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nostalgic longing for the old order and the stout-hearted sentences of medieval Christendom. What we need is a literature that articulates the great themes of our faith: suffering and salvation, within the sociological boundaries of our time.

Secondly, the intense crisis of meaning in modern societies [p. 206](#) demands that we once again, in the language of Tolkien, 'put the monsters at the centre'. In other words, 'to help people look in the eye that which they fear the most instead of turning away literally from the disaster'. That is a phrase from Auden. The German poet Rilke in alluding to the story of the frog that turns into a prince assures us of something.

I would like to quote this, and end with it: 'That which we find most fearful, we shall find in the end also to be the most fateful, like this monster of a frog. At the centre of its terror and of its being is something that needs and wants our help.' And he concludes by saying, 'Perhaps all the dragons of our lives are really only princesses just waiting for us to be at once beautiful and brave.'

This article was a plenary address delivered at the *Media Association International Litt-World '90 Conference*, U.S.A. Melba P. Maggay is General Director of the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture (ISACC) in Manila, Philippines and is an editor and writer. [p. 207](#)

Contextual Theologies: The Problem of Agendas

Harvie M. Conn

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Evangelism, as the communication of the gospel, never takes place in a vacuum and it never has done so. Historical events and situations have always shaped our confessions of faith. In this article the author, a former missionary in Korea, argues that the application of the biblical message to our contemporary world is necessary but not enough. We must go deeper into the historical and cultural context of the people with whom the gospel is being shared. The gospel must be inculturated, not just applied. This takes clarity and courage, for the danger of syncretism is never far away, but the call to live dangerously is always with us. Doing theology is more than a mental exercise; it comes from on-the-road involvement in the lives of people. It is the right relationship between text and context.

The author discusses the agenda of the Early Church, of AngloSaxon evangelicals today and of the emerging churches in the Two-Thirds World. He discusses how the Early Church Fathers, Justin Martyr, Clement and Origen, in their evangelistic concerns responded to the aspirations of pagan Greek philosophy and to the demeaning accusations of Celsus, yet were themselves captive to the rationalism of the educated few. The consequence of the

inadequacy of their understanding of sin is also discussed. The author then discusses how far the agenda of contemporary evangelicalism in the Western world is relevant to the agenda of the Two-Thirds World. Only when the message is presented in terms understood by its hearers, is the real scandal of the gospel made clear. This important article speaks to the heart of the hermeneutical crisis in developing a theology of communication which is both biblically faithful and culturally relevant.

Editor

Mention the word ‘contextualization’ in Reformed and evangelical circles and sooner or later another word pops up—syncretism. Why?

There are many answers to that question. Most certainly a basic one is our legitimate concern that the authority of the Bible will become [p. 208](#) lost in the plethora of localized theologies. If we start with our particular, historical situation, what will happen to the once-for-all character of the Bible as norm? In constantly taking account of the receptor cultures, isn’t hermeneutic in danger of letting the medium become the message and the message become a massage? Will the ‘sameness’ of the Bible get lost in a diversity of human cultures?

There are plenty of illustrations to confirm these fears. Liberation theologies often reduce the Bible from canon to paradigm. Korea’s Minjung theology often sounds, through the voices of some of its advocates, to be more Korean than biblical.

My purpose in this paper, however, moves in another direction. I wish to suggest that there is still another cause for fears, and this among those committed to the full inerrancy of Scripture. It is not as obvious to us as is the expression of doubts regarding the authority of the Bible. In fact, we are only beginning to recognize its potential for creating trouble. I speak of our lack of sophistication about the circumstantial issues which all theologies, including evangelical and Reformed ones, address.

To put it positively, I wish to underline the place of the historical context in rightly doing theology. I shall use several key figures from the early church to point out the liabilities of misjudging context and indicate how that misjudgment has affected our understanding of theology. And, finally, I shall make a few comments about how evangelicals in the Two-Thirds World are attempting to be more aware of this issue of context.

SHIFTS IN PERSPECTIVE

The basic purpose of theological reflection has never changed—‘the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in the light of their own circumstances’.¹ John V. Taylor, the missionary statesman of the Church of England, remembers the heartbreaking moment when his son decided to give up on the Church. ‘Father,’ he said on one occasion as the two left church together, ‘the preacher is saying all of the right things, but he isn’t saying them *to* anybody. He doesn’t know where I am and it would never occur to him to ask!’

