

What has the Jerusalem of dogmatic to do with the Athens of context, or how should one do contextual theology?

O que tem a ver a Jerusalém da dogmática com a Atenas do contexto, ou como se deve fazer teologia contextual?

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Abstract

This essay presents a systematic theological approach to the issue of the relation between dogmatic and the demand of contextuality that is voiced loudly by the advocates of the field of study called contextual theology. Far from defending dogmatic and systematic theology against contextual theology, as if these two enterprises are totally antagonists and irreconcilable, it aims, first, to present some thoughts about the conceptual and rational assumptions that underpin the scholarship called contextual theology. It endeavours, second, to call for balancing the contemporary trends of contextual theology by inviting for viewing contextual theology itself from a robust and balanced systematic and dogmatic standpoint. By this, the essay ultimately proposes that apart from a dogmatic and systematic foundation that lies in the scriptural and doctrinal understanding of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, contextual theology is not truly theological, no matter how relevant and plausible it was for a certain cultural context. Without such a dogmatic stand-point, contextual theology itself would be another form of 'false theology' and far from authentically Christian.

Keywords: Theology; Context; Dogmatics; Systematics.

Resumo

Este ensaio apresenta uma abordagem teológico-sistemática à questão da relação entre a dogmática e a demanda por contextualidade, sonoramente manifestada pelos advogados do campo de estudo chamado de teologia contextual. Sem defender a teologia dogmática e sistemática contra a teologia contextual, como se esses dois esforços fossem totalmente antagônicos e irreconciliáveis, este ensaio intenta, primeiramente, apresentar algumas ideias acerca dos pressupostos conceituais e racionais que sustentam a área de estudos chamada teologia contextual. Intenta, em segundo lugar, clamar pelo equilíbrio das tendências contemporâneas da teologia contextual, convidando a perceber a própria teologia contextual a partir de um ponto de vista dogmático e sistemático robusto e equilibrado. Com isso, o ensaio propõe por fim que, afastada de um fundamento dogmático e sistemático que resida no entendimento bíblico e doutrinário da revelação de Deus em Jesus Cristo, a teologia contextual não é verdadeiramente teológica, não importa o quão relevante e plausível ela seja para um determinado contexto cultural. Sem tal ponto de vista dogmático, a teologia contextual tornar-se-ia outra forma de 'falsa teologia' e estaria longe de ser autenticamente cristã.

Palavras-chave: Teologia; Contexto; Dogmática; Sistemática.

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1. Contextuality and the *habitus* of theological writing

It is seemingly becoming a *habitus*¹ in today's scholarly circles to find theologians producing literature by starting from a narration of their personal, experiential relationship with the intellectual activity called theology. Instead of departing, for instance, from an inquiry about the nature and content of theology or the scriptural, dogmatic and intellectual components of theological reasoning, or even the subject of theological discourse, authors depart from a narrative on their own theological journey. As if we witness today a shift from inquiring about "what is theology?" into "how do we do theology?" or even more specifically from "who is the theologian?" into "what designates this person or that one as a theologian?" (Ward, 2005, p. 16) The logic that underpins this starter conjectures is that "one speaks out of a *habitus*, the theologian as much as anyone else. And the *habitus* is culturally constituted" (Ward, 2005, p. 22). The driving-force of this logic is the conviction that no theologian, no matter what intellectual and methodological approach she follows, is exempted from the conditioning elements of the cultural context that constitutes her theological *habitus* (Ward, 2005, p. 22).²

If one is to follow this new theologization paradigm, and if one had to move within the, rather, narrow reasoning-circle which this attention to contextuality and culture avails to theologians, one should, then, discuss the nature of contextual theology from a personal, autobiographical perspective that treats theology as a poetic of testimony.³ Instead of a question like "what does it mean to do theology in relation to contextuality?", for example, the theologian should offer, in this case, an answer to the question of how does she do theology from her own specific context, be it cultural, religious, sociological-anthropological, political, or even purely experiential.⁴ But, if the theologian does this, would she still be doing theology in the real Christian sense of the word? Is speaking about one's theological context, and how one deals with the theological scholarship in relation to his specific culture, reflective of the nature and subject of theology, or of what the theologian personally finds herself tackling as a Christian in a certain life-setting by means of the theological methods of intellectual inquiry?⁵

Answering this last question takes us immediately to the issue of the relation between dogmatics and the demand of contextuality that is voiced loudly by the advocates of the field of study called contextual theology. One of the now

almost conventional claims of contextual theologians is that one should do theology basically and primarily from the dimension of the cultural and contextual factors, which the theologian finds herself standing within, and not from a purely dogmatic or biblical stand-point (contextuality, that is, is no more to be read as *con*-textuality, but rather as *context*-uality). Contextual theology claims that the message of the Gospel and the theological reasoning on it *per se* should just be the **form**, the linguistic-package, the outer garment, of theology, and not its foundational content. The Gospel, as the South African Catholic theologian, Albert Nolan, says, only provides the **form** of theology, while it is the context that provides or shapes the content of the theological discourse (*apud* Sauter, 2007, p. 106).⁶ If a theologian does not follow this track, it is very possible that she would be branded by non-western contextual theologians as a pseudo-contextual scholar, who is actually supporting and re-invoking into the theological arena a systematic and dogmatic form of theologization, which African, Asian, and South American theologians used almost consistently to consider “the burdensome legacy of European and, in part, North American [religious] colonialism” (Sauter, 2007, p. 102).

