12 Contextualisation through the arts

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Contextualisation matters¹

The term *contextualisation* emerged from discussions around the third mandate programme of the Theological Education Fund (TEF; 1970–1977), then closely related to the World Council of Churches. The TEF argued that seminaries in the Third World should be equipped with library resources and encouraged to develop theological curricula that are relevant to the local context. The copyright on this term may well be ascribed to its director, Taiwanese theologian Shoki Coe (1914–1988), mentor of his internationally much better known fellow countryman C.S. Song (b. 1929), one of the pioneers of contextual theology in Asia. Coe criticises the earlier concept of indigenisation as static and backward-oriented, and opts for a more dynamic view of the interaction between text and context.²

Typology of contextual theology

The phenomenon that Coe is addressing on a theoretical level was already flourishing simultaneously all over the Third World in the early 1970s, in the aftermath of secular emancipation movements. While Africa and Asia were decolonised in the course of the reorganisation of the world after World War II, they were immediately entrapped in neo-colonial structures with their former colonisers or the new superpowers of the Cold War era. Latin America, which had already gained independence from the Spanish and Portuguese crowns in the 19th century, was infiltrated by a neo-colonial US imperialism that regarded these countries as their “backyard”. The new coordinate system in the second half of the 20th century was shaped by the East-West and North-South conflicts, with bloody surrogate wars in the territory of the Third World. Christian intellectuals were under pressure to justify why they kept the religion of the coloniser and still wanted to contribute to nation building. The result was theological identity reconstructions in the colonial twilight that fostered cultural renaissances and denounced poverty and oppression under military regimes and the Western capitalist market system.³

While the term contextualisation has a Protestant background, the phenomenon it describes is ecumenical. In the aftermath of the reform of liturgy central to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), Catholic missiology coined the term *inculturation*, which also pays attention to the dynamic interaction between Gospel and culture, and diverges from the older *accommodation* model. The latter regards Gospel and culture as static entities (kernel and husk model) and promulgates a certain optimism that the interaction processes can be controlled, and form and content kept separate.⁴ More recent documents of the Vatican on mission, however, still use the term *inculturation* but conceptually have turned back to the earlier accommodation model.⁵ A term that is also frequently applied in regard to these phenomena is *syncretism*.⁶ While historians of religion consider intercultural-religious exchanges as inevitable and use the term in a neutral, descriptive way, the evangelical wing of the missionary movement considers it heretical. Contextual theologians, finally, propagate a positive view. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, for instance, talks about a “creative syncretism” that enhances Christianity with African resources.⁷ For me, integration has become an important criterion. Is a particular Christian community able to integrate elements of another religion in a way that makes sense within the overall Christian reference system?

I prefer the term *contextualisation* not so much for confessional reasons, but because it suits well as an umbrella term for the two major schools of contextual theology, namely liberation theologies that focus on the socio-economic and political dimension of the context, and inculturation and dialogue theologies that engage with the cultural-religious dimension.⁸ Today, gender, ethnic, and ecological dimensions are addressed as well. When I started my research on contextual theologies, I soon came to the conclusion that we need an intercultural theology as a frame of reference and platform to engage in a dialogue among the different strands of contextual theologies. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians has been a vivid laboratory for observing such intercultural interaction processes.

Methodology of contextual theology

While scope and generative themes vary by context, contextual theologies share a methodological framework that I describe as the hermeneutical circle between text and context.

