historically reliable theology. Our contextual dialogue must therefore include these historical contexts but must not feel itself constrained by the assertions, assumptions, and articulations provided by those contexts.⁷⁴

6. CONCLUSION

Acknowledging the contextuality of all theological formulations immediately mires one in a myriad of methodological questions and concerns that are themselves grounded in even more basic theological considerations. A complete contextual methodology should be able to lay out a theological framework adequate for sustaining its methodological proposals. In that light, this paper has sought to sketch the barest outlines of a theological framework for a properly

⁷¹ Daniel W. Hardy, “The Future of Theology in a Complex World: An Opening to Discussion,” in *Christ and Context: The Confrontation between Gospel and Culture* (eds. Hilary D. Regan and Alan J. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), 36.

⁷² Stanley J. Grenz, *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement* (ed. David S. Dockery; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995, 2001), 84.

⁷³ We must therefore reject Charles Taber’s call for indigenous theologies to do theology by “going back to the bible and ignoring the intervening history of interpretation” (“The Limits of Indigenization,” *Missiology* 6.1 [Jan. 1978]:70). Although it is necessary to affirm that all theologians should do theology indigenously, we must also recognize that all Christian theologies stand within both the biblical and historical narratives of the Christian community and reject that background at their own risk.

⁷⁴ As Hall asserts, “The message that we receive from this Christian past is therefore not, ‘Repeat what we have said!’ but rather, ‘Do what we have done!’” (*Thinking the Faith*, 88).

contextual theology by drawing on insights provided by the person and work of the triune God, creation, sin, revelation, and the church. By viewing theology from these various perspectives, we can appreciate the necessarily contextual dimension of all theological formulations and the resulting limitations of this particularity without losing the universal realities that we seek to apprehend and falling into the morass of unbridled relativity. Through the work of the triune God, the church is empowered to perform its theological task despite the limitations of finitude and sinfulness by embracing its various particularities in a manner that empowers both universal and particular relevance.