In this essay, rather than presenting a personal autobiographical narrative of my story with theology, or my theological *manifesto*, or even defending dogmatic and systematic theology over-against contextual theology, as if these two enterprises are totally antagonistic and irreconcilable, I want, first, to present some thoughts about the conceptual and rational assumptions that underpin the scholarship called contextual theology. I will endeavour, second, to call for balancing the contemporary trends of contextual theology by inviting for viewing contextual theology itself from a robust and balanced systematic and dogmatic stand-point. I would pursue this by reflecting briefly on the following questions: 1) should contextual theology be counter-actual or rather inter-actual in its approach and purpose? 2) What is the criterion of reasoning and hermeneutics in contextual theology; and should it be other than the human condition alone? 3) Should contextual theology’s discourse remain within the boundaries of the particular and specific, or should it also take into consideration the universal and general nature of the Christian faith? These questions are systematic and dogmatic in their nature and extent. I approach contextual theology from a systematic point of inquiry because I want to propose that, apart from a dogmatic and systematic foundation that lies in the scriptural and doctrinal understanding

of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, contextual theology is not truly theological, no matter how relevant and plausible it was for a certain cultural context. Without such a dogmatic stand-point, contextual theology itself, as I argue, would be another form of 'false theology' and maybe even far from authentically Christian.

2. On the field of study called contextual theology

In *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, contextual theology is defined as this theological study that is "predicated with reference to its context." On the other hand, the *Encyclopaedia* defines contextuality as "relation to the substance and nature of the context, which goes beyond merely the literary setting to include geographic, linguistic, social, political, cultural, and ideological factors" (Fahlbusch & Bromiley, 1999, p. 678)⁷. Theologians almost inclusively admit that, ever since its beginning, Christian theology has always been a historical phenomenon generated from situational and specific questions raised in the light of certain cultural and intellectual settings. In other words, ever since the beginning of Christianity, the theological understanding and interpretation of faith was localized.

As said above, the field of study called contextual theology is a fairly recent phenomenon. Christians started talking officially about this segment of theological reasoning around the sixties of the last century, when the World Council of Churches started to review the value and validity of theological knowledge in the light of the church's life in a rapidly globalized, post-colonial world. Sigurd Bergmann notices that this assessment produced, since 1973 onwards, a rapidly growing demand for contextualization in theological scholarship, which was granted, Bergmann continues, "surprisingly quick and geographically all-encompassing diffusion between 1973 and 1990" (Bergmann, 2003, p. 32).

Contextual theologians justify the need for theological scholarship that is determined by context by means of a general allegation that the dogmatic and systematic approaches to theology are dissatisfactory: they do not make real sense in the non-European and non-American settings of Asia, Africa, and Latin America or outside the boundaries of the western cultural patterns and thought forms (Bevans, 2003). The classical forms of theologization are deemed

oppressive and ideological in such a manner that denies the positive and the good in various cultures and stresses, instead, what is really destructive in them (Bevans, 2003). What is the theological rationale, which such a centralization of context paves for? It is no other than a new understanding of the incarnation in a total anthropomorphic logic that claims the following: Christian faith stands upon the basic claim that God in a specific historical time became, through the Son, a human flesh and blood among men and women. The Creator, that is, “became part of a certain sociocultural context”. Be that as it may, the Christian belief in the earthly historical incarnation “cannot be reduced to metaphysics, a science of the supernatural” (Bergmann, 2003, p. 15). Moreover, if the message of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ is to continue to touch people in today’s world through our agency, “we have somehow ourselves to continue the incarnation process. Through us God must become Asian or African, black or brown, poor or sophisticated” (Bevans, 2003, p. 12). The only way for knowing the Gospel, contextual theology argues, is by strictly and exclusively encountering it as a “message contextualized in culture” (Bevans, 2003, p. 12).

“There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only *contextual* theology” (Bergmann, 2003, p. 3)⁸. Thus starts the Catholic theologian, Stephen Bevans, his book, *Models of Contextual Theology*. “The contextualization of theology”, Bevans continues, “is really a theological imperative.” “It is a process that is part of the very nature of theology itself” (Bevans, 2003, p. 3). In order to counter the traditional theological departure from the scriptures and the doctrinal Tradition, contextual theology argues that theology should rather recognize the validity of the present human experience. By means of centralizing human experience, contextual theology surmises that, rather than being purely objective, theology is totally and basically a subjective activity. “Subjective” here, as Bevans explains, means that the source of reality and the starting-point in understanding any reality is “the human society, culturally and historically bound” (Bevans, 2003, p. 4). On what basis this subjective point of departure is stipulated? On the basis of the assumption that “reality is not just ‘out there’; reality is ‘mediated by meaning’, a meaning that we give it in the context of our culture or our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms” (Bevans, 2003, p. 4)⁹.

