

POPULARISING CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

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Abstract

Popularising contextual theology is the challenge of our time. If we are talking about popularising contextual theology we must have clarity about the terms 'popularising' and 'contextual'. Both of these terms are being used in various ways, leading to misconceptions and distrust.

In this paper one form of popularising, namely popularising for secondary school pupils, is discussed. Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies on this level may be regarded as popularised theology.

Popularising contextual theology is no easy task. Popularising does not mean summarising or merely using other words. Popularising requires in the first place the determining of the target group. This target group description must be placed in a careful description of the so-called macro-environment. But before a programme or syllabus can be drawn up, it is necessary to determine the available sources. A syllabus must then be constructed that is contextual, relevant and of interest to the primary target group. A detailed analysis of the needs and the need priorities of each standard or age group should be determined and the pupils' context taken into account when deciding on the selection of sections to be considered.

Popularising contextual theology for Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies is an enormous challenge and opportunity. This must be dealt with urgently, seriously and in a creative way.

1. Introduction

Popularising contextual theology is the challenge of our time. The future of theology will to a great extent be determined by the success or failure of popularising contextual theology. This is especially the case as far as Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies on pre-tertiary level are concerned. This is, to my mind, no abstract hypothesis to be discussed and debated for the next decade or two, but an aspect that needs to be put into practice immediately.

Let us first highlight the basic issues at stake and then apply it to a specific terrain, namely Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies on secondary school level.

Religion only has meaning if it addresses the most basic and deepest questions of people in their experience of life. People can only express their religious belief and professions by means of metaphors. These metaphors can only have meaning and give meaning to a person's life if they are contextual. A person experiences life concretely and needs to understand his/her situation; tries to explain it; wants to overcome fear and strives to reach certain goals. These are, for the religious person, only possible if religion forms the basis of his/her thoughts. Theology which does not address topical questions is irrelevant. Theology must be contextually relevant. This was the case in 'biblical' times and still is. Theology cannot be an ivory tower hobby of a number of scholars. It must be heard by and conveyed to the general public, the believing Christian.

The scientist, and thus also the theologian, is trying in a creative way to discover and describe the structure of the world. This is done from a relational position and in metaphoric language. The theologian deals with people's religious ideas and experience and the systemisation thereof. Put another way: theology must be seen as the reflective and intellectual analysis of religious experience. Theology as a specific reflection of the Christian life and its relationship to the religious dimension of culture, has a unique nature which distinguishes it from most other forms of scientific reflection (cf Veldsman 1990:323-344; Van Huyssteen 1987; Deist 1990:16-18).

From the Christian perspective it deals with the religious experience based on the Bible, or the religious experience controlled or interpreted by means of the Bible. This must be done creatively. Creativity is of the utmost importance in theology. Creativity can be defined in different ways and classified into different subsections. Creativity comes to the fore when at least two obviously different aspects are brought together. In this connection it can be correctly maintained that theology is in an extremely favourable position for creative thinking. It is therefore a great pity that theology has so often tended to become irrelevant; to be a kind of repetitive discipline - to such an extent that the public usually expects the theologian only to put in other words what has already been said, often with the perception that theology can be nothing other than the confirmation of age old or 'eternal' truths. This attitude is to my mind also reflected in Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies syllabi.

However, in reality, contextual theology tries to bring the Bible and the present day reality together (cf Pillay 1990:54; Van Aarde 1990:9-10). And there is a worldwide gap between the two, not only in relation to time, but also in relation to general human perceptions and ideals. In this respect the popularising of theology plays a vital role, not only in bringing the results of theological research to the non-theologian, but also in passing on the questions of non-theologians to the theologian for research. Thus we have a potentially

creatively stimulating situation. Contextual theology has as task to bring two contexts together and in so doing, give meaning to the present context and/or change it into a meaningful context (cf Burtness 1974:209).