Relevance and irrelevance are the words we have used in the past to justify the dilemma placed before us by Taylor’s son. Are our sermons and our theology scratching where the world does not itch? How can [p. 209](#) we live out and share the gospel in such a way that the cultures of the world will respond, ‘God speaks my language!’? ‘If Jesus is the answer, what are the questions?’

In recent years, however, that question of relevance and what we have called ‘application’ has become more dominant. Much more attention is being paid now to how

¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985).

our context, our setting, is related to gospel response. Recent discussions in hermeneutics have underlined these questions in terms of 'the two horizons'.² The global agendas of missionary Christianity are reminding us that our Anglo-Saxon applications don't always fit in Uganda or Uruguay or Bedford-Stuyvesant. Evangelical cultural anthropologists are exploring this cultural terrain and questioning the ease with which we used to talk. Now, we speak not of application but of inculturation, not of relevance but of indigenization and/or contextualization.

Are John Taylor's remarks about Africa true of Asia and North America and the Latin world as well?

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that the Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal?³

In Japan, for example, the same problem can be illustrated another way. The word *tsumi* is used to translate the Christian worldview built into the word *sin*. But in a shame-oriented culture like Japan, *tsumi* comes closer to the English word *imprudent*. To the non-Christian Japanese it does not convey the idea of moral right or wrong or of sinning against God or even against duty. 'The fearful thing about *tsumi* is rather the inherent potential of being discovered in the act and therefore shamed for being imprudent.'⁴ To the Christian, *tsumi* speaks of rebellion against God, lawlessness. To the non-Christian, *tsumi* points to the fear of being out of harmony with society and nature, of acts disapproved by humanity. How will the Christian cross this p. 210 'culture gap' and still hold the gospel in his or her hands after passing over?

The average evangelical listening to this kind of example and this kind of question might easily respond, 'This is a question of application.' And, in a sense, this answer is still a useful one. On the simplest understanding of communication, this kind of response is good enough—if communication is understood simply as the strategic skill needed for gift-wrapping packages of information materials. But there is more to see and more to say than that.

Making the gospel relevant to the Japanese or a disillusioned young Englishman requires more than a 'gift of words'. It requires a 'gift for cultural understanding'. You can't fool a cultural Archie Bunker by changing words like 'this' to 'dis' and 'moron' to 'meathead'. Behind Archie's judgments on Poles and Blacks and Jews and Jesus is a cultural world that informs him, a cultural agenda that must be seen, 'dark glasses' worn by Archie that tell him what God and his next door neighbour are supposed to look like.

Biblically oriented theologizing is the work of a gospel optician who must assist the reluctant patient in trying on a new set of glasses. Words like *tsumi* are more than crossword-puzzle answers for the right number of squares in a verbal game. They are suitcases in which the user packs all his or her cultural luggage. They are glimpses through a window into someone else's cultural house. They are furniture arrangements that make the owner feel 'comfortable' and 'at home'. They are cultural fences around a piece of property that say, 'This belongs to me.'

² Harvie M. Conn, ed., *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 189–94.

³ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 24.

⁴ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 268.

For theology to become theology, it must, at some time or other, rummage through those suitcases and be a Peeping Tom, looking through those windows. Reflecting biblically on what we find, on what we see, is called theology. It is what Bengt Sundkler called 'an ever-renewed re-interpretation to the new generations and peoples of the given Gospel, a representation of the will and the way of the one Christ in a dialogue with new thought-forms and culture patterns'.⁵

Theology, by this definition, is not a gentleman's hobby. Nor is it ever exclusively a Western, white gentleman's hobby. It is not simply the mental exercise of persons sitting on the high front balcony of a Spanish house watching travellers go by on the road beneath them.

The 'balconers' can overhear the travellers' talk and chat with them; they may comment critically on the way that the travellers walk; or they may p. 211 discuss questions about the road, how it can exist at all or lead anywhere, what might be seen from different points along it, and so forth; but they are onlookers and their problems are theoretical only.⁶

A biblically oriented theology is done by the travellers whose questions come from their involvement in the trip. They are questions that call not only for comprehension but for decision and action. They ask not only, Why is this so? but also, Which way to go?