Contextual theologians argue that these particular horizon and thought form not only shape our view of reality. They also influence our understanding of

God and expressions of faith. They, then, glean from this that one can only speak about a theology that makes sense at certain time and for certain conditions. Is this orientation towards subjectivity and contextuality an attempt to complete the theological equation by adding the element of context to the already acknowledged and used elements of Scripture and doctrines? Bevans answers this question by affirming that, far from just adding-up to complete the extant equation, contextual theology wants to **change** the whole equation altogether. It wants to show that the equation of theology lies from A to Z in context and is founded on contextuality. Context is the alpha and the omega of everything related to faith, and it grounds even the scriptures and the dogmatic Tradition (Bevans, 2003, p. 5). So, if Scripture and Tradition are the sources of the Christian discourse, the context is the head-source, the birth-place, of these sources. Theology is from beginning to end a discourse about the religious experience of the individual subject that originates from, is shaped after and is expressive of this individual's cultural and personal spheres. This from-context-to-context view of theology can be summarized in the Bultmannian-like concern about discerning not who the Jesus of history was, but rather who the Christ of the Kerygma is for me **here and now** in my own existence. God, according to this concern, no longer remains, as Gordon Kaufman says, "merely the God of an ancient tradition, but becomes instead the living God for those living in that world" (Kaufman, 1996, p. 53). This logic suggests that without structuring the hermeneutics of faith on contextuality, there is no meaning or no possible understanding of faith; there is even, one can say, no faith as such. "Contextualization", Bevans states, "is the *Sine qua non* of all genuine theological thought and always has been" (Bevans, 2003, p. 7)¹⁰

In sum, we can say that in order to be comprehensive in its predication of the contextual nature of human subjective, religious experience, contextual theology not only considers culture seriously. It further makes culture "the matrix of theology" and the human person's total worldview the prolegomenon of theological reasoning, stressing always the particular and the relative over-against the universal (Adams, 1987, p. 76).¹¹

In the following pages, I will show that rather than replacing, or even displacing, systematic and dogmatic theology, contextual theology needs necessarily dogmatics in order to be an authentically Christian theology. In the next section, I will show that the contextual nature of contextual theology stands

against construing it as a theological discourse that is designed specifically to counter-part and refute western, or any, dogmatic theology. Such a construal contradicts the historical and the intellectual background of contextual theology, which itself is rooted in the soil of western and systematic thinking. I will then argue in the following section that, apart from a dogmatic foundation, contextual theology would turn into a discourse on the human condition alone, or even only, rather than on the human condition in the light of, or even on the basis of, the reality of God in Jesus Christ.

3. From counter-acting into inter-acting with Western & systematic theologies

It is very important in any attempt at tracing the historical narrative of contextual theology to look at this latter's emphasis on "reading theology as a contextual affair" as being itself the production of a particular contextual setting. We need, that is, to realize that the theological concern about context is rooted historically in the romanticist reaction to the rationalism of the eighteenth century and the successive western reaction to the missionary experience of the western churches in the post-World War II era. It was the Romantic Movement in Germany, in specific, that highlighted conceptually the term *Kultur* (almost twenty years before the usage of the English word) and the German liberal theology's notion of *Kulturprotestantismus*, which translated the Greek notion of *paideia* into *Kultur* and *Bildung*.¹² The notion of *Kultur* was perceived, then, from a crude contextual perspective as it was used in the context of the discussion on the elements and constituents of human knowledge and creativity. The Romantic Movement supported the contextuality and the specificity of human knowledge by arguing that "the cultures of different peoples were not to be judged by criteria drawn from the principles of the enlightenment, but valued as distinct forms of excellence" (McGrath, 1993, p. 98). Later on, the anti-colonialist reaction against the western missionaries of the nineteenth century, and the claim that these missionaries tried to force rational ideological agenda on the local and cultural settings they served in, both granted victory to the romantic charge against the enlightenment's rationalism, and paved the way eventually for the birth of contextual theology.

It is imperative to keep this historical-intellectual background in mind when studying and appraising the phenomenon of contextual theology, because it shows that, not only the notion of “culture” is a cultural artefact (Matthews, 2004), but also the genesis of contextual theology is itself contextual in nature. Ignoring this fact would turn contextual theology into an absolute, static and meta-criterial discourse. On the other hand, the contextual biography of contextual theology shows the untenability of viewing contextualization as an extra-western theological alternative that is offered by the rest of the world over-against the non-contextual reason of western theological scholarship. Rather than being an anti- or a counter-western enterprise, contextual theology’s centralization of contextuality is itself the child of a deeply contextual theological and philosophical debate that took place in Europe in the nineteenth century for the latest.

Another factor that evinces the inappropriateness of construing contextual theology as an anti-western theological discourse is that contextual theology is the product of the intellectual and philosophical frameworks of postmodernity. Postmodernity itself emerged in the twentieth century as an intellectual reaction against the modernist imagination in the very same western context that granted victory for Romanticism and Subjectivism over Rationalism and Objectivism. Contextual theology’s rejection of the confessional and authoritarian impulses of classical dogmatics echoes nothing, actually, other than an emphasis on the private opinion over knowledge, on the relativist over the wholistic, on the **many** over the **one**,¹³ on the subjective over the objective, on experience over reason and on the signifiers over the signified, which are characteristic of the intellectual imagination that challenged modernity from Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida up to deconstructionism.¹⁴ Contextual theology is one of the breeds of postmodernity’s shift into centralizing the relativity of reasoning and emphasizing its rootedness in the knowing subject’s private race, gender, class and culture (Cady, 1991, p. 86). Gerhard Sauter perceptively notices that the non-western theologians’ zeal for forming a theological discourse free from any western intellectual influence or conceptual pre-conditioning is just an expression of these theologians, rather right, longing for their true authenticity and concern about offering an indigenous Christian message to their private and local contexts. This zeal drives the non-western theologians to opt often for developing an indigenous theology in opposition to, and even clash with, western theology.

However, a careful scrutiny of these theologians' discourse, as Sauter correctly points out, evidently shows that the contextual theologians fall into the same "trap" of relying on the western scholarship, which they reject and militate against in the first place. There is a truth, after all, in the opinion that "the methodical tools of criticizing western theology mostly are a blend of political sciences, sociology, philosophy of culture, cultural anthropology, social psychology, hermeneutics, and linguistics," which are after all "imported from the west" (Sauter, 2007, p. 100).