2. On popularising and contextuality

If we are talking about popularising contextual theology we must have clarity about the terms 'popularising' and 'contextual'. Both of these terms are being used in various ways, leading to misconceptions and distrust. 'Popularising' basically implies that a theology or theological topic is reformulated and presented in such a way that the non-theologian can understand it. Popularising is very important as theologians are basically scientists, expressing themselves in scientific terms, using scientific methods, terminologies and forms of argumentation that are alien to the non-theologian. Popularising must bridge the gap between theology and the non-theologian.

Scripture is meant for ordinary people and is not the domain of trained theologians only (Padilla 1981:18).

The term 'contextualising' is intended to point to the fact that the Christian message must be articulated in the real living context, which is always a context of change, of challenge (Newbigin 1982:5).

Contextual theology has been defined in many ways. One only needs to look at the great number of publications on and about contextual theology to understand that one is in a mine-field. I am going to use the term 'contextual theology' in a specific way as theology taking the context of the biblical text as well as the context of the theologian and his/her readers into account. This is intentionally a broad 'definition', allowing a number of methods to be used, such as a socio-linguistic reading or a narratological reading of the Bible, to mention only two. Contextual theology must, to my mind, take both contexts into consideration. As Padilla (1981:18) puts it:

The contextual approach ... recognises both the role of the ancient world in shaping the original text and the role of today's world in conditioning the way contemporary readers are likely to 'hear' and understand the text.

In the contextual approach both the context of the ancient text and the context of the modern reader are given due weight (diagram 3):

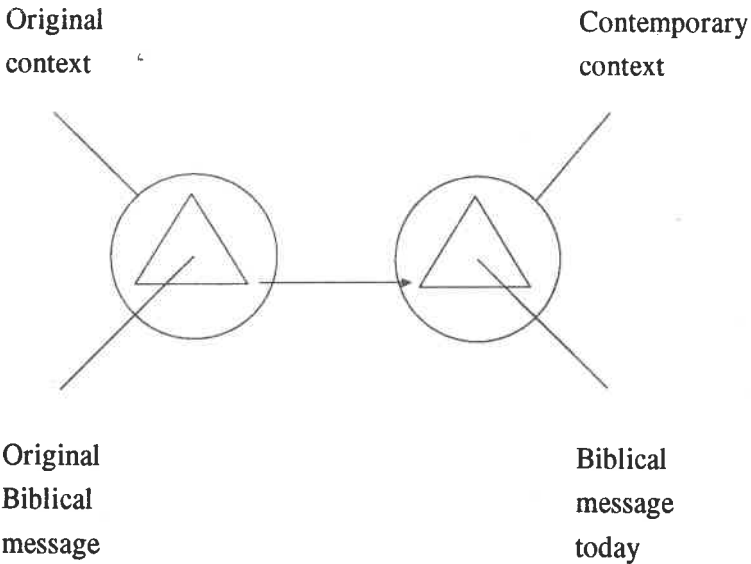


Diagram (Padilla 1981:19)fd

If one of these is ignored, it can lead to the rejection of that theology. A so-called contextual theology that only pays attention to the biblical context (the context of the specific section) is incomplete and as such to a great extent, irrelevant. A so-called contextual theology only focussing on the theologian's context is not 'theology', but at most, religious reflection on the particular situation. In such 'theologies' the Bible is minimized. 'Theologies' without the Bible; and therefore they cannot be called 'theologies' in the strict sense of the word. This type of contextual theology is basically socio-political in nature. Goldsmith (1983:18ff) correctly pointed out that theology is always done in a context that is both socio-political and philosophic-religious. Contextual theology tends today to divide along these two streams. Contextual theology following only the socio-political path may be very popular in certain circles, although to my mind is too frequently hypocritical - the product of people experiencing life from a totally different situation, such as certain advocates for liberation theology living in extremely luxurious conditions. These contextual theologies may, however, be very popular as had been the case in South America.

Emphasising the other path only may be just as dangerous. Kraft (1978:35) refers to the risk of syncretism and the two paths that lead to syncretism:

One is by making mistakes when adapting the Christian message to indigenous forms.

The other is by refusing to adapt God's meanings to new cultural forms. Pleading for popularised contextual theology implies a plea for sound contextual theology in which both contexts are taken seriously and where popularising is taken just as seriously.