Theology is always theology-on-the-road. And, in this sense, it is not simply a question of relevance or of application. It is not a twofold question of, first, theological interpretation, and then practical application. Interpretation and application are not two questions but one. As John Frame says, 'We do not know what Scripture says until we know how it relates to our world.'⁷ Theology must always ask what Scripture says. But it always asks in terms of the questions and answers our cultures raise. And to ask what Scripture says, or what it means, is always to ask a question about application.

Evangelical theologians in the Two-Thirds World seem more sensitive to all this than we do in the white, Western world. A 1982 gathering in Bangkok expressed their concern 'that our hermeneutic should both be loyal to historic Christianity and arise out of our engagement with our respective situations'.⁸ The same conference report says with concern, 'Churches of the Two Thirds World are in danger of bondage to alien categories. These do not permit them to meet adequately the problems and challenges of proclaiming Christ in our contexts.'⁹

Later in the same year (1982) appeared the Seoul Declaration, sponsored by the Asia Theological Association and bringing together Asia's evangelical theologians. Again, in even more explicit language, Western theology, 'whether liberal or conservative, conservative or progressive', was criticized for an agenda obsessed with problems of 'faith and reason', for abstractionism from life. It was said to have capitulated to the secularistic worldview associated with the Enlightenment. The report charged that 'sometimes it has been utilized as a means to justify colonialism, exploitation, and

⁵ Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1960) 281.

⁶ James I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973) 5.

⁷ John Frame, *Van Til the Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Pilgrim, 1976) 25.

⁸ Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds., *Sharing Jesus in the Two-Thirds World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 277.

⁹ *Ibid.*

oppression, or it has done little or nothing to change these situations'.¹⁰ Orlando Costas p. 212 comments that 'this situation may lack precision. However it does articulate a well-known criticism of Western theologies.'¹¹

Where can we trace the origins of these alleged problems? And how does the agenda of the Two-Thirds World differ from ours? These are the questions we seek to answer now.

Melba Maggay, a Filipino Christian, suggests where to begin.

Christians in Asia and Africa are taught to answer questions raised by Greek sophists in the fourth century. While we live in a culture still very much awed by the Power that can be clearly perceived in things that have been made, we start from the supposition that we are talking to post-Christian men long past the age of the mythical and therefore must belabour the existence of a supernatural God. We defend the Scriptures as if we speak to the scientific rationalist, and not to men who have yet to see nature 'demythologised,' stripped of the wondrous and the magical.¹²

History also reminds us that the Two-Thirds World's struggles with 'translating' the gospel into their own cultural setting is not unique. The Church did not begin with a prepackaged gospel kit and do its theologizing through a kind of cultural circumcision. Against the challenge of accretions and distortions brought about by tradition and cultural consensus, the message of the gospel was shaped. Even in the early years of the Church, evangelism was never proclamation in a vacuum and theology was not what was done by someone talking in someone else's sleep. Situations have always shaped our confessions of faith.

The early Church was not afraid of letting the culture set its gospel agenda, though it recognized the risks. Origen (c. 185–254) advocated what he called 'spoiling the Egyptians', taking from pagan thought and culture all that is good and true, and using it in the interests of Christian thought. He was not the first to make these demands. A new cultural context was forcing new questions on the church. The physical persecution of the church was shifting to more subtle levels of attack. Intellectual assaults were being mounted. Legal charges demanded answering. The church was increasingly isolating itself from any earlier identification as a Jewish sect. What was its relation to the world Jewish community?

A pioneer and innovator in answering these questions was Justin Martyr (c. 100–165). To the urbane Hellenistic world, he heralded Christianity as 'the only philosophy which I have found certain and p. 213 adequate'. The gospel and the best elements in Plato and the Stoics were seen as almost identical ways of apprehending the same truth. Between Christianity and Platonism 'there is no gulf fixed so great that the passage from the one to the other is impossible or unnatural'.¹³

The centre of harmonization for Justin lay in his concepts of the *Logos*. Using the Johannine vocabulary, Justin saw Jesus as the *Logos* inherent in all things and especially in the rational creation. All who have thought and acted rationally and rightly have done so because of their participation in Christ and universal *Logos* (*Apologia* 2.10.13). So both

¹⁰ Bong-Rin Ro and Ruth Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984) 23.