The hermeneutical circle

This is not the proverbial vicious circle, but a *circulus progrediens*. One never returns to the same point where they started their theological journey. The context is rapidly changing in the so-called developing countries. Contextual theology by its very nature has to respond to these changes, which in turn opens up new perspectives on the text. The rich reservoir of meaning of the

Figure 12.1 The hermeneutical circle

text can never be exhausted by one interpretation. Therefore, the context is the variable in the hermeneutical circle and the text is the relational constant [Fig. 1]. Nevertheless, not everything goes “interpretation-wise”; the text itself sets the limits of its interpretation. I distinguish two criteria in the production of contextual theology. The message of the text will only be understood if it unfolds a certain relevance in the particular context. Checks and balances are guaranteed, in the first place, by the identity criterion, which applies the text again to measure whether the theology formulated is in line with it. On top of this there is a third criterion – the dialogue among the global community of storytelling and interpretation that Christianity is today. Text, in my understanding, is not only the biblical text but the Christian tradition, which can be understood as different layers of interpretation of the text. There is always at least a twofold question with respect to the context, namely the context of the author and the reader respectively. Since it is a circular process, it does not matter whether one enters into it via the text or the context.

Hermeneutics of suspicion

Latin American liberation theologian Juan Louis Segundo (1925–1996) introduced in his Harvard lectures a hermeneutics of suspicion,⁹ a conception that was soon embraced by feminist theologian Elisabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza. While liberation theologians were suspicious of the interpretation of the text but not of the text itself, feminist theology also addressed the

Figure 12.2 Hermeneutics of suspicion

Figure 12.3 The hermeneutical prism

patriarchal bias of the text. Postcolonial theologians should follow that path by laying open imperialist texts in the Bible [Fig. 2].

The hermeneutical prism

I consider hermeneutics as a game with four players in which each of them has taken the lead in a given moment. Author-centred hermeneutics (A) wanted to understand the author better than the author understood him/herself (F.D.E. Schleiermacher). Text-centred hermeneutics (T), to the contrary, talked about “the death of the author” and “the autonomy of the text” (Umberto Eco). Reader-centred hermeneutics (R) asks for the reader-response or the implicit reader (Wolfgang Iser). Context-centred hermeneutics (C) in a way integrates the earlier models, since the context is eccentric and multiple – that is, author and reader have their contexts and the text is read in different contexts through the ages. I opt for a pluralism in method that applies the different hermeneutic perspectives like a prism [Fig. 3].¹⁰

Hermeneutics and aesthetics

Hermeneutics are theories of interpretation. While aesthetics is usually defined as the study of art and beauty, I follow a broader understanding of it as a theory of the perception of the senses (*aisthesis*),¹¹ which includes all the senses as well as the realisation of the ugly and evil. The relationship between aesthetics and ethics is no longer a given, but has to be reconstructed in every case anew. Aesthetics is first of all based on a non-verbal sensory experience and emotion. The attempt to verbalise it inevitably leads to some loss. Here is where hermeneutics come into play as a way to negotiate that loss. Hermeneutics is aware of the fact that each interpretation is only a temporary demarcation of a certain sense.

Christian art in context¹²

If we talk about Christian art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, all parts of the term have to be problematised. Already in contemporary Western discourses on art, it is debated whether there is something like *Christian* art at all, or whether there is only good art and bad art. If we turn to other cultural-religious spaces, we should not just transfer our Western conceptions but listen to local perceptions of what art is. In Asia and Africa, art is first of all to follow the craftsmanship of the master and the iconographic conventions. Changes happen, but slowly. Still, once one gets used to the particular local art forms and their iconographies, differences in artistic quality or aesthetic value become obvious. My working definition is that Christian art is Christian according to its content and purpose.

The artists and their public

I differentiate between three groups of local artists:

- 1 Those who are commissioned to produce Christian art. They are trained in the particular art forms of their traditional religions, whether their background is Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, or, rather seldom, Jewish, etc. This means that non-Christian artists may become subjects of contextualisation by using their familiar iconographies to depict Christian themes.
- 2 Those who become interested in Christian themes, be they Christian themselves or not. Their works may be motivated commercially, producing a kind of Christian airport art for tourists or for spiritual purposes, as in the case of the Hindu Renaissance or the socially engaged Buddhist monk Uttarananda.¹³
- 3 Those who are Christian and regard the production of Christian artwork as their contribution to communicating the Gospel.

