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Learning from the African Experience: Bediako and Critical Contextualisation

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SINCE the 1970's the term 'contextual theology' has gained in prominence and relevance for those engaged in intercultural, and increasingly intra-cultural, theologising. Discussions surrounding the topic are generally being engaged on two distinct though intimately interrelated levels. The first is that of the theoretical, what is generally referred to as 'missiology', while the second is that of the practical, what can be called 'mission studies'.

Looking first at the missiological level, discussion tends to focus on understanding what contextual theology is and how it works, or perhaps, more correctly, how it should work. A key driver behind this discussion is the desire for a genuine grappling with the explosion of local theologies coming from the Two-Thirds World. Against

the threat of theological relativism and unbounded pluralism, or what could be called the tyranny of the particular, there is a need to search for some understanding of the processes, derivations and implications of these local theologies. By undertaking this search it is hoped that mechanisms useful for mediating against the tyranny of the particular may be found.

So the study of contextual theology proceeds apace, actively engaging across a broad range of theological and practical concerns. In fact, by its nature, the study of contextual theology crosses all of the major disciplines of traditional Christian study. It is, after all, a discussion about frameworks and foundations. However, within this broad range of scholarship there is an understandable emphasis on hermeneutical and methodological issues. This is perhaps why certain issues have come to dominate the missiological agenda, such as the Evangelical and Ecumenical divide on the authority of scripture, and the relative

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merits of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. In discussing missiological issues this paper will not concern itself with hermeneutical concerns per se, though of course they are integral to any discussion of contextual theology; rather it will principally be concerned with methodological issues.

At the mission studies level the concerns are more practical in nature, generally focused on matters of application. The primary focus here is on active engagement in inter and intra-cultural dialogue and evangelism. The driving questions are usually related to issues of particularity, for example, those of method. So, for instance, the relevant question may be: how can I relate more relevantly to my poor Philippine Muslim neighbours when I am an affluent white missionary? Or, perhaps, how do I, a South Korean missionary, bridge the cultural gap with my African or New Zealand neighbours? In similar vein this paper is concerned with questions such as: how can I actively live out my faith in the context of African traditional religions? These are but a small selection of the great many concerns facing those actively engaged in living out their faith within the various, multi-faceted contexts in which Christianity is expressed. They are representative of the other deep concern of this paper, addressing in some small measure the *how* of Christian engagement with the world.

Of course the theoretical and practical distinction drawn above is never so clearly distinguishable in reality. The missiological considerations draw deeply from the well of actual experiences for their empirical data, while the practice of contextual engagement

is, we would hope, largely predicated upon theoretical formulations derived from the insights of missiologists. As this implies, there is an important dialogical, in fact symbiotic, relationship between those involved in missiology and those involved in mission studies.

This paper seeks to contribute to this relationship by undertaking a dialectical engagement between the practical and the theoretical. By this means I hope to demonstrate how a fruitful theological discussion can ensue, one that changes in important ways all those involved in it. Before proceeding with this demonstration though it is appropriate to pause for a moment to discuss, in the following order, both the key parameters of the dialectical approach being undertaken here, and the parameters within which the discussion will proceed.

Key Parameters of Dialectical Approach

As intimated above, the missiological framework is largely driven by a modular approach. In part this represents a human predilection for simplicity: a search for tools that achieve some coherent management of an overly abundant supply of data. In this context models operate as general explanatory frameworks. Models can also serve other purposes; for example, some are constructed for indicative or predictive purposes, providing direction for future research endeavours. While being mindful that in some sense all models have an element of this latter characteristic this essay is concerned primarily with the former, those models that seek to provide a working

understanding of reality.¹

In using such explanatory models there is a need to acknowledge their reductionist tendencies. These models are, after all, simplistic representations of what are often very complex sets of phenomena. This is certainly true in the field of practical theological inquiry. Here a prolific amount of anthropological, sociological and economic data intersects with the complexities of human behaviour to weave an extraordinarily intricate garment of interactions. It is the unenviable task of theologians occupied with such inquiries to engage their study at both the level of data and narrative, to intimately understand the detail while concurrently constructing a sensible framework with which to explain the available data.

However, mere understanding is insufficient. Once understanding is gained it is incumbent upon theologians to disseminate their findings. This dissemination is not only necessary for explanatory purposes, it also allows for critical reflection by the community at large. Open, though loving, critiquing can lead the way to a very constructive dialogue, one in which important contributions can be made to the models being presented, whether by highlighting overlooked, or over/under stated aspects. Such a dialogue may also become the vehicle for

further creativity that extends or supersedes the original models.

This returns us to the aim of this paper, though now with a greater understanding of the parameters involved. It allows us to state more accurately and succinctly the aim of this paper as engaging in a critical dialogue between modular contextual theology theory on the one hand, and the actual practice of intercultural communication on the other, with the hope of constructively contributing towards both. This paper further proposes that this can best be achieved by examining certain key models of contextual theology through a specific case study. This case study approach allows us to gain insight not only into the relative merits of the modular perspective to contextual theology, thereby providing an understanding of the usefulness of these models as tools for advancing our understanding of contextual theologising, but also into how the use of these models can contribute to the improvement of a specific situation.