¹¹ Orlando Costas, 'Evangelical Theology in the Two Thirds World', *TSF Bulletin* 9/1 (Sept.–Oct. 1985) 7–13.

¹² Melba Maggay, 'The Indigenization of Theology', *Patmos* 1/1 (1979) 1.

¹³ Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966) 11–12.

Abraham and Socrates were 'Christians before Christ'. Each rational being shares in the universal Logos. We possess a piece of this Logos, like a seed sown by the Divine Sower. Each philosopher speaks the truth according to one's share of this seed, and according to one's ability to perceive its implications.

Without being critical at this stage in the argument, at least we must recognize now Justin's effort to communicate Christ according to the agenda of his hearers. His ultimate intention was not to carry out a kind of philosophical penetration of the Christian message and blend Plato with Jesus. It was to remove the impression that Christianity was just another religion. In view of its universality, it was able to embrace them all. His goal was evangelistic, that of presenting Christianity as the fulfilment of a longing and desire in paganism.

Others followed Justin, speaking also to a context that drove them to underline some of Justin's earlier emphases. The so-called Alexandrian school of the third century faced new antagonists who sought to push the church further into their Greek corner. Fifteen or twenty years after Justin, the Platonist Celsus wrote a blistering attack on Christianity. Celsus' arguments were an exact reversal of Justin's. He may in fact have been answering them directly.¹⁴ The Greeks, he contended, did not borrow from the Hebrews. It was, in fact, the reverse. Jesus had read Plato and Paul had studied Heraclitus. Christianity is a corruption from the primordial truths enshrined in the ancient polytheistic tradition. How does one explain so many Christian deviations, then? Replies Celsus, 'The majority of Christians are stupid!' The dullwittedness of the majority of Christians is no accidental fault to him, and certainly not a virtue. It is symptomatic of the inherently irrational and anti-intellectual character of Christianity. Adding to this assault was the growing strength of Gnosticism, 'a stepping stone from Plato to p. 214 Plotinus'. Obsessed with evil, it consisted essentially in a radical rejection of this world as being at best a disastrous accident and at the least a malevolent plot.¹⁵

Against this context, men like Origen and Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–215) shaped their presentation of the gospel. Philosophy for the Hellenistic world was *paideia*, the education of rational man. Greek culture was the pedagogue that prepared us for a new world culture. Clement, using [Gal 3:23](#) and its reference to the law as 'the pedagogue', presents Christianity as fulfilling 'this paideutic mission of mankind to a higher degree than has been achieved before'.¹⁶ Before the coming of Christ, he proposed, philosophy was necessary for the Greeks to obtain righteousness. Philosophy was their schoolmaster to bring them to Christ, just as the law was the schoolmaster for the Hebrews. In the philosophies of the ancient Greeks, the Logos revealed himself, though dimly and vaguely. In those philosophies, he prepared that world for the gospel which would be preached to it.

For Clement, there is only one true philosophy, 'the philosophy according to the Hebrew'. And since the Greeks have drawn from it, so we do also. This 'true philosophy' has two streams, Holy Scripture and Greek philosophy. They are like two rivers, at whose confluence Christianity springs forth (*Miscellanies* 6.8).

It was Clement's successor, Origen, who systematized even further this effort at communicating. And like his predecessors, his purposes were evangelistic. Eusebius, the Church historian, notes that 'a great many heretics, and not a few of the most

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 132–33.

¹⁵ Henry Chadwick, 'Philo and the Beginnings of Christian Thought', in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (ed. A. H. Armstrong; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 166.

¹⁶ Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961) 60.

distinguished philosophers, studied under him diligently ... he became celebrated as a great philosopher even among the Greeks themselves'. Origen asserts that he does not intend to deviate by a hairsbreadth from the teaching of the Church. 'We confess that we do want to educate all men with the Word of God, even if Celsus does not wish to believe it' (*Contra Celsum* 3.54).