In the light of this contextual origination, one should no more consider contextual theology as an alternative, western-free discourse, but rather a venue for dialogue and relationship between western theological thinking and non-western cultural and intellectual variations. Contextual theology is then to be seen as this intellectual venue, wherein theologians examine the Christian discourse on faith and ascertain that the universality of the Gospel has not been replaced by a claim of absoluteness and universality of a specific, culturally-rooted analysis of Christian faith.¹⁵ From this relational-dialogical and contextual nature of contextual theology *per se*, one can say that contextual theology proper should be *inter-cultural* and not *counter-cultural* in nature; should be **dialogical** and not polemic in intention; should be **proactive** and not reactive in stance. Contextual theology should, that is, be nothing other than "inter-cultural and inter-intellectual theology".

Usually, today's scholars distinguish between contextual theology and intercultural theology, associating the latter rather than the former more organically with mission studies. Some even consider intercultural theology just another name for missiology; a name, that is, that attempts at demonstrating the self-revision process, which missions studies is subjecting itself to in order to redeem and correct its colonialist, culturally insensitive past. But, other than the clear missiological connotations that are usually attributed to its discourse, intercultural theology is just another name to contextual theology. This latter as the former is "a new attempt to do justice to local theologies and particular experiences of churches within the universal church" (Wijens, 2001, p. 218). In addition to this, contextual theology itself started also with a missiological focus in mind, in that, in its discussions since the 1960s, the World Council of Churches wanted to emphasize contextuality in theological education, so that theology can truly be evangelistic (Fahlbusch & Bromiley, 1999, p. 678). Be that

as it may, rather than just polemically standing against classical dogmatics and proving its colonialist tendency, contextual theology, since it is itself contextually shaped, should realize the contextual background of these dogmatics in a positive and relational manner that maintains its intercultural and missiological nature as, first and foremost, an intercultural and not a counter-cultural theologization discipline. Rather than counter-parting systematic theology and dogmatics, contextual theology, as intercultural theology, should represent a theological interpretation and understanding that crosses the conceptual and methodological boundaries between the different theological disciplines in a dialogical way.

4. The human or the divine? The question of theological criterion

In contextual theology, the basic question that is normally asked is “how can theology be done...to sufficiently respond to its context?” (Sauter, 2007, p. 96). When contextual theology is approached in one of its branches, e.g. indigenous theology, liberation theology, black theology, etc., the “how” question is usually pursued by means of chasing after the theologian’s contextuality. Then, questions like “who is the theologian?”, “where she comes from?”, and “how is she conscious about her actual situation” (Sauter, 2007, p. 97) become central to the theological inquiry, and theology becomes that discourse that is derived fully and mainly from either its author’s human condition or from the anthropological and cultural components of this author’s socio-anthropological background and location. Be that as it may, by the emphasis on the context and the knowing subject, contextual theology reminds us that theology is by nature a human activity and a human by-production.

Remembering that theology is a human creation is something necessary and inherent, actually, to the Christian theological thinking ever since it existed in history. The crucial question here is what do contextual theologians want to extract from this self-evident fact? When the theologians who are occupied with contextuality are pushed to utter explicitly what conceptual difference does the human origination of theology make, they state that theology as a human work should then be defined as merely talk about the human and her needs. In his elaboration on the contextual nature of theology, Gordon Kaufman offers such a conclusion about the anthropocentric nature of theology. He starts his

interpretation of theology by reminding us that theology is purely a human work, and then he states

Theology also serves human purposes and needs, and should be judged in terms of the adequacy with which it is fulfilling the objectives we humans have set for it...that is, all religious institutions, practices and ideas – including the idea of God – were made to serve human needs and to further our humanization... (Kaufman, 1996, p. 42)

The validity of any theology on God, then, lies not in its accurate interpretation of God's truth as attested to in the Bible and the dogmatic Tradition. It lies instead in its actual function in human life and its adequacy as a vehicle for fuller humanization (Kaufman, 1996, p. 43). One must point out here that, for Kaufman, the possibility of fuller humanization is not real without using the idea of God as an expression of "the power of the human". This view concurs conceptually with Kaufman's human-centred understanding, where the notion of God is no more treated as an expression of a self-existing Being, but as an idea that is strictly necessary for practical reasoning, that is meaningful within the boundaries of human symbolism alone and that is valuable only by means of its metaphorical ability in "interpreting all of experiences, life, and the world" (Kaufman, 1996, p. 45). One can imagine that when Kaufman is once asked: where the final decision about the adequacy of the idea of God for humanity lies? He would say that, rather than in the scriptural witness, nor in the doctrinal teaching, it lies in the hands of the human theologizing subject.¹⁶

While Kaufman's attention to subjectivity and the role of the human in making the idea of God relevant to the lived context is understandable and justifiable in principle, the possible dangerous consequences of over-emphasizing the human subjectivity at the expense of God's self-existing reality seems to be inescapable in such an approach. If theology starts and ends exclusively with the subjective reasoning of the theologian on her own human condition and settings, theology should narrow down the reality of God by turning God into a mere cultural idea of a linguistic expression that is used, without any reservations or exceptions, in the service, and under the pre-conditioning rules, of the human context. This means that the role of theology lies restrictively in contextualizing God *per se* by applying Him as an idea to every indigenous metaphor, model, or concept that are pertinent to the particular cultural context in concern. Moreover, theology must do this, Kaufman seems to be suggesting, "even if this

leads to significant departures from biblical or traditional ways of understanding God” (Kaufman, 1996, p. 52).