The message that God communicated in these ancient times and places must be interpreted in such a way that it is properly understood and responded to by contemporary people in contemporary times and places (Kraft 1978:32).

For over one hundred years, in many places at least, the emphasis in theological education had been so one-sidedly on the context of the there and the then that the context of the here and the now had barely been touched. 'Contextualization' is a passionate cry for the recognition of the significance of this time and this place. The question now, it seems to me, is whether contextualization can ever actually take place apart from some genuinely serious attempt to get inside that context as well as this context (Burtness 1974:210).

Contextualising theology is the task of theologians. In doing this, it is important that it should be done in a scientific way and that it complies with generally accepted standards and norms. Looking at the number of articles about contextualised theology and especially at the contents of these articles, it is obvious that attention is given to the theory and that it is applied in practice. Where this is not the case, contextual theology becomes nothing less than the popular theological reflections of an individual on his/her personal experience of a specific situation. Contextual theology, when being done in an appropriate theological way, is, however, not always directly accessible to the lay person - and that includes the majority of Biblical Studies teachers. It is, therefore, of utmost importance that contextual theology must be popularised.

3. Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies as popularised contextual theology

In this paper I would like to refer specifically to one form of popularising, namely popularising for secondary school pupils. Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies on this level may be regarded as popularised theology. These are forming subjects and are primarily not theology as such, but a form of popularised theology. The major problems regarding these subjects can, in my opinion, be related to the fact that contextualisation and the popularised aspect are not taken into account. On secondary school level the exclusive or primary goal is not the introduction to the academic discipline, but also the accompanying of the child to adulthood. The teachers are also not necessarily biblical scholars and researchers in the full sense of the word. There can be the danger that the gap between research and education on a secondary level can become so great, that the two cannot be reconciled. In this case it can be correctly reasoned that education on a primary and secondary level can be seen as popularised theology. Popularised theology must always fill the gap

between research and lay knowledge. Therefore to my mind one of the tasks of popularisers of theology is to popularise theology for the educational situation. This is an urgent necessity which can only benefit theology and education. Specialist popularisers must give serious and ongoing attention to this (cf Swanepoel 1992:10).

Popularising contextual theology is no easy task. Popularising does not mean summarising or merely using other words. You cannot use the same text and read it in another tone of voice - as Bible stories are sometimes read for children. Popularising requires in the first place the determining of the target group. For whom do you want to popularise contextual theology? This implies more than just saying, for example, for secondary school pupils. This target group must be described in detail. The developmental phase, psychological, social and physical development must be determined. The socio-cultural situation as seen by the target group must be determined. The topical questions must be described - be it expressed questions or latent questions. In describing the target groups, in depth attention must be given to demographic criteria such as age, sex, family size and life cycle and denomination; socio-economic criteria such as social class; geographic criteria; and psychological criteria. The clearer the picture of the potential target group, the greater the possibility that popularising can succeed.

This target group description must be placed in a careful description of the so-called macro-environment. This macro-environment is to a great extent an uncontrollable environment, but it influences and determines the situation and is basically the context or situation which the contextual theology is addressing. In this regard attention must be given to the international environment, the political environment, the physical environment, the economic environment, the technological environment and the economic environment (cf Swanepoel 1992a for a detailed discussion of these aspects).

But before a programme or syllabus can be drawn up, it is necessary to determine the available sources. These sources include contextual theologies, as well as contextual theologians and competent educationalists. There may be a number of contextual theologies which can be popularised. There may also be a number of topical contextual issues which have not yet been investigated. Popularising may also include these - to be investigated, but then the populariser must at least know that there are theologians who can do this and who they are. To my mind, a syllabus must then be constructed that is contextual, relevant and of interest to the primary target group; a syllabus that on the one hand will be relevant to all, but at the same time on the other hand, is applicable to a specific target market segment in its specific situation (cf Newbigin 1974:6). This is to my mind one of the greatest challenges. This cannot be a once-for-all type of thing. It must be done on an ongoing basis. This does not mean that a number of contextual themes can be put together and there you are: we have a syllabus. This is not in line with contextual theology as such, nor with the norms for syllabi. Contextual theology is a method of doing the-

ology, covering a wide range of topics. No theology can answer all questions or be absolute. Each theology has limitations. This must be accepted and encourage theologians to develop new theologies, and evaluate theologies in order to determine the most suitable theology for that time.