How will we judge these early 'borrowings from the Egyptians'? J. K. S. Reid, for example, sees Clement as roaming 'round the rich intellectual world of his day with a far greater sense of mastery than Christian theologians had hitherto shown, fearlessly rebutting such elements as are incongruous with the Christian faith, and just as p. 215 eagerly putting others to apologetic use'.¹⁷ Henry Chadwick sees Clement seeking 'to make the Church safe for philosophy and the acceptance of classical literature'.¹⁸ Before we dismiss Origen's work as 'biblical alchemy', we need to remember that nothing for Origen was true simply because Plato said it. In *Contra Celsum* and elsewhere he is occasionally prickly to the point of rudeness towards the classical tradition. For all these men, natural religion and natural ethics are not enough. There is salvation only in Christ and good works done before justification are useless. The soul of man is so weakened and distracted that it cannot be redeemed apart from the power and grace of God in Christ (*Contra Celsum* 4.19). Behind all of these formulations is the heart of the evangelist seeking to share Christ with his cultural world.

In short, the intentions of these men could not have been better. In the language of Michael Green, they sought

to embody biblical doctrine in cultural forms which would be acceptable in their society. Not to remove the scandal of the gospel, but so to present their message in terms acceptable to their hearers, that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced.... If Christ is for all men, then evangelists must run the risk of being misunderstood, of misunderstanding elements in the gospel themselves, of losing out on the transposition of parts of the message so long as they bear witness to him. Christians are called to live dangerously.¹⁹

Many of their mistakes, and many of ours, we can find understandable. What were they to say to pagan writers who charged that Christians promoted impiety to the gods, that they engaged in immoral practices, that their rejection of emperor worship was treasonable to the state? They answered by focusing on Christian ethics.

What gospel encouragement could they offer to a world fearfully aware of demonic activity and power? Celsus saw such demons as inferior subordinates of the great god. The Christians like Justin answered by focusing on Jesus' redemption as one that destroys the demons. 'The power of exorcism lies in the name of Jesus,' testified Origen (*Contra Celsum* 1.6). What answers could they give their critics who charged them with making blind assertions and giving no proof? They turned to an exposition of Christian as 'the true philosophy'.²⁰ p. 216

At the same time, there were wrong turns taken and lessons to be learned of a negative sort also for us and for the Two-Thirds World. I suggest that at least one part of their mistake may have been made in perceiving their context. They shifted the attention of the church to a new target or receptor audience. About the middle of the second century, a

¹⁷ J. K. S. Reid, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 53.

¹⁸ Chadwick, 'Philo', 180–81.

¹⁹ Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 142.

²⁰ Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma* (7 vols; repr. New York: Dover, 1961) 2.209–24.

large body of literature was aiming at the pagan majority of the population masses. But as the decades wore on, Christian writers spoke less and less to the illiterate masses. The Alexandrian School addressed people who read for the purpose of obtaining better information. 'They speak to the educated few, including the rulers of the Roman Empire. They address them individually as men of higher culture (*paideia*), who will approach such a problem in a philosophical spirit.'²¹ Thus the presentation of the gospel was drawn deeper into the pull of a rationalistic orbit. Holistic balance was distorted by the magnetic attraction of a philosophical outlook that cuts up reality into an intricate series of related philosophical problems.

A second related problem was their failure to deal with their own pre-understandings in evaluating the gospel agenda. Their predispositions, the presuppositions they brought to the theological task of hermeneutic, were themselves captive to the same charms of rational speculation. Clement of Alexandria came to Christianity by way of philosophy. Could one expect such a man to see easily the Christian as anyone other than the 'true Gnostic'? Origen was a professional philosopher. Like a dentist who looks at faces and sees mouths, he looked at Christianity and saw the *paideia* of humanity, Greek wisdom at the bottom line of divine providence.

And finally a third problem remained. The cultural agenda they chose to address showed sin's cracks and dents but no serious injury. Sin's side effects could be treated in an emergency room on an outpatient basis. There was no need for intensive care units. Culture was good 'and not an evil,' commented Origen. 'In fact, it is a road to virtue. It is no hindrance to the knowledge of God.' Rather it favours it (*Contra Celsum* 3.47, 49).