Scope

As noted above this paper will proceed on the basis of a case study. This immediately raises the question of where a case study can be sourced. Of course the choice made here immediately betrays the author's regional predilections, which in this case happens to be Africa. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that the dialectical methodology along which this analysis proceeds is equally valid for any regional analysis. Having established the general context to be Africa though, there is the important consideration of determining the level of specificity required

¹ Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study of Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979), esp. pp. 23-33, and Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis, 2002), Rev ed., pp. 28-33, guide the following.

to achieve our aim.

For the purposes of comparative discussion it is often easier to speak in generalisations, allowing very diverse and often divergent ideas to coalesce under a single descriptive term. One such term is that of 'African Theology'. Its usefulness relates to its ability to draw together a multitude of similar theological threads from one of the most multi-faceted continents on earth. It does have accompanying difficulties though, not least of which is the widely differing contexts included within its ambit. In speaking of African Theology it is therefore very important to describe the constituent similarities included within it, thereby delineating the limits of similarity being discussed, while concurrently acknowledging the broad diversities still inherent within the discussion.

With respect to the broad similarities, it is proposed that this paper will have particular relevance for those interested in African theology emanating from contexts in sub-Saharan Africa, excluding South Africa. This delineation is chosen for a number of reasons, beyond the obvious geographic consideration. Two primary reasons may be cited. First, there is the quite different historical development of Christianity between these regions. The development of Ethiopic Christianity, for instance, is quite different from the primarily western transmission of Christianity experienced by its southern counterparts. Second, there are the many substantive differences between the theological contexts embraced by these regions. So, for example, the South African theological context could be broadly described as embracing or emanating from Black and Lib-

eration theology. While these theologies are certainly present in the region being examined, they are not as pervasively or predominately so.²

Having established the broad similarity present across a swathe of Africa there is also the need to acknowledge the very many, and often antagonistic, diversities it represents. Most notably there exists a significant divide between the theologies derived from the nations of West Africa as opposed to those of the East. In fact, at each further stage of particularisation multiple divergences emerge. Hence the nations of West Africa contain within them a plethora of theological streams, and, similarly, individual nations such as Ghana display equally diverse theological thinking and activity.³

Trying to locate oneself within this milieu is an unenviable task. The preceding discussion does, however, highlight two methodologies that could usefully allow us to become orientated within the African context. The first is to frame this discussion around the general appellation of African Theology, seeking a pan-African case study of critical contextualisation. In a paper of this scope, however, such an ambi-

2 Tite Tienou, 'The Church in African Theology; Description and Analysis of Hermeneutical Presuppositions', ed. Carson, D. A., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1984), pp. 151-165. So also, Hesselgrave, and Rommen, *Contextualization*, pp. 96-98.

3 John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 15-23. Hesselgrave, and Rommen, *Contextualization*, pp. 96-98 cite several other important factors, such as differing theological sources and aims.

tious project would prove too difficult to tame. However, one other avenue of inquiry may prove fruitful, viz, reference to a particular, specific representative context. This is a potentially useful context because, as noted above, it is in the particular context that the modular framework needs to have validity and usefulness.

This essay will therefore seek to examine contextualisation, as experienced within Africa, through the thoughts of a single African theologian, the Ghanaian, Kwame Bediako. Of course no such discussion can proceed in some kind of glorious isolation, and particularly so within the African context where the sense of community is so strongly present. We shall therefore hear from a number of other theologians, of varying African nationalities and Christian roots, who will become important conversation partners as we progress.

It is perhaps important to justify the choice of Bediako over other equally commendable subjects, especially in light of the large pool of significant theologians Africa has produced. Within such a context there will never be a truly satisfactory justification for the particular choice made. It can be noted though that some important guidelines in this choice included the desire to interact with a theologian of considerable pan-African status, who had a consistent and significant body of written work to draw from and, given the context indicated by the title of this paper, had some significant interaction with western theologians.

Bediako is an evangelical theologian who is an increasingly important bridging figure between Africa and the West. He is both director of the Akrofi-

Christaller Memorial Centre in Ghana, and a director of the Oxford Center of Mission Studies, Oxford, England; as well as formerly being Visiting Lecturer in African Theology at the Center for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Though much of his time is spent in Ghana he travels extensively in the West each year lecturing. Aside from his vital bridging role Bediako was chosen for two further reasons. First, we shall see that his theology is fairly representative of the middle ground of African thinking on contextualisation issues; and second, because of his articulate elaboration of both historical and contemporary African theological processes.

Having decided upon the subject of the case study it now remains to proceed with the discussion. This paper will therefore seek to understand how Kwame Bediako views contextualisation; then it will seek to understand his perception relative to appropriate modular frameworks; thirdly, it will comment critically upon both of these frameworks and Bediako's positions in light of the preceding analysis. Finally, it will then draw out some of the broader implications that arise out of the analysis.