One wonders, in the light of this centralization of the human in theological reasoning, whether or not theology remains the Christian discourse on God and God’s relationship with creation if the epi-centre and core-subject of faith becomes the human condition. In other words, would it be appropriately representative of Christian faith the theological method that turns the God-talk in the theological reasoning into mere **function** of forming a theological speech that is adequate to the human cultural and contextual conditions?

A noteworthy tackling of these questions is found in the writings of contemporary western, dogmatic theologians in their engagement with a serious and constructive dialogue with contextual theology and their genuine re-appreciation of the contextuality of theological reasoning. In his book, *Protestant Theology at the Crossroads*, Gerhard Sauter reflects perceptive awareness of these potential anthropocentrism and one-sided stress on culture and context in contextual theology. Sauter argues that there is a substantial, conceptual difference between “mirroring the context” and “reflecting upon the context”. While Christian theology is supposed to reflect upon the context and carefully considers it in a responsible manner, theology is not to become simply a mere reflection on the context that mirrors it neutrally and passively.¹⁷ Although theology, Sauter explains, relates in various forms to different situational settings and reflects the theologians’ solidarity and occupation with specific human conditions that are pertinent to their own context, the content of the theological discourse should not be purely induced from such private concerns and situational conditions, and they should not be the source of the theological discourse (Sauter, 2007, p. 110). If theology did this, it will lose its critical and reforming role in society, as well as it will turn God and His revelation into mere linguistic expressions of a specific human needs and the product of the historical condition. God and His revelation would no more be the representatives of any objective side in the equation which Kaufman develops in his speech on the relation of the human imagination to reality. The objective reality in this equation is the reality of the cultural-linguistic setting, wherein the human (religious) agent develops an imagination of truth in relation to the idea of “the Divine” (God). The cultural and linguistic expressions of “the idea of God”, rather than

God *per se*, become the representatives of any potential objective dimension in this equation.

What underlines the above mentioned view is the conviction that one cannot anyway speak about God apart from, or even from-without, the human condition. This notwithstanding, if theology wants to remain honest to its Christian and Jewish origins, it must then maintain a differentiation between God's acting in the human historical context, on one side, and the course of this historical context *per se*, on another. This differentiation, as Gerhard Sauter correctly notices, does not mean separation between the divine reality and the human realm. It rather tells the theologians that, in their attempt at speaking about the human historical context in the light of God's idea, they have to remember that "God reveals Godself in history, but the [historical] course of events is not the revelation of God" (Sauter, 2007, p. 109). Be that as it may, one cannot seriously "*derive* theology from any contextual factor", because such a derivation "would define theology from outside its genuine grounding," moulding eventually "what the church is entrusted to say and to perform under all circumstances" (Sauter, 2007, p. 99).

A theologically balanced contextual theology should not, then, reduce the theological discourse into mere echo of the cultural voice or a mirror of the narrow and limited conditions of a specific human source. It should rather reflect upon the cultural context of certain human setting from a theological standpoint that strictly discerns the difference between "preaching the Word of God" and the Word of God itself. A proper contextual theology is one that is founded on the conviction that

the preacher is never allowed to identify his or her words with God's Word. The preacher's words are at best approaches to consenting to God's Word, approaches that imply an opening of the perception of the congregation to God's speaking to them, to his acting on and with them, to fulfil his providential will through them (Sauter, 2007, p. 70-71).

If the above differentiation between "theology as a mirror of context" and "theology as a reflection upon context" is what makes any theological reasoning a theological discourse proper, then the foundation of contextual theology can no more be the human condition or the human cultural mind-set, but rather the truth of God in Jesus Christ and the Gospel's mind-set, or the Gospel as itself a

context. But, how can our understanding of God in Jesus Christ and of the Gospel be as such theologically authentic and honest to the message of Christian faith? Is it not the case that our understanding of Christ and of the Gospel is itself culturally and contextually conditioned? And if it is so, how can one guarantee that the offered interpretation is reliable and reflective of the Gospel's faith, rather than just mirroring certain expectations and presumptions that are derived from the context of the theologian?

These challenging questions take us back to the inquiry on criteriality: what is the criterion of theological understanding? In this essay, I am arguing that the criterion of theological understanding, no matter how contextually oriented it was or it must be, should not be from-without the core-message of the Gospel's faith; it should not, that is, be the conditional, circumstantial needs or convictions of the knowing, believing subject. The reliability criterion of any theological understanding of the Gospel of Christ in relation to a specific context is not separable from what Graham Ward calls "a triple hermeneutical activity" with respect to 1) the interpretation of Scripture, 2) the teaching of the church (dogmatics), and 3) the contemporary work of Christ in the context of an undertaken activity (Ward, 2005, p. 14).