What of an antithesis between darkness and light? What of sin? Sin was the result of ignorance, not an inherited evil nature, argued Justin. With a highly optimistic confidence in human reasoning and free will, he fully expected that if the barriers of ignorance and misinformation were removed, the truth of Christ would shine in its own light. And if not, you could always blame the deceptions of demons. 'The devils made me do it.' Sin's darkness was no more apparent in the Alexandrian p.217 School. Clement was interested in free will, not inherited bondage or corruption of nature. And Origen reduced the fall to the state of preexistence, before the beginning of earthly life. Original sin became pre-original sin.

Given these perspectives, accommodation became an easier way to deal with the cultural agenda issue than antithesis. But searching in good will for points of contact can become like falling on pitchforks in haystacks. Borrowing too many things from a neighbour, no matter how well intended, left the Western world with a very cluttered theological attic.²²

Out of this came eventually a new understanding of how theology was formed. Theology saw itself as more and more an abstractionist task, a searching for essences untouched by the realities of the cultural context. The goal of theology became a rational display of the Platonic ideal. The Latin Fathers, with their legal training, reinforced this perception. The Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea and the two Gregories, in the second half of the fourth century, carry it on. In the language of Werner Jaeger:

Even in their high appreciation of Origen, to whom they often refer, they show that they, like him, think of theology as a great science based on supreme scholarship and as a

²¹ Jaeger, *Early Christianity*, 27.

²² For amplification of this criticism, consult C. Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 109–18.

philosophical pursuit of the mind. And this science is part of the entire civilization that is theirs and in which they feel at home.²³

Out of this, we suggest, comes a confusion of the Bible as norm with theology as a neutral search for the rationally ideal, the 'heavenly principles'. True theology is seen as *sui generis*, the liberating search of the mind for essence, core, unhindered by any kind of historical, geographical, or social qualifier. Theological pursuits are freed to become the Platonic search for abstract, rational principles.

Anglo-Saxon evangelicals are today properly concerned over current attitudes to biblical authority. Is the history we have just sketched also part of the reason why they become more fearful that any thinking which explores the tentative nature of theology will lead to a downward slide to syncretism? Do they see the rational core 'ideal' of theology being threatened? How much of that fear is biblically proper? And how much is controlled by a hidden agenda that assumes that theology, wherever it originates, is a rational given ontologized p. 218 out of reality? Has the evangelical in the Two-Thirds World seen this history better than we have?

THE AGENDA OF EVANGELICAL TWO-THIRDS WORLD THEOLOGIES

The emerging theologies in the Two-Thirds World share many things in common with Western models.

(1) They are intentionally contextual and occasional, as is all theological effort. One will not always find great theological systems. But these systems have come late to the Anglo-Saxon world as well. The first centuries of church history did not produce a systematician like Calvin or Luther until there had been an Augustine writing on soteriology or an Anselm on the atonement to feed into the larger stream. In fact, there may be those who do not want to build such systems in the church of the Two-Thirds World. On the part of some, this could very well be a part of the criticism of the Anglo-Saxon world of theology. Some apparently might fear any theological system that appears to be timeless and culturally universal.

(2) There is also a sense that this occasional, local character of theology is crucial if Christianity is to survive in its particular settings. And this too is a feeling shared with Justin and the Alexandrian School. We are aware, for example, that we must Christianize Africa. The African theologian shares that commitment with us. But with it, there is another question. How will we Africanize Christianity? How will we move from Christianity for Africa to Christianity in Africa? If Christianity is to survive in Africa, it must be seen as more than a relic of the colonial period. It must be truly African; it must speak to actual African concerns with an authentically African voice. The authenticity of all theology, argues one evangelical, depends on two factors: its Christian integrity and its cultural integrity.²⁴

(3) We share together as well an inability to break ourselves free from our cultural pre-understandings. The same weakened view of sin that encourages accommodation to our Greek and Latin cultures often inhibits theology in the Two-Thirds World. Is this not a major flaw, for example, in liberation theology? In its necessary protest against a reduction of sin to the merely private, is liberation theology still encumbered with too shallow a view of sin? Are some of the richest descriptions of sin in the Bible blurred? Is liberation theology willing to see sin as such a state of corruption that the elimination of

²³ Jaeger, *Early Christianity*, 74.