The Task at Hand

The African theologian John Pobee notes:

The task is to develop an authentically African expression of the one gospel ... expressing the one gospel in such a way that not only will Africans see and understand it

but also non-Africans will see themselves as sharing a common heritage with Africans.⁴

For Pobee this is a task that can be achieved by erecting a theological framework around three key guidelines: '... the search must be biblical, apostolic and catholic'.⁵ Somewhat in anticipation of later discussion we can note before proceeding further that these key guidelines are not exhaustive of the requirements. Justin Upkong notes the importance of context in the search, specifically highlighting orthopraxy as a central element of African theological dialogue. Nominally 'secular' structures therefore also need to form an important element in the theological construct.⁶

Kwame Bediako

In Ghana Kwame Bediako is one

scholar undertaking the task Pobee outlines. He has engaged in substantial research of both the roots of African theology, through historical investigation, and of the significance of African theology in the contemporary international Christian environment.⁷ Methodologically he builds on his historical foundation by elaborating a comprehensive picture of the broad distinctives that mark out a contemporary African theology. The hermeneutical key informing his historical research, and therefore used in his understanding of the current contours of African theology, is the African search for identity. He comments that historically the development of an African theology represents the story of a search for an authentic African Christian identity.⁸

Surveying the history of the gospel story in Africa, Bediako concludes that despite the initial missionary encounters being traumatic events for traditional African cultures, the dynamic interaction of the gospel with African culture was deep and abiding, eventually resulting in a significant, indigenous reassessment of the received

4 John Pobee, *West Africa: Christ Would be an African Too*, (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), p. 49. Tite Tienou 'Indigenous African Christian Theologies: The Uphill Road', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 14/2, (Apr 1990), pp. 73-77. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1985), pp. 77-86.

5 John Pobee, *West Africa*, 49. Lesslie Newbigin, 'The Enduring Validity of Cross-Cultural Mission', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 12/2 (Apr 1988), pp. 50-53; A. Nkwoka, 'Jesus as Eldest Brother, (Okpara): An Igbo Paradigm for Christology in the African Context', *Asia Journal of Theology*, 5/1 (Apr 1991), 87-103; B. Quarshie, 'The significance of biblical studies for African Christian theology', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 3/1 (Jun 2000), pp. 17-26.

6 Justin Upkong, 'Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology', *Mission Studies*, XVI/2, 32 (1999), pp. 100-124.

7 See especially Kwame Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions', Samuel, Vinay, and Sugden, Chris, *Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World: Evangelical Christologies from the contexts of poverty, powerlessness and religious pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 81-121.

8 Tite Tienou, 'The Church in African Theology: Description and Analysis of Hermeneutical Presuppositions', Carson, D.A., *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1984), pp. 151-165, esp. p. 152.

gospel message.⁹ This is not the only insight he gleaned from this historical analysis. Bediako also recognized an inherent ethnocentric bias as driving much of the modern missionary enterprise. Important European mission conferences are reflective of this premise with, for example, the 1910 Edinburgh Conference concluding that there existed no formative preparation for the gospel message in the animist indigenous cultures of Africa. As Bediako notes, this led to an inevitable conclusion: the need to import the gospel, along with its European cultural accoutrements, as the only means by which Christianity could be both articulated and lived.¹⁰ In effect, Europe was culturally and religiously exported. This, then, is the formative backdrop to the development of Kwame Bediako's theology.

The heart of Bediako's argument is captured in a paper presented in 2001, in which he discusses 'Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition'. In this paper he is deeply concerned with the need for Christians to recognize that scripture is inherently participative in nature and that this is central to understanding Christian identity. Each Christian or Christian group has

lived within the confines of a natural culture that at some stage was intersected by the story of the culture embodied in scripture.¹¹ Over a period of time the two cultures, the natural, and what he terms the adoptive (scriptural) culture, eventually come to merge within the individual or group such that 'Scripture becomes recognized by us as the narrative that explains who we are, and therefore as our narrative'.¹² At this point the adoptive scriptural culture has become 'our story'; we are adopted into it. Quite clearly this analytical commentary reflects a self-conscious stance regarding the place of both culture and scripture within the gospel and culture interaction.

His mode of argument is very instructive in attempting to understand what this stance might be. As previously noted, the historical development of African theology is very important to him. His fundamental thesis is that the post colonial period of the 1950s to the early 1980s saw African theology pursue an unusual direction, at least in western eyes, as it adopted, in Bediako's terms, the 'hermeneutic of identity'.¹³ This pur-

9 Tienou, 'The Church', pp. 82-84. For balance note also Newbigin, 'Enduring Validity', p. 50 and Steven Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity: History and Typology', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XVI/3 (1986), pp. 166-186 and particularly Lamin Sanneh, 'The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission: An African Perspective', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 17/4 (Oct 1983), pp. 165-171.

10 Bediako, 'Biblical Christologies', pp. 84-94.

11 John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 92-98.

12 Kwame Bediako, 'Scripture as the hermeneutic of culture and tradition', *Journal of African Christian Thought*, 4/1 (Jun 2001), pp. 2-11.

13 Bediako, along with most commentators, strongly distinguishes between African theology and Black theology; see for example, 'Understanding African Theology in the 20th Century', *Themelios*, 20/1 (Oct 1994), pp. 14-20.

suit had a very specific focus in the primal roots of African society, an explicit recognition that African society is, and always has been, inherently religious.