Mobility and overlap among the groups is possible, but this categorisation has still proven to be helpful. A fourth group is foreign artists who came with the missionaries or the colonisers and who either perpetuate the Western style for the colonial elite and local gentry or study local art forms and apply them to Christian themes.

Epochs of Christian art in the Global South

The epochs of Christian art in the Global South follow the phases of the missionary expansion of the Christian faith. Until the second half of the 20th century, accommodation was the iconographic paradigm. Important for Christian intellectuals from Asia and Africa is the first phase, namely the expansion to the East along the Silk Road all over Asia, and to the South into Ethiopia. They emphasise that there was a Christian presence on their continents before the Western missionary project that started in the 16th century, which is therefore regarded as being the second phase.

In our case, the Jesuit mission is of special interest because their mission strategy was to accommodate the Christian faith to the local culture and its religious underpinnings. This led to conflicts with rival missionary orders, who accused them of syncretism. The resulting so-called accommodation or rites controversy (ca. 1610–1744) ended finally with the temporary liquidation of the Jesuit order.

The third phase started with the missionary awakening of the 19th century, which was a Protestant lay movement to begin with. Many missionaries came from the lower echelon of society, which was rather distanced from the cultural refinement of the bourgeoisie. Mission was a chance for social upward mobility, as long as one could survive the extreme conditions in the mission field. On top of this, Protestantism has historically had a rather biased relationship with the arts. In order to delimit itself from Catholicism, it cleared its churches of images. Yet there is a range between Luther (who regarded images as *adiaphora*), Calvin, and the iconoclastic radical wing of the Reformation. In the slipstream of the Protestant mission movements, the Catholics also entered the mission field again. The Papal letter *Maximum Illud* (1919) that demanded a local Chinese clergy became another turning point in the mission strategy of the Vatican. The rites controversy had ended with a total neglect of all things contextual. Now neo-accommodation and a renaissance of Catholic mission art emerged.

The fourth phase is marked by the coming of age of the local or younger churches in the Global South after the end of World War II. Contextual theologies were often even anticipated by contextual Christian art. Today we are standing at the threshold of a new phase. Christian themes have entered secular galleries in Africa and Asia. Even though these artists are not producing it for Christian ends, they still contribute to a new religious iconography.

Iconography

More than 90 per cent of the images produced are either of Christ, the Madonna and Child, scenes from the life of Jesus, or the parables. Old Testament themes are rather rare. There is hardly any reference to mission history, or, in the Catholic Church, to the saints, unless there are local martyrs.

The terminology and theory developed in the research on contextual theology can also be applied to contextual Christian art. We always have to reckon with the interaction of at least two iconographic systems. Regarding the genre of local iconographies, we have to distinguish between temple and court art, on the one hand, and folk art, on the other hand.

Documentation

The sources for Christian art from the Global South are postcards, calendars, pamphlets, and more recently coffee table books and the internet. The material is often delicate and the storage unprofessional, so many things have already faded, due to lack of interest and ignorance.

The many faces of Jesus Christ

I will concentrate here on examples from the fourth epoch, the era of contextualisation. For a long time, Nyoman Darsane (b. 1939) was the artist of “the beautiful gospel”,¹⁴ the Indonesian master of contextualisation.¹⁵ Yet after the 2002 Bali bombings and the 2004 tsunami, there was a dramatic change in his paintings as far as themes, form, and colour are concerned. The equilibrium between good and evil that is at the root of Balinese culture was disrupted.

In *Rain of Blood*, [Fig. 4] Christ is dancing on an imaginary cross. Thick red streams of colour are running over a violet background. As behind the screen of a shadow puppet master (*dalang*), one can see shifting shadows of demons.