Should it decide to adopt this hermeneutical tripod, contextual theology would not only offer an alternative, challenging interpretation of society and human situation from the angle of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. It would more radically become a reforming voice and an influential instrument for re-creating culture and reconstructing the context. It does this theologically by reminding us, as Graham Ward perceptively states, that "culture is the *promise* originally given to [the human] of what he is to *become*" (Ward, 2005, p. 56), not merely, that is, of what she *is* right now. And, if contextual theology is supposed to work for the self-being and good-condition of this cultural contextuality, then it must maintain its emphasis that culture is not narrowly what we are in the present, but also what we are called to **become** in the future by means of labouring with impossibilities and tears, driven not by our contextual certainties, but rather by the hope that stems from the message of the Gospel. Contextual theology should, that is, be always related to the productive **transformation** of culture, not by echoing the cultural conditions, but rather by "directing such transformation towards a transcendent hope" that lies in God's revelation. Only by virtue of a hope from-without the realm of the human boundaries, "the

cultural imaginary is changed and alternative forms of sociality, community and relation are fashioned, imagined and to some extent embodied” (Ward, 2005, p. 172). By founding the theological discourse on this dogmatic understanding of a transcendent hope that lies in God’s revelation and Gospel, contextual theology would be that theological scholarship, the main role of whom is to proclaim that “we can find a stance from which we can criticize our own culture” (Newbigin, 1989, p. 191); as well as being an invitation for us to realize that the God of Jesus Christ does not blindly accept all the constitutive elements of every human culture (Newbigin, 1989, p. 185). At least not without God relates to them in His otherness and transforms them by means of His divine Grace.

The awareness of contextual theology’s need of a dogmatic and systematic theology criterion that lies in the scriptural and doctrinal interpretation of the divine revelation is just a reminder of the Christian faith’s foundational claim of Jesus Christ’s lordship over the whole of creation and the totality of human existence alike. Christ’s lordship over culture means in the realm of contextual theology that when the church launches a mission towards the world, the starting point of its missionary work and of its relation with the world should neither be the church’s cultural world-view nor the cultural context of the served community. The starting point should rather be God’s revelation of himself as it is witnessed to us in Scripture and interpreted in the history of doctrines (Newbigin, 1989, p. 154). If Christ is above culture as the Lord of all creation, then our understanding of Christ within our cultural framework and mind-set should reflect this lordship and builds upon it. And, if Christ’s lordship lies in one of its features in the universality of Christ’s truth, then our theology should also serve this universality and express it first and foremost, without, certainly, marketing instead its own universality or turning Christianity into the name of its own intellectual convictions. The theologian should, then, submit her culture, as well as her love of her culture, to the service of the divine Father’s use, according to the divine Son’s transformation and on the basis of the Holy Spirit’s judgment.

5. Contextual theology and the challenge of universality

The biblical attestation of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ states clearly that the Gospel is a universal message, beyond the limitation of history and

geography. The Bible also reflects an attention to the multicultural, multiethnic, and multinational identities of those who will one day become followers of Jesus Christ. Today's globalized world evinces this reality so clearly, in that the many cultural homes of Christian faith indicate that Christianity is polycentric in nature. What supports the polycentricity of Christian faith is the theologian's realization of the worldly increase in number of the people who no longer reflect in their identities the symptoms of one, single cultural influence. A vast number of the globe's inhabitants were born into one cultural setting, grew up in one, studied and were educated in another, and live and work in yet another cultural setting. When, therefore, they attempt at writing theology for a specific nation, or society in a specific country or continent, contextual theologians face the challenging fact that their African, Asian, Arab, Indian or Latin American addressees are influenced by many cultures and are actually the children of a Christianity that is more universal and global than they imagine. This makes these theologians unable to deny that "not only theology becomes multicultural, [but] also the faithful him- or herself [too]" (Bakker, 2008, p. 105). In other words, the universality of the Christian faith challenges any narrow attention to particularity or strict reliance on relativity, which contextual theology may depart from in its discourse on faith.

In the light of the abovementioned realization, how can contextual theology reconcile the Gospel message's universal nature, Christianity's polycentricity and the Christians multicultural identity with its traditional focus on contextual particularization and its centralization of cultural specificity? How can contextual theology present the Christian message in its universal polycentricity by virtue of the particular and the specific, not despite of them? To ask the same questions in theological terms, how can the cultural contextual particularity of the theologian become a source of enrichment and depth, rather than a cause of exclusion and alienation, for the truth of God in Jesus Christ, which this theologian aims at conveying in her theology?

The only way for contextual theology to tackle this challenge is by being itself globalized in form and content and by becoming a discourse about world Christianity, rather than mere speech on local church communities. But, how can contextual theology do this as a **Christian** discourse in specific, and not just as a general religious speech? My proposed answer to this question is: by being clearly and substantially theological, not just religious or cultural, in nature.

Unless contextual theology is **theological**, it cannot speak in the name of the Christian faith in the world. The ensuing inquiry, nonetheless, would now be: how can contextual theology be such an authentically theological discourse for world Christianity? My proposed answer to this question would be: by grounding itself in the Gospel of Jesus Christ as it is witnessed to in the scriptures and interpreted in the church's doctrines. In other words, contextual theology cannot be relevant to today's global and multi-cultural Christianity unless it was founded on Christian doctrinal thinking and inquiry.

One of the most significant outcomes of founding contextual theology on the church's understanding of the Gospel's universality, rather than on cultural and contextual particularity, lies in salvaging contextual theology from the trap of "indigenization". Christian theology borrowed the terms contextualization and indigenization from social sciences, sociological and cultural anthropologies in specific. The general tendency in contextual theology is to use these two terms interchangeably, if not even synonymously, due to the fact that these two terms refer usually to the Christians' responsibility of making the Gospel meaningful in relation to concrete dynamic, cultural and social phenomena¹⁸. In the best cases' scenario, contextual theologians may admit merely a slight difference between contextualization and indigenization, which lies in the fact that while the latter focuses on the purely cultural dimension of human experience, the former more inclusively touches also upon the social, political and economic questions and pays attention to the struggle over justice (Bevans, 2003, p. 26-27).