Importantly for our purposes, Bediako notes that this search actually constituted a new theological methodology. Though not new in Christian history, it was new in the imaginations of western theologians still wedded to enlightenment sourced, rationalistic theological processes.¹⁴ He notes that in fact it constitutes old methodology with the highest of historical validation, being the primary tool utilized by the early church. Key examples of its use include the Jerusalem Council of Acts and the Pauline approach.¹⁵

Bediako then goes on to note that African theologians, by the 1980s, had used the results of this search to derive an authentic African theology from an essentially religious foundation. Importantly for Bediako, this showed that African theologians of earlier decades had pursued their search '... not as historians of religion do, nor as anthropologists do, but as Christian theologians...' ¹⁶ Their conclusions were therefore not sourced in a west-

ern dominated model of theological engagement but in a genuinely biblical encounter with their religious past.

Hiebert and the Generic Model

The next logical step for Bediako was to examine what African theologians have made of this since the early 1980s. He notes that three primary streams of thinking can be discerned. The first is the radical continuity advocated by indigenisers such as Bolaji Idowu.¹⁷ Bediako, specifically examining Idowu's treatment of God, notes that he perceives an essential, though diffuse, monotheism within the African traditional religions. Idowu therefore rejects the proposition that these religions be viewed as polytheistic. To this extent the relationship between the traditional religions and the Christian God can be likened to a continuum of revelation. This implies that both have an enduring place within the religious framework of African consciousness.

Bediako's greatest praise and sharpest critique of Idowu comes at this very point. He sees Idowu as blazing an important trail in the search for a uniquely African Christian identity. Central to this, in Bediako's view, is the necessity of dealing with the place of the primal religions in ongoing Christian living, also a central theme in Idowu's work. Idowu envisages an essential continuity upon which Bediako is keen to build. The danger Bedi-

¹⁴ Abraham Akroong is eloquent on this, providing personal testimony in answer to a question on how to recover identity and religious and cultural self-expression from the African past. Refer to Barbour, C.M., et al., 'Gospel, Culture, Healing and Reconciliation: A Shalom Conversation', *Mission Studies*, XVI-2/32 (1999), 135-150, pp. pp. 141-143.

¹⁵ For this latter point note Larry Poston, 'Cultural chameleon: Contextualization from a Pauline perspective', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 36/4 (Oct 2000), pp. 460-469.

¹⁶ Bediako, 'Understanding African Theology', p. 15, quoting Andrew Walls here.

¹⁷ See Bediako, 'The Roots of African Theology', pp. 61-62 and 'Understanding African Theology', p. 16.

ako attempts to avoid, which he perceives Idowu as having succumbed to, is formulating this proposition in such a way that the newness or unique voice of the gospel is subsumed under the auspices of primal African religions. Bediako is concerned that Idowu has not gone on to explicate the unique impact of the gospel on Africans. To this extent Idowu is an example of Hiebert's uncritical contextualization, an example of a syncretistic acceptance of traditional practices.¹⁸

The second stream Bediako identifies is the radical discontinuity championed by the likes of Byang Kato. Bediako focuses on Kato's insistence that a distinctive biblical framework needs to lie at the heart of an African theology. Kato, in this sense, rejects the need for engaging in a creative dialogue between traditional culture and theology, preferring instead the primacy of the universal biblical witness. In effect this is a form of Hiebert's 'Rejection of Contextualisation' or 'Denial of the Old'.¹⁹

The third and final stream of thinking is the middle ground occupied by 'translators' such as John Mbiti, who uphold

... the development of a sustainable tradition ... [in which] ... the Christian faith is capable of 'translation' into African terms without injury to its essential content ... not in 'indigenizing' Christianity or

theology ... rather, in letting the Christian gospel encounter, as well as be shaped by, the African experience ...²⁰

Bediako stands in support of this stream of thinking, noting that it contains the grounds for maintaining the fine balance necessary between the two divergent approaches outlined above. On the one hand it holds in high esteem the cultural and theological legacy of the African primal religions, while on the other it interacts critically with this legacy through the mechanism of a supracultural gospel. In this way Bediako envisages the best of both worlds coming together, building a narrow path of creative tension upon which can be forged the future theological enterprise of African Christianity.²¹

This fits quite nicely into the categorisation Hiebert puts forward as the preferred methodology for contextualizing the gospel message: critical contextualisation.²² As Hiebert describes it, critical contextualisation is a process whereby a congregation first recognizes the need for a critical

18 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 1985), pp. 185-186.

19 Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, pp. 184-185.

20 Bediako, 'Understanding African Theology', pp. 16-17.

21 There are, of course, those who disagree with much of the foregoing. So, Tienou views Mbiti as advocating an essential continuity per Idowu's uncritical contextualization; 'Indigenous African Christian Theologies', p. 75.

22 Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights*, pp. 186-190. Note also Wilbert Shenk's idea of 'critical engagement', present in the second century *Epistle to Diognetus*, 'Missionary Encounter with Culture', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 15/3 (July 1991), pp. 104-109.

engagement of culture by the scriptures; second, uncritically gathers information on their traditional religions; third, undertakes a biblical study relevant to the traditions at hand; and finally, critically engages the traditional religion. From this a number of possibilities emerge, including retention of certain aspects considered to be not biblically injurious, rejection of aspects viewed as contrary to the biblical worldview, and finally changing other aspects so that biblical ones are retained while non-biblical points are adapted or rejected, as is considered appropriate.