The *Crucifixion* of Ketut Lasia (b. 1945), [Fig. 5] on the other hand, is a typical example of accommodation art. It shows the crucified Christ in a Balinese landscape in Ubud style. Form and content are clearly separable. Even though the blood is dripping from the wounds of the nails as in early medieval paintings, the depiction of the suffering of Christ is not convincing. One of the armoured men under the cross has already raised his spear to pierce Jesus’ side. Yet the whole atmosphere is not aggressive, but rather restrained. This is even true for the mourning women who are crouching at the bottom of the painting.

Indian artist Solomon Raj (b. 1921) is also an academically trained theologian who has written on contextualisation. Yet against expectations, he

Figure 12.4 Nyoman Darsane, *Rain of Blood*, 2004, acrylic on canvas, 76 × 66 cm
Source: © Photo Volker Küster, courtesy of the artist

rarely uses Hindu iconography. Instead, he turns to Buddhism and Ethiopian icons. When regarded in the context of Dalit theology, this appears to be a reflective contextualisation that renounces inculturation following the dialogue of theologians of Brahmin descent with Hinduism.¹⁶ Ambedkar, the famous Dalit activist, is quoted as having said, “I was born as a Hindu, but I don’t have to die as a Hindu”. He converted with half a million of his followers to Buddhism, which was the beginning of the flourishing of Neo-Buddhism in India, after Buddhism had been absorbed by Hinduism and extinguished by Islam a thousand years earlier.

Figure 12.5 Ketut Lasia, *Crucifixion*, ca. 2000, traditional paint on canvas, ca. 70 × 50 cm

Source: © Photo Volker Küster, courtesy of the artist

The linocut *Jesus, the Teacher* [Fig. 6] depicts Jesus in the dress and posture of the seated Buddha. The palm of his open right hand, bearing the mark of the cross, is directed towards the viewer, pointing to the ground. This is the Buddhist hand gesture (*mudra*) of wish fulfilment. The left hand is raised in

Figure 12.6 Solomon Raj, *Jesus, the Teacher*, 1980s, linocut

Source: courtesy of the artist¹⁷

front of his chest in the Christian Orthodox gesture of blessing. His index and middle finger point upwards, while his ring, little finger, and thumb touch each other, forming a circle, as a symbol of the Trinity. At the same time, it is reminiscent of the Buddhist *prana mudra* that increases life force.

The linocut *Black and White* by black South African artist Azariah Mbatha (b. 1941) [Fig. 7] tells a story. The upper left part shows the reality of apartheid:

Figure 12.7 Azariah Mbatha, *Black and White*, 1970s, linocut¹⁸

black and white are segregated. On the right side, however, they are mingled chessboard-like under the cross. A black tear is running over the white left half of Jesus' face, with the right half being black. The two scenes are integrated in a kind of wooden construction with a beam in the centre. The beam is reminiscent of an ancestor pole with interchanging black and white masks on it. The beam ends in a mask that is half black and half white, in inverted order from the face of the crucified, now with a white tear running over the black half of the face. Inversion is a central concept in traditional religions. The ancestors, for instance, are imagined to be white instead of black. Therefore, the mask depicts the resurrected Christ being present with the portraits of a white and a black man in the foreground. "Where two

or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matthew 18:20). The black person is watching the white with a sceptical look, yet the artist of this prime example of liberational expressionism is obviously already arguing for reconciliation under the draconian apartheid system. The ancestors of South Africa are black and white together, and Jesus is among them as a black-and-white Christ.

There is a less known visual version of Ernesto Cardenal’s famous Gospel of Solentiname.¹⁹ He gave painting tools to the fishers and farmers of Lake Nicaragua, with whom he read the New Testament, and they illustrated in a naïve manner the Gospel stories situated in their life world. I call this liberational primitivism, reclaiming the later term in spite of being well aware of the discussion on the alleged derogative meaning.

In *The Massacre of the Innocent* by lay artist Julia Chavarría, [Fig. 8] we see Somoza’s soldiers raiding a village, killing the children in front of their mothers and ready to also rape the women.