As far as Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies are concerned, we are moving into a new situation, which will require more than a few minor or artificial adaptations. Re-conditioning or re-cycling of the syllabi will definitely not be sufficient. It is the task of the popularisers of contextual theology for these subjects to have a central goal. This goal must be clearly defined and kept in mind when setting the specific aims for the specific sections or groups. The goal of Religious Instruction can be to equip the pupils to understand themselves, the world and their context in the light of Scripture, to enable them to live meaningfully in accordance with the principles of Scripture and to contribute in creating a meaningful life situation. The goal of Biblical Studies can be to equip the pupils to use the Bible in such a way that they understand it and the biblical message and are able to apply that to their context.

Theological education has to do with equipping Christians to make appropriate decisions about the text and the context of the Christian commitment (Burtness 1974:209).

Once this has been done, the populariser can go to the drawing board.

In the light of the abovementioned a 'new product' must be created. This must be done on an ongoing basis. New syllabi must be generated, screened, evaluated, developed and 'commercialised'. I have already said that theology can never be absolute and that these cannot be put on the agenda for the next twenty or hundred years.

The statement of Kraft (1978:31):

For many, the term 'theology' has about it an aura of irrelevance, unfortunately also applies to present situation regarding Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies.

One of the greatest needs for popularised contextual theology is that it should fulfil all of the needs of the pupils. In this regard one can refer to Maslow's hierarchy of needs:

	Security	Love	Respect Pride	Self-fulfillment (ego) Reaching your potential. Reaching goals
Physiological				
Food	Safety	Socialising	Power	- regarded as
Clothing	Protection	Belonging to	Prestige	highest
Shelter	from:	Acceptance	Achievement	priorities
Rest	insecurity, loss, illness, dangers	Friendship	Status	
			Confidence	
			Self-respect	

To my mind this model, being used for motivation, can be the point of departure of a new contextual syllabus. All of these are addressed in the Bible. Actually all had been addressed in various sections of the Bible from different perspectives due to the different contexts in which they had originated. The physiological need for food is addressed, for example, in the wilderness narratives in Exodus and Numbers and by Jesus (cf e.g. Mk 6:36-44). The security need is discussed in detail in the book of Job. The love need can be regarded as the central theme of the Gospel of John. The need for respect comes to the fore in the letters of Paul, as does self-fulfillment. Actually one can find these needs in many more parts of the Bible - to such an extent that it is totally unnecessary to re-use one section over and over again (as is the case in the present syllabi). A detailed analysis of the needs and the need priorities of each standard or age group should be determined and the pupils' context taken into account when deciding on the selection of sections to be considered. This is one of the most interesting challenges awaiting us!

4. A few examples of popularising of contextual theology

Let us look at a few examples of possible popularising of contextual theology. In the first example we will have a look at the contextualisation and recontextualisation of a specific section in the Old Testament and in the second example at a well-known prophecy and the re-use of that section in the New Testament.

In Genesis 32 we read about Jacob wrestling with a man/God. The narrative as we have it in our biblical texts, is based on a number of older narrative traditions. One of these reflects an ancient man-demon struggle. In the ancient near East people believed that there were various demons, such as desert and

water demons. Certain areas, such as deserts, were primarily inhabited by demons, as actually was the case with all land not inhabited by humans. For this reason annual sacrifices had been made to keep the demons in their territory, such as the goat being sent into the desert with the word: one for Azazel (cf Lv 16:8). Intruding in the land of demons might have serious consequences such as an attack by demons in the form of snakes (cf Nm 21:6-9). It was also assumed that these demons guarded their territory and were especially active where rivers had to be crossed. A land could only be occupied by defeating the demon guard. According to this old narrative, Jacob fought with a demon guard in order to enter into and occupy the land. This fight lasted all night, and there was no clear winner. When dawn was breaking, the demon pleaded with Jacob to let him go (Gn 32:26). Jacob agreed, but on condition that the demon would bless him - that is, would permit him to settle in peace. So Jacob conquered the land.