Wagenaar's Critique of Bediako

To the extent outlined above, Bediako's methodological approach and subsequent analysis would appear to be firmly grounded within a wider theological framework. Upon deeper analysis however, the stability of his process, expressed above in terms of Hiebert's categorisation, is less certain than anticipated. In a very interesting analysis Hinne Wagenaar undertakes a critical interaction with Bediako's theology,²³ focusing particularly on his engagement with the issues of identity and the pre-Christian past in Africa. In this analysis Wagenaar is certainly sympathetic to the basic thrust of Bediako's work, though he notices an underlying, unresolved

tension. Wagenaar explores this through three key cultural examples: the use of African Names for God; the use of Sacral Power; and the long-standing nub of contention, Polygamy.

He observes two levels of interaction in Bediako's work. At a theological level Bediako advocates an essential continuity with traditional customs and religions, following the lead of scholars such as Mbiti. However, at the level of practical example his illustrations demonstrate a decidedly more ambivalent attitude towards these issues. In practice he seems to advocate an essential discontinuity on key points: 'There seems to be an imbalance between Bediako's wish of being open to the traditions and his actually critical and even negative attitude.'²⁴

At first sight, analysed under Hiebert's model, this objection points to a negative evaluation of Bediako's judgement. Critical contextualisation is a process of ongoing critical interaction in which the gospel meets, confronts and adjudicates on the different elements of culture. As such it is often a matter of judgement, on the part of the Christian community, as to which elements are to be accepted and which rejected. At one level therefore, under Hiebert's model, Bediako could be seen as inappropriately exercising his personal judgement such that he acts at odds with his prevailing theological ethos.

This, however, is a far too simplistic explanation. Wagenaar's critique speaks of a general attitude of acceptance being circumvented at the point

23 H Wagenaar, 'Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past: A Critical Analysis of Dr. K. Bediako's Theology from a Frisian Perspective', *International Review of Mission*, LXXXVIII/351 (Oct 1999), pp. 364-380.

24 Wagenaar, 'Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past', p. 369.

of practical interaction by a general attitude of, at best, ambivalence. This point is strengthened when we note Wagenaar's discovery that practical examples do not abound in Bediako's work. In fact, it is necessary to trawl through Bediako's writings to find them. This makes it all the more notable that amongst this scarcity of examples Bediako demonstrates a general approach conversant with a critical and negative attitude. The implications of this are significant. It implies that Bediakos' theoretical construct does not carry through into his real life analysis, that there is an essential disparity between his theory and practice.

This is just one explanation of the Wagenaar analysis though. Another possible explanation lies in the contention that Hiebert's explanation of critical contextualisation is an inadequate tool for this investigation. His approach is useful as a means for describing the general approach Bediako utilises, but it is perhaps insufficiently nuanced to allow for analysis beneath the level of theoretical framework. If this were the case, then Hiebert's approach would seem to struggle to critique adequately its own adherents as the level of application shifts from the general to the specific. One plausible explanation for such a weakness lies in the lack of mechanisms Hiebert provides for analysing how critical contextualisation is actually engaged. His model is a good example of a simple explanatory model that lacks the ability to fully dialogue with its own case studies.

Nonetheless Wagenaar's critique has highlighted a significant potential problem with Bediako's argument that, under the framework provided by

Hiebert's model, we are unable to fully investigate. It is appropriate therefore to search for an alternative model that provides some assistance.

Kaplan and a Continuum

Interestingly Kaplan strikes this same problem when he examines the question of the Africanization of missionary Christianity. A key consideration for him was the inadequacy of blanket terms, such as 'adaptation' and 'incarnation', for analytical purposes. He found that such terms tended to hide more than they revealed, as indeed was the case with Hieberts' generic approach. Kaplans' typological analysis therefore eschewed the generic style represented by Hiebert for a more extensive set of categorisations, in his case dividing contextualisation into six primary adaptation modes.²⁵

His approach is essentially historical, depicting the various modes missionaries have employed for their engagement with the local context. It is noticeable that, in his argument, what he is presenting does not constitute a plurality of postures. On the contrary, it represents a continuum running from the naïve attitude of 'toleration' through to the most sophisticated mode of 'incorporation'. This final adaptation mode is a very provocative suggestion in light of the modern missionary movement. Through it he suggests an African incorporation into the biblical story on a par with western

25 Steven Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity', p. 167.

incorporation into it.²⁶

While African theologians certainly agree with this contention, there exists a subtle problem with Kaplan's statement of it. Justin Upkong pinpoints the matter in a very interesting commentary. In his analysis he tackles two streams of inculturation theology that he deems inadequate when applied to the African context.²⁷ The pertinent stream for our purposes is labelled the 'philosophic' approach. He characterizes this as an inculturation process predicated on the application of a philosophical system. Upkong uses an applied example to argue against this stream, that example being the process Placide Temples describes in his book *Bantu Philosophy*.²⁸

Upkong objects to this process for two major reasons. The first is that it does not adequately deal with the exigencies of the African situation, failing to offer a holistic solution to *both* the religious and secular sensibilities of the African context.²⁹ The second is that while it seeks to present an African philosophic alternative, it

nonetheless proceeds from an inherently western perspective. Upkong argues persuasively that while philosophical concepts are an essential foundation for doing theology, this does not necessarily imply the validity of a systematic philosophical approach.