In a gallery in Jakarta, I discovered two paintings by F. Sigit Santoso (b. 1964) that were obviously dealing with Christian themes.²¹ When I enquired about the artist, the gallery owner presented me with a catalogue of a past exhibition that also contained a painting under the title *Namaku Isa* [Fig. 9].

The artist blends the iconographies of Jesus and Mary in an intriguing manner. The face is female, but the body bears the marks of the cross, signified by a red spot of blood on the white garment under the right breast. Both

Figure 12.8 Julia Chavarría, *The Massacre of the Innocent*, ca. 1981/82, watercolour²⁰

Figure 12.9 F. Sigit Santoso, *Namaku Isa*, 2005, oil on canvas, 140 × 110 cm²²

hands bear the marks of the cross. The left female hand is resting in front of the chest. The palm of the right male hand is directed towards the viewer in the Buddhist gesture of wish fulfilment. Yet at the same time, it points to a red plastic-like fish that has been cut in half by a knife symbolising sacrifice. It is lying on a plate on a small round table with a white tablecloth standing in front of the Jesus figure. This painting of a queer Christ goes beyond the classical contextualisation model, and is an example of *glocalisation*. It is not restricted to a Christian public, but enters the global contemporary art scene.

What does all this mean for the relationship between the images and the word, contextual Christian arts and theology?²³ Artists often respond much faster to the signs of the times and are more innovative than theologians, even when they are organic intellectuals. As a matter of fact, they not only anticipate the written word,²⁴ but open up a space of meaning that allows deeper and more polysemous insights than an idea fixed in letters. Solomon Raj did not merely anticipate Dalit theology by decades, but also touched on the cultural and (inter)religious issues that the latter is still avoiding today. Yet without being willing to address the role of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, Dalit theologians are caught in a dead-end street. Nyoman Darsane, for his part, is, as the most prolific Balinese contextual Christian artist, at the same time the only contextual theologian as well. The linocut of Azariah Mbatha demonstrates that one picture can contain a whole theology in a nutshell. Whoever has understood this artwork has understood what Black Theology is all about. Hermeneutics cannot exhaust aesthetics, but the latter can open up diverse inroads of comprehension. At the same time, Sigit Santosa not only breaks new ground iconographically and theologically, but also crosses the boundaries of the whole contextualisation project. Contextual Christian art contains a theology in its own right. It anticipates, transcends, and condenses the written word. Now that it is starting to move out of the contextual box, in what direction will contextual theologies develop? The least one can say is that contextual and intercultural theology have become more intertwined than they were at the outset. We are moving from contextualisation to localisation.²⁵

Notes

- 1 For a more detailed account and further references, cf. Volker Küster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch über die Minjung-Theologie* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1995); Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010). Other substantial contributions to the discussion about contextual theology's methodology are given by Schreiter and Bergmann. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985); Sigurd Bergmann, *God in Context: A Survey of Contextual Theology* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 2 Cf. Shoki Coe, "Contextualizing Theology," in *Mission Trends No. 3: Third World Theologies*, eds. Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 19–24.
- 3 Cf. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001).
- 4 In Protestant missiology, *indigenisation*, and in its evangelical branch, *translation models*, were synonymous with accommodation.
- 5 Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, encyclical letter, December 7, 1990, sec. 29 and 52–54.
- 6 Cf. recently Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas, eds., *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018).
- 7 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Value of African Religious Beliefs and Practices for Christian Theology," in *African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-*