²⁴ Dick France, 'Christianity on the March', *Third Way* 1/21 (November 3, 1977) 3-5.

poverty, [p. 219](#) oppression, racism, classism, and capitalism cannot alter the human condition of sinfulness in any radical way?²⁵

But, after we have admitted the similarities, we are still left with differences that may be pointing to more hopeful learning signs for the future of theology. It is to a few of these signs that I point now in closing.

1. There appears to be a more conscious awareness among Two-Thirds World theologies of the human, cultural context and contextuality as a key in the process of theologizing. These evangelicals appear to find it easier to admit that all theology has always been situational. It has always been a case of theology in context. At the same time, these evangelicals also distance themselves from those who argue that context takes precedence over text. Old doubts concerning the authority of the Bible can emerge again, they warn, under the cloak of an enculturated hermeneutics.²⁶

But even admitting this, there is still a lesson for us to learn whether it be from Korean Minjung theology or American Black theologies of a liberal orientation. Theology cannot be done in an ontological vacuum. Theology speaks out of the historical context; and theology must speak to that context.

2. There also appears to be in Two-Thirds World theologies a deeper appreciation of the social and cultural dimensions of the historical context than one finds elsewhere. These theologies have not made the mistake of the Alexandrian School and focused on the purely ontological and epistemological. Their setting does not seem to have allowed them that luxury. They have done their theologizing in a world of vast poverty, a world of oppressor and oppressed, a world of dependence and marginalization.

Where was theology to turn to respond to these issues? The agenda of inherited Anglo-Saxon theology did not speak to these issues. If theology was to speak to Two-Thirds World needs, it would need a new agenda. It would have to search for new answers. What does the Bible say about poverty and oppression? About nation-building and torture, racism and, dare I say it, sexism? The indices of Anglo-Saxon theological texts yield little fruit for these kinds of questions.

3. There also appears to be in Two-Thirds World theologies a [p. 220](#) deeper interfacing with non-Christian religions. The churches of Asia especially have found it necessary to make the growth of the great traditions of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism a central emphasis in their theological development. Again, there seems to be little help in meeting this challenge from contemporary Anglo-Saxon theologies. Our world has left behind the interest in pagan religions shown by Justin and the Alexandrian School. We live in a post-Enlightenment world where we must spend our energies on Anglo-Saxon secularization and antisupernaturalism. There are some who fear an escalating self-preoccupation even of evangelical theology with its own welfare.

In the Buddhist context of Sri Lanka and Thailand, by contrast, theology finds itself oriented to questions of the nature of suffering, of impermanence and the non-self, of enlightenment. In Africa the dialogue is with Africa's traditional religions. What is the connection, if any, between Christian theology and African religions? Can Africa's religions become bridges, points of contact, for the development of a distinctly African sound to Christianity?

Anglo-Saxon theology will have much to learn from these studies. As our countries become increasingly pluralistic in religions, we will have to ask the same questions. We

²⁵ For a fuller exposition of these problems, consult Harvie M. Conn, 'Theologies of Liberation', in *Tensions in Contemporary Theology* (ed. S. Gundry and A. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 404–18.

²⁶ Ro and Eshenaur, *Bible and Theology*, 9–12, 23–24.

are already doing it with Judaism. Now our study of Hinduism, Islam and Buddhism must begin.

4. Finally, there is a new recovery in Two-Thirds World evangelical theologies of the missiological nature of theology. That missiological dimension was present in the classical theologians we paid attention to at the beginning of this paper. But the results of their encounter led theology further away from that dimension. By contrast, this missiological dimension is being recovered in the Two-Thirds World theologies. In some settings, such as Asia or most of Africa, theology is forced to do its work without the benefit of the *corpus christianum*. In this setting theologizing has a more 'missiological' sound to it. It is done with more consciousness that the non-Christian world is eavesdropping.