Upkong's arguments are important considerations here because Kaplan, in advocating the 'incorporation' mode of adaptation, relies on the work of Placide Temples.³⁰ In Placide's analysis, he notes that 'Jamaa represents a reinterpretation rather than a mere restatement of the Christian message',³¹ and that 'The numerous African concepts and teachings incorporated into the Jamaa belief system and ritual ... are held to be of universal value and to be worthy of incorporation into the wider church'.³² The key words here are 'reinterpretation' and 'incorporation'. Kaplan views their interaction as resulting in a shift from '... an attempt to express existing Christian ideas in an African idiom...' to a mindset where '... the Jamaa seeks to express new truths'.³³

Clearly this aim is lauded by Upkong, although the process Kaplan envisages as bringing it about does not, in Upkong's eyes, develop a truly African Christian understanding. Indeed it cannot, as it proceeds from an

26 Research conducted in 1990-1992 in Malawi demonstrates the great difficulties Africans are having in comprehending this; refer Kenneth Ross, 'Preaching in Mainstream Christian Churches in Malawi: A Survey and Analysis', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXV/1 (Feb 1995), pp. 3-24.

27 Upkong, 'Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology', pp. 100-124.

28 Upkong, 'Towards a Holistic Approach to Inculturation Theology', p. 102.

29 See also Zablon Nthamburi, 'Toward Indigenization of Christianity in Africa: A Missiological Task', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 13/3 (Jul 1989), p. 114 for a similar point.

30 See his discussion Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity', pp. 180-182.

31 Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity', p. 181.

32 Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity', p. 182.

33 Kaplan, 'The Africanization of Missionary Christianity', p. 182.

inherently western foundation—that of engaging theological concerns through a dichotomous philosophic system that looks only to the religious categories of life rather than life in its holistic understanding.³⁴

Space does not permit a full discussion of this very interesting critique, particularly given its implications for western theological processes. However, one general point is pertinent to this discussion. Upkong's analysis is possible because of the historical development that has occurred in African theological thinking.³⁵ His critique was foreshadowed in the works of Lamin Sanneh. In 1983 Sanneh wrote a perceptive article in which he promulgated a distinctively African view of recent theological and missiological history in Africa.³⁶ His central thesis was that Africa is coming of age in the ongoing outworking of the universal gospel message. Sanneh argues that western mission history in Africa actually represented an active engagement with the *missio Dei*, rather than just the imperialistic, western ethnocentric Christian enterprise it is often portrayed as.

If indeed the African engagement

proceeded from *missio Dei*, then the need to understand it through the western frame of reference is circumvented for Africans.³⁷ God is about a new work and it is more important to understand this than it is to comprehend the historical process of transmission that gave rise to it. In fact, understanding it through primarily western categories potentially robs the universal church of important new understandings. Bediako represents one theologian keen to highlight this. As Bediako notes, '... the divine initiative that precedes and anticipates historical mission, concedes the salvific value of local religions.'³⁸ a very provocative suggestion in western eyes.

Here we have now travelled full circle and returned to one of Bediako's dominating themes, the essential nature of African primal religions in understanding African Christian identity. In the process, we have arrived at a much better understanding of his underpinning logic. What has been gained in the discussion above is an important insight. Upkong's implied critique of Kaplan's position is founded upon a deeper layer of theological engagement with African culture than previous contextual models have allowed for. Sanneh lights the way by

34 Ben Knighton, 'The meaning of God', pp. 120-121, notes the difficulties posed by language even before philosophic categories of discussion can proceed.

35 Zablon Nthamburi, 'Toward Indigenization of Christianity in Africa', for example, notes that in African religious history Placide Tempels and E. W. Smith '... were an exception in an age or [sic] rhetorical misrepresentation of African beliefs', p. 114.

36 Sanneh, 'The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission', pp. 165-171.

37 Bediako deals with Sanneh's thesis quite extensively in his article 'Translatability and the Cultural Incarnations of the Faith', Scherer, J.A., and Bevans, S.B., eds, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 3: Faith and Culture* (New York, Orbis, 1999), pp. 146-158.

38 Bediako, 'Translatability', p. 170.

noting that the African engagement arose from western participation in *missio Dei*, ushering in a qualitatively different Christian experience, an experience akin to the gospel bursting the wineskins of Judaic election in order to reap a harvest in fertile Gentile fields.³⁹ Kaplan saw this change but lacked a full understanding of its radicality relative to western theological processes.

Stephen Bevans

Upkong's proposed solution to the problem provides an important clue as to where we may be able to find another suitable modular approach to continue our analysis of Bediako. Upkong continues his analysis by going on to advocate what he calls a Sociological-Anthropological Approach—an approach based on what Stephen Bevans calls a praxis model.⁴⁰ Bevans promulgates a very interesting typological framework. Instead of envisaging a continuum, he is quite explicit in advocating a plurality of options for 'adaptation', or, in Bevan's own language, for engaging in contextual theology. Importantly, his typological breakdown of contextual theology avoids the simplicity that rendered Hiebert's model uninformative, while his inclusion of avowedly non-western

categories provides for analytical approaches that Kaplan's construct did not allow for.