- African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17–23, 1977, Accra, Ghana*, eds. K. Appiah-Kubi and S. Torres (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1979), 109–16, 110. M. M. Thomas, with his concept of “Christ-centred syncretism” inspired by the Hindu-Renaissance, and Chung Hyun-Kyung, with her feminist project of “life-centred syncretism”, are further examples.
- 8 On the discussion about inculturation, and contextual and liberation theology, cf. especially Elina Vuola’s Chapter 4, and also Mika Vähäkangas’ Chapter 13 and the editors’ introductory Chapter 1 in this volume. On liberation theology with regard to the economic and political world system, cf. Ulrich Duchrow’s Chapter 5, Atola Longkumer’s Chapter 6, and Teresa Callewaert’s Chapter 8 in this volume, and on public and political theology, see Dion A. Forster’s Chapter 2 in this volume.
 - 9 Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), 9.
 - 10 This is common practice today in the writings of postcolonial theologians like Kwok Pui-Lan, Musa Dube or R. S. Sugirtharajah; cf. Küster, *Einführung* §2.
 - 11 Cf. Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004); Volker Küster, *Gott und Terror: Ein Diptychon* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2019); Sigurd Bergmann, *Religion, Space and the Environment* (London and New York: Transaction Publishers, 2014).
 - 12 Cf. Volker Küster, “Christian Art in Asia: Yesterday and Today,” in *The Christian Story: Five Asian Artists Today*, eds. Patricia Pongracz, Volker Küster, and John Wesley Cook (New York and London: Museum of Biblical Art, 2007), 28–43; Volker Küster, “Visual Arts in World Christianity,” in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Christianity* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 368–85.
 - 13 Cf. Volker Küster, “A Dialogue in Pictures. Reform Buddhism and Christianity in the Works of Ven. Hatigammana Uttarananda/Sri Lanka,” *Exchange* 39 (2010): 6–28.
 - 14 Volker Küster and Theo Sundermeier, *Das schöne Evangelium: Christliche Kunst im balinesischen Kontext* (Nettetal: Steyler Verlag, 1991).
 - 15 Cf. Volker Küster, “Accommodation or Contextualisation? Ketut Lasia and Nyoman Darsane – Two Balinese Christian Artists,” *Mission Studies* 16 (1999): 157–72.
 - 16 Cf. Volker Küster, “Renunciation of Inculturation as Aesthetic Resistance: The Indian Artist Solomon Raj Seen in a New Light,” *Exchange* 30 (2001): 359–71; Anand Amaladass and Gudrun Löwner, *Christian Themes in Indian Art: From the Mogul Times till Today* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2012).
 - 17 P. Solomon Raj, *Palm Leaf Prayers* (Wuppertal: Vereinigte Evangelische Mission, 1995), 11.
 - 18 Theo Sundermeier, *Südafrikanische Passion: Linolschnitte von Azariah Mbatha* (Bielefeld: Lutherverlag, 1977), 69; cf. Azariah Mbatha, *Within Loving Memory of the Century: An Autobiography* (Scottsville, South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005). © Azariah Mbatha granted through DACS.
 - 19 Cf. Phillip and Sally Scharper, eds., *The Gospel in Art by the Peasants of Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984); Ernesto Cardenal, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010 [1976–1982]).
 - 20 *Die Bauern von Solentiname malen das Evangelium: Mit Meditationen von Helmut Frenz* (Gelnhausen and Berlin: Burckhardthaus-Laetare Verlag, 1982), 19. The Name of the artist Julia Chavarría has been misspelled in the German edition as Julia Schwania. © Ass. para el desarrollo de Solentiname / H. Schulz.
 - 21 Cf. Volker Küster, *Zwischen Pancasila und Fundamentalismus: Christliche Kunst in Indonesien* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016).
 - 22 *Paradoks Batas: Painting Exhibition/F. Sigit Santoso & Sugiyo Dwiarmo*, curator M. Agus Burhan (Jakarta, 2005), 27.

- 23 Cf. Theo Sundermeier and Volker Küster, eds., *Die Bilder und das Wort: Zum Verstehen christlicher Kunst in Afrika und Asien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).
- 24 Cf. Theo Sundermeier, "Die Daseinserhellung durch Kunst übersteigt immer noch die des Wortes," *Jahrbuch Mission* 22 (1990): 29–41.
- 25 Cf. Volker Küster, "From Contextualization to Glocalization: Intercultural Theology and Postcolonial Critique," *Exchange* 45 (2016): 203–26.