In settings like Latin America and among blacks in South Africa and North America, the church also sees itself as a marginalized minority. But in this instance their world is the world of institutionalized Christendom. But, either because of oppression or racism, they are forced to do their reflective work 'from the underside'. In these context, they carry on their efforts in spite of the *corpus christianum* or directly to it. In both of these contexts, theology then sees itself as a witness of a prophetic sort. The theological tone is more 'missiological'. Theologians sound more like evangelists. [p. 221](#)

THE REAFFIRMATION OF 'SITUATIONAL' THEOLOGIZING

The lessons from the early Church and from the Two-Thirds World converge. Contextualization is not a new discovery; it has always been a characteristic of theology as such. Paul's 'task theology' is a biblical pattern for our own theologizing. Adrio König puts it this way:

All theology, all reflection about the Bible should be done contextually, i.e., taking into consideration the context or situation of the theologian and the church. Everyone who thinks systematically about the meaning and implications of the biblical message should deliberately take up his own situation in his thinking. Theology is practiced in and from within a specific situation, but also in terms of and with a view to a specific situation.²⁷

This is just saying that theology must be biblical but it need not be borrowed. Even evangelical theology will have a different look when it is shaped in a context where Confucius, not Kant, is king.

So a different twist to theology seems to be developing in the Two-thirds World. It is addressing questions not usually dealt with by evangelical mainstream theologians in the northern hemisphere—ancestor practices in East Asia and Africa, Buddhist worldviews oriented to suffering. Muslim misunderstandings of Jesus, political and economic issues. 'It offers critical evaluations of western theology and affirms at the same time its shared commitment to the authority and integrity of the Bible. It fears bondage to alien categories and confesses its loyalty to historic Christianity. It does not ask for approval but for affirmation.'²⁸ One will hear sounds from the evangelical of the Two-Thirds World that may appear strange at first to Anglo-Saxon ears tuned to a Reformation credal history through which the Two-Thirds World has not passed. Why will it sound different?

After a lengthy study of the 1982 Bangkok and Seoul statements referred to earlier, Orlando Costas answers our question this way:

²⁷ Adrio König, 'Contextual Theology', *Theologia evangelica* 14/3 (Dec. 1981) 37–43, p. 37.

²⁸ Harvie M. Conn, 'Looking to the Future: Evangelical Missions from North America in the Years Ahead', *Urban Mission* 5/3 (Jan. 1988) 28.

Evangelical theologians in these parts of the world are appropriating the best of their spiritual tradition and are putting it to use in a constructive critical dialogue with their interlocutors in and outside of their historical space. For them the evangelical tradition is not locked into the socio-cultural experience of the West. They insist that they have the right to p. 222 articulate theologically the evangelical tradition in their own terms and in light of their own issues.²⁹

Is not that our common calling in every age and in every cultural setting? And from it will there not come ultimately perhaps the richest contribution of all to the task of theology—the reminder to us all of what theology truly rooted in biblical revelation and addressing our real contexts can offer us? The ultimate test of any theological discourse, after all, is not only erudite precision but also transformative power. ‘It is a question of whether or not theology can articulate the faith in a way that is not only intellectually sound but spiritually energizing, and therefore, capable of leading the people of God to be transformed in their way of life and to commit themselves to God’s mission in the world.’³⁰

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Christian Communication and Religious Pluralism: Capitalizing on Differences

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The author of this article, who has had missionary experience in Japan, questions the rightness of always looking for similarities, bridges, common ground and redemptive analogies in our task of communicating the gospel to people of other faiths. He thinks that emphasizing likenesses among religions is illusive, and the risk of emasculating propositional truth while ‘coronating’ personal experience is very real. He quotes with approval Hendrik Kraemer and Hans Reudi Weber in their emphasis on contrasts and differences. By contrast he argues that the Christian faith is qualitatively different from other faiths and that it is through comparison and contrast that the uniqueness of the gospel can be most effectively communicated. In an age of religious pluralism and relativistic dialogue, this warning needs to be carefully considered. However, the article raises for us the fundamental issue of the scope and limits of revelation itself. Is there a valid distinction between God’s universal creational revelation and his particular salvific revelation as recorded in the Bible? Unless our theology of communication tackles this basic issue our practice of communication is in danger of being faulty and misleading.

²⁹ Costas, ‘Evangelical Theology’, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.