When Bediako's theology is compared with the six models Bevans outlines, some very helpful results emerge. What is immediately and explicitly clear is that Bediako uses translation terminology to define his stance. This can be seen, for example, when he speaks of '... the critical notion that the Christian faith is capable of "translation" into African terms without injury to its essential content'.⁴¹ This is an immediate indicator that Bevans' Translation Model is perhaps the most appropriate framework to begin with. The parallels between Bediako and the Translation model are in fact numerous and explicit.

From the start Bediako is deeply concerned to note the importance of language in the developing theology of the African continent, noting that '... the possession of the Christian Scriptures in African languages ... be regarded as the single most important element of the Western missionary legacy in Africa ...' He goes on then to comment that 'This ... ensured that a deep and authentic dialogue would ensue between the gospel and African tradition ... in the categories of local languages, idioms and world-views'.⁴² This expresses the heart of the translation model, the gospel, conceived of as a supracultural kernel, being trans-

39 Setiloane's poetry vividly captures the pathos of the historical transmission. Refer Edward Schroeder, 'Lessons for Westerners from Setiloane's Christology', *Mission Studies*, 4/II-2 (1985), pp. 8-14, esp. pp. 11-12.

40 Upkong, 'Towards a Holistic Approach', pp. 107-121.

41 Bediako, 'Understanding African Theology', p. 14.

42 Bediako, 'Understanding African Theology', p. 17. Lamin Sanneh, 'The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission', pp. 166-167 is also quite explicit about this.

lated through a process of dynamic equivalence into the receiving culture.

A very interesting aspect of Bediako's approach, in light of the translation model, is the starting point advocated by Bevans. He depicts adherents of this model as beginning from the perspective of a supracultural husk that is applicable across all contexts. This is not an immediately obvious distinctive of Bediako's approach. Bediako certainly does uphold the supracultural nature of the gospel message. However, his methodological approach is not entirely consistent with what Bevans suggests an adherent of the translation model would adopt.

Bediako, in fact, begins with the African search for identity, the need for an authentically African expression of the Christian faith. In essence it is personal and communal experience that is driving Bediako's theological search. When we consider his perspective on African primal religions, that they are preparatory for the gospel, it becomes clear that Bediako is methodologically outworking the Anthropological Model Bevans describes. As Bevans notes, '... the practitioner of the anthropological model looks for God's revelation and self-manifestation as it is hidden within the values, relational patterns, and concerns of a context.'⁴³

Like the Translation Model so too the Anthropological model has numerous points of connection with Bediako's theology, though this time in terms of his theological methodology. So, for instance, Bevans accurately

depicts Bediako's approach when he notes, '... the real work involves digging deep into the history and tradition of the culture itself, "for it is primarily there that the treasure is found"'⁴⁴ and later '... while acceptance of Christianity might challenge a particular culture, it would not radically change it'.⁴⁵ It is clear from these examples that Bediako is also utilising what Bevans describes as the Anthropological Model.

As a preliminary observation it is important to note that Bevans acknowledges the often fluid nature of the situations theologians face. In view of this he explicitly recognizes that the models he presents actually represent a plurality, and are therefore inclusive in nature, with theologians able to exhibit aspects of more than one model.⁴⁶ Certainly Bediako represents an excellent example of precisely this approach. It should be noted here though, that Bevans does not go on to delineate how such an approach might work in practice, nor does he engage in discussion of any fundamental incompatibilities between the models. These are important issues that bear further analysis and consideration, although to do so here would move beyond the scope of our purposes so such discussion is deferred to another time.

In terms of how these two models interact in Bediako's analysis, we can

⁴³ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 56.

⁴⁴ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 56-57, finishing with a quote from Rush.

⁴⁵ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 57.

⁴⁶ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, p. 139.

note that on the one hand he is dedicated to the supracultural nature of the gospel message. However, on the other hand, he is equally dedicated to the notion that African primal culture is fundamentally good in a religious sense, containing within it a very high level of preparation for the gospel message.⁴⁷ At first sight this presents a significant tension, a point between which adherents of the Translation model and the Anthropological model ostensibly clash. Wagenaar, as noted above, depicted just such a fundamental tension within Bediako's writings.

On the one hand he is open to the theological importance of the African primal religions and cultures, while on the other he is highly critical of key aspects of these religions and cultures when they engage with the gospel at specific points. Restated in terms of Bevans' models, this is an expression of a clash between Bediako's methodology, founded upon the Anthropological model predisposing him to a positive understanding of culture, and his theological construct, operating from within a Translation model framework, leading him to hold a suspicious and critical attitude to engagement with cultural practices. It is perhaps this tension that prompts Wagenaar to comment: 'Reading Bediako's work, I constantly experienced a tension between the critical African theologian and the traditional biblical evangelist.'⁴⁸