It is worth pondering, however, that treating these two terms as synonyms may not be quite accurate because it sometimes deflates their notional distinction and particularities (Costa, 1988, p. ix). In anthropology, contextualization means placing a word or an idea in a particular context and stating thereupon the social, grammatical or other settings of certain belief, system of thought, interpretation or a tradition. On the other hand, indigenization means transforming things to fit into a specific cultural setting that is in concern. For this transformation to be relevant to, and congruent with, the cultural elements and values that one is supportive of, the process of indigenization must be syncretistic in nature. It must, that is, reconcile, unite or even fuse differing systems of belief, or even opposing principles, practices, parties or systems of thought together. This attempt at syncretizing originally opposed things makes the act of indigenization, eventually, a form of

reductionism. And within this framework of reductionism, objectivity, coherence and plausibility are sometimes sacrificed for the sake of relativization, circumstantiality, and crude subjectivism.

The above mentioned syncretistic indigenization takes shape in theology when, for example, we force the Christian message to turn into a manifestation of a certain cultural religious and spiritual tradition that is restrictively relevant to, and definitive of, a specific, timely context and a present existential condition. Instead of maintaining its dialogical and correlational nature, the Gospel turns into an apologetic method that aims at showing that the Gospel echoes by all means, and in all its elements, what a specific cultural setting considers to be the real constituents of religious and socio-cultural identity. In indigenization, as Ruy Costa correctly says, there is “an inclusion of conscious power struggle” (COSTA, 1988, p. xiii) between those who convey the Gospel message and those who receive it in the addressed culture. By this concern about control and self-fulfilment, indigenization counter-parts a basic dimension in theological contextualization, namely that contextualizing the Gospel does not aim at forcing cultural premises over the message of faith, nor does it want to impose the textual attestation of the Gospel, regardless to whether this attestations’ linguistic and literary content are lucid and relevant or not to the addressed culture. Contextualization proper is not a reflection of modification and compromise that are conducted according to the rules of the prevalent. It is the attempt at interpreting the scriptural attestation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and translating it into a language and expressions that are understandable by the cultural context, without trying to force on the message of faith the cultural presumptions and defining elements of the context. In other words, indigenization may mean that the syncretization of the message of faith may produce different Christianities, which are as numerous as the vast number of the cultural contexts of the Christians around the world. Whereas, contextualization means that the correlation between the Gospel and the cultures does not deflate their distinctions, but creates a dialogue between them as two particularly differentiated things. Contextualization does not aim at creating many Christianities after diverse Gospels, the content of which may be sometimes over-against the scriptural attestation and the dogmatic teaching of the church’s Scripture and Creeds. Rather than many indigenous Gospels in the

world, contextualization means dialoguing with the variety of the worlds within the one and only Gospel of the Lord.

Systematically speaking, the difference between contextualization and indigenization marks the difference between making the local culture and the religious context the criterion of the meaning and interpretation of the Christian Gospel, on one hand, and letting the truth of the Gospel or faith speaks to the human condition in its particularity and seeing how God speaks to the human being in a specific historical moment and space, without reducing God's truth into the by-product of this specific condition, on another. Indigenization stands on the river-bed of the first option, because the demand of syncretism makes the human cultural, linguistic, and subjective settings the supreme authority and criterion, as well as enculturation, the ultimate goal. Whereas, contextualization, as a relational dialogue between the Gospel and the culture, represents the second option, insofar as it theologically concedes that God and His revelation in Christ as witnessed to in Scripture are distinct from the human understanding of them.

What helps contextual theology maintain a foundational distinction between the Gospel and culture and avoid the trap of indigenization is none other than founding its scholarship on the dogmatic and systematic guarding of the faithful independence of the subject of theology from any circumstantial conditioning. It is one of the responsibilities of systematic theology to remind the church that God's truth in Christ is the foundation and the starting point for re-understanding and re-interpreting our own historical and cultural conditions from a new stand-point that lies beyond the boundaries of our contextually-shaped reason alone. It is systematic theology's duty to declare that God questions and challenges our cultural and traditional settings, and transforms our reason, and not only answers our contexts' requirements and our reason's preconditions. It is dogmatics, as Gerhard Sauter says, that reminds us that the interpretation of faith should not turn into mere sociological category at the service of a specific civilizational and cultural imagination (Sauter, 2007, p. 56-57). It is dogmatics that tells us which elements in the context under focus can hinder and militate against, rather than serve the purpose of, understanding the word of God and the Gospel (Padilla, 1980, p. 69).

In order to adhere to the universal and relational nature of the message of salvation in God's incarnation in Jesus Christ, theology should be contextualized, yet not indigenized in the sense of squeezing the truth of God in Jesus Christ into cultural clothes that are far too small to fit it. Theology should speak about how God meets the human in contextual, historical moments. However, theology should not become a discourse about how the members of certain culture would like God to be in order for the followers of this culture to be happy and in peace with their indigenous conditions. When theology dresses itself with these conditions and becomes a tool under their control, it loses its universal connection to, and meaningfulness for, the world, because it can no more reflect any Christian relation with any existing otherness. However, when theology departs from speaking about how God's otherness meets the human in a specific context and how God's otherness relates to this human in the particularity of her existence, theology becomes then, by virtue of its context and not despite of it, an enlightening proclamation for those who live outside this context. It becomes one way among others of proclaiming how otherness does not negate relationality, but rather makes it possible. When theology is contextualized rather than indigenized, it helps people wherever they are to reflect on their own context in the light of God's truth and find new dimensions of God's encounter with their own historical setting. For any theology, European, American, Asian, African, etc. to be meaningful to the global context, it should start from analyzing and scrutinizing the particularity of its contextual, cultural setting, yet it should afterwards go beyond the starter of its particular boundaries and use its relational nature in inviting for an encounter between the God of Jesus Christ and the others in their different contextual identities.

Conclusion

In this essay, I tried to answer the following question: is there any possible reconciliation one can make between systematic/dogmatic theology and contextual theology, and is it tenable to view contextual theology as the alternative and the total opposite of systematic/dogmatic theology? My answer was that any division between contextual theology and dogmatics reflects actually a misunderstanding of the nature of the versatile rationality of theology, as well as of the contextual nature of Christian faith.

Contextual theology cannot continue its rejection and undermining of systematic and dogmatic theology in its scholarship. Principally speaking, systematic theologians need to be aware that without attention to contexts, theology is not fruitful or relevant. However, contextual theologians need equally to seriously think about the systematic theologians' strictness about drawing a precaution line between "being authentically indigenous in your Christianity" and "thinking in a proper and authentic theological reasoning within a specific context". These two stances must not be confused or identified, because deriving theology from what resonates with the indigenous would "mould what the church is entrusted to say and to perform under all circumstances" (Padilla, 1980, p. 98, 100). Contextual theology, in conclusion, is to be performed as part and parcel of the systematic and dogmatic theological inquiry, not as an alternative to it.

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¹ I borrow this concept from Pierre Bourdieu's philosophical and anthropological understanding of cultural practices. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* designates these dispositions that drive people to act and react in specific manners. See: P. Bourdieu (2002, p. 72-95; 1990, p. 52-65).

² Graham Ward argues that this even applies to someone like Karl Barth, who believed that the theologian's personality and his theological works are to be distinguished. Ward maintains that Barth's theology is "a cultural event with a public meaning. It cannot be reduced to either individual genius or a product of a certain set of sociological conditions." David Tracey similarly claims that Barth actually continues the liberal tradition of his age and shows a concern about making theology adequate to contemporary needs (Tracey, 1996, p. 27-31). See also on this Ronald F. Thiemann (1991, p. 75-95).

³ See, for example, on this newly invented concept, Rebecca S. Chopp (2001, p. 56-70).

⁴ For just very few good examples of such pieces of writing, see the collection of essays in Darren C. Marks (2008); Serene Jones' (2001, p. 158-163) brief genealogical narration of her interest in cultural theory and its implementation in her own theology, or Paul F. Knitter (1996, p. 1-22); and the collection of biographical essays in Christian W. Troll and C. T. R. Hewer (2012).

⁵ Similar questions have also been raised by Gerhard Sauter (2003, p. 254).

⁶ The referred book is Albert Nolan's *God in South Africa: the Challenge of the Gospel*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

⁷ Sigurd Bergmann points at the philological origin of the term 'context' and says that it refers to "that which surrounds (Latin con-) a text." It means, Bergmann continues, "the parts of a text that precedes and follow the text in question and which are of importance for its surrounding" (Bergmann, 2003, p. 2).

⁸ Bergmann affirms that "theology today ought to be contextual theology" (Bergmann, 2003, p. 16).

⁹ Bevans here echoes the subjective view of reality in Lonergan (1972).

¹⁰ Bevans echoes here Hall (1989, p. 21).

¹¹ I thank Fábio Henrique de Abreu, the doctoral student from Brazil, for all the conversations we held together on Paul Lehmann and Paul Tillich, during his (Abreu's) stay in Hartford Seminary as a visiting-researcher, Fall & Spring semesters, 2012. Abreu drew my attention to Lehmann's subtle understanding of the relation between theology and contextuality and his warning from turning theology into mere 'epiphenomenon' by means of reducing its content into mere cultural expressions and elements. See for Lehmann's view, for example Lehmann (1996, 2006).

¹² In his study of Barth's critique of Liberal Theology's notion of *Kultur*, Graham Ward explains that this notion meant "the self-education of the spirit in which the very best of what is human is cultivated. And such cultivation is to be approved. To be cultured was not only to be trained in taste and able to appreciate the highest achievements of human creativity; to be cultured was to have been formed by those achievements such that their ideals were internalised" (Ward, 2005, p. 40).

¹³ On the swinging from the idea of the 'one' into the idea of the 'many' and its intellectual, philosophical and theological ramifications on Western thought, read the perceptive mapping and analysis of my *Doktorvater*, the late Gunton (1998).

¹⁴ It goes without saying that one should also remember the contextual nature of these terms i.e. 'modernity' and 'postmodernity', as well as the contextual dimension of any attempt to interpret the phenomenon they pertain to, which makes such an attempt far from being purely descriptive, as Linell Cady correctly notices (Cady, 1991).

¹⁵ I am inspired with this idea by Wijens (2001, p. 218).

¹⁶ "In every generation it is the theologian herself or himself who makes the final decision about what contours the notion of God will have on the pages being written" (Kaufman, 1996, p. 50).

¹⁷ "Lacking dogmatics, theology runs the risk of becoming a mere reflection of its context. In this way theology without dogmatics only mirrors its contexts instead of reflecting upon the situation and carefully considering it in a way that is theologically responsible" (Sauter, 2007, p. 114).

¹⁸ Thus Robert Schreier: "despite slightly different nuances in meaning, all of these terms point to the need for and responsibility of Christians to make their response to the gospel as concrete and lively as possible" (Schreier, 1985, p. 1).

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