Under the aegis of these two models it is easy to see that the apparently dichotomous behaviour Wagenaar discerns is, in fact, the focal point of a fundamental clash of models in Bediako's theology. While theoretically the interpenetration of these two models, under Bevans' magnanimous gaze, is merely a feature of the pluralistic nature of the contextual models he puts forward, in practice the interaction between one and the other is manifestly wrought with complex tensions. In Bediako's case the tension lies unresolved, although Wagenaar does note a recent softening in Bediako's approach. This softening can legitimately be stated as the Anthropological model's more culturally engaging language of recognition replacing the Translation model's tendency towards an asserted, propositional interaction in Bediako's work.⁴⁹

Implications

This paper has taken the opportunity to investigate several models of contextual theology through a case study methodology, in this instance by examining the work of an individual African theologian. Three key types of models were examined. The first was the generic model advocated by Hiebert, which provided a broad descriptive framework of contextual theologising. While certainly useful at this general level it lacked the ability to engage and critique at the level of the particular. This weakness severely limits the use-

⁴⁷ See also Jehu-Appiah, 'The African Indigenous Churches', pp. 410-420.

⁴⁸ Wagenaar, 'Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past', p. 373.

⁴⁹ Wagenaar, 'Theology, Identity and the Pre-Christian Past', p. 373.

fulness of the model as an analytical tool in the contemporary theological climate, a climate in which the particular is increasingly emphasised.

The next model examined was that of the typological continuum presented by Kaplan. While more focused on the particular, it too struggled to provide a convincing explanation of the specific case study being analysed. In large part this was a result of an inherent western philosophical bias present within its framework, a bias rejected by African theologians as not being particularly relevant to their context. This has significant implications for the way the West interacts with an African, or indeed any Two-Thirds world, theologian. On the face of it, from a western perspective, it can be said that Kaplan's construction of his continuum seemed a very plausible and authentically African attempt at contextual theologising, one that markedly stretched the western theological comfort zone.

From an African perspective, however, the framework Kaplan offered was still built upon a western foundation. It may have stretched to the very edge of that foundation, becoming an uncomfortable prospect for western theologians, but it never actually challenged those foundations. For many African theologians though it is precisely these foundations that are the problem. For them the western philosophic approach is too narrow a platform upon which to build a truly biblical framework for theologising in the African context. The question this naturally raises is whether or not the western foundations are in fact sufficient for western theological purposes? Some work is being undertaken

in this direction but, up to now, western theologians have paid insufficient attention to this issue.⁵⁰

The third model examined was that of Stephen Bevans, which proved to be the most useful analytical tool examined by this paper. When applied to a particular context, it managed to describe both the generic theological processes being undertaken while concurrently providing a means by which the validity and usefulness of these processes could be examined. 'Models of Contextual Theology' is therefore an excellent example of a modular approach to contextual theology that is both built around particular case studies and validated by reference to specific case studies. It therefore stands as a significant milestone in the continuing development of our understanding of contextual theologising.

Having briefly noted some of the implications arising out of this paper, regarding the modular approach to contextual theology, there remains but one further set of implications to note. The interaction of models and case studies can, and should properly be, a two-way dialogue. The preceding implications arose out of a dialogue in which the model under consideration was analysed in relation to its validity and usefulness for a specific case study. We need not stop here, for we can reverse the direction of dialogue

⁵⁰ There are some notable exceptions; for example Lesslie Newbigin provides an excellent challenge of western philosophic foundations in all of his later works and Charles Kraft is increasingly looking provocatively at issues of relationship and spiritual power in contextualization.

and consider the implications these models have for the case study, in this instance Kwame Bediako's theological processes.

Arguably the most important insight to emerge is the need for individual theologians to properly understand the theoretical foundation upon which they stand. From Bediako's writings it does not seem as if the tensions highlighted by Wagenaar were the result of a self-conscious stance; rather it appears as if they have emerged as a product of the process by which Bediako engaged his culture with the gospel. It is only once they were examined through a grid, such as that provided by Bevens, that their source and full implications became clear. In this instance the application of modular contextual theology provides a mechanism by which the theological foundations and processes of a theologian can be further refined, or, perhaps, maintained, though now in an explicitly self-conscious manner.

Having said this, it must be noted that this is no simple process. Examining Bediako through Bevens' eyes has been instructive, although the positive evaluation implicit in the foregoing analysis is predicated upon a particular view of Bevens' models. This view can be summarised as Bevens' contention that there exists a true plurality amongst the models he presents, and that one can in fact mix the mod-

els. This is by no means a given. The differences between the Translation and Anthropological models are significant and should not be readily overlooked. At a crude level these differences are analogous to the quite significant differences between the understandings of revelation and theology plaguing Evangelical and Ecumenical interactions. In key respects these positions can be broadly categorised as stemming from a Translation versus Anthropological model difference of perspective.

Without seeking to weigh Bediako with the heavy weight of expectation it is perhaps not impertinent to suggest that the struggle we find present in Bediako's theology reflects a much broader malaise in the current study of contextual theology. Resolving this malaise is not likely to be a fast or comfortable process. Nonetheless, as individuals grapple with these issues in their local contexts, it is to be hoped that significant insights will emerge and, perhaps, over time, a consensus will develop. Whether this is a consensus of an acceptable plurality or the emergence of a dominant methodology is less important than the ongoing spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ to and through the cultures of our world. Bediako, for one, is certainly a theologian worthy of engaging such a task and we look forward to watching how his theology develops from here.