As time passed demons faded away and eventually had no place in the Israelite religion. The old narrative thus became irrelevant. Then it was recontextualised and with other narratives, incorporated into a 'new' narrative. In the new context Jacob wrestled with God and was only able to meet his brother and start a new life, leaving all his fraudulent acts behind, when he personally met God. In this way Jacob became Israel.

This proves the statement/hypothesis that a theological or religious profession is a metaphorical profession closely related to the context of the professor and needs to be recontextualised whenever the context changes in order to be relevant.

But what is the relevance of Genesis 32 for the secondary school pupil in South Africa in the nineties? It must not be seen as an historical report of something that happened long ago. I am of the opinion that these pupils are wrestling with the socialising process, trying to find their place in society. The forming of groups is of great importance. As groups split, one of their problems is coping with 'old' friends that have become 'new enemies'. In this respect the 'final' Biblical narrative may be useful. In this way motives on the second and especially the third level of Maslow's hierarchy of motives will be addressed. Aspects such as prestige, achievement and confidence from the fourth level will also be touched on.

In the black community in particular the land question is a topical problem with which they are wrestling. It is also becoming an issue amongst white pupils as the senior secondary school pupils are becoming involved in politics. In this regard the ancient man-demon struggle may be used as an example of how people were thinking: land can only be possessed through struggle. Even uninhabited lands had to be conquered by defeating demons. This must, however, be seen in the light of the rest of the Old Testament: the promise of the land to the patriarchs by God; the conquering of the land and the 'apartheids era' and the 'new dispensation' which started with Omri in which all shared in the land and the relativising of the land issue - even in the

Genesis 32 narrative. In this way motives from the second level, and especially the aspect of security can be addressed.

Let us look at another example; another type of recontextualisation and the popularising thereof. The example is extremely well known and one of the most used by Christians and in the Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies syllabi; namely Isaiah 7:14, the Immanuel sign.

In the context of Isaiah 7 it is a comforting sign to Ahaz in a time of great anxiety and threat. Pekah and Resin formed an anti-Assyrian coalition and were putting pressure on Ahaz to join the coalition. Isaiah approached Ahaz advising him not to join the coalition. In a lengthy speech (Is 7-11) he used a number of 'signs' to convince him; all referring to the birth and names of boys. The first of these is the Immanuel sign. Isaiah makes use of an old custom in judicial practice. If a person in a court case had no witness, but was absolutely sure of his case, he/she frequently referred to a pregnant woman and said that before the birth of the baby or before the child would come of age, the truth of his testimony would be visible. In this way Isaiah said that the young woman would be pregnant, have a son with the name of Immanuel, and that before he could distinguish between right and wrong the two threatening countries would be devastated by the Assyrians (cf Is 7:16) This son to be born would be the sign of the presence of God. Whenever the king saw his pregnant wife and more so when he saw his baby boy, he would be reminded: God is with us.

In the New Testament this section was re-interpreted and recontextualised (cf Mt 1:23). In the context of Matthew it was of importance to link the Old Testament with Jesus. This he did by means of 'fulfillment' references. One of these was Isaiah 7:14 (cf Mt 1:23). In doing so, he used the words not in their 'original' context, but in a new context. Read within the context of the Gospel it no longer is a sign of the present of God, but is a reference to the present God. Not a boy signalling and reminding people that God will not be absent in their hour of crisis (on political and military terrains), but that He will deliver them, and that the Son of God himself delivers those who believe in him from all evil.

This particular section is repeated in the syllabi. In the syllabi the primary context of Isaiah 7 is not the focal point, nor the New Testament's recontextualisation. It is basically used to 'prove' that the Old Testament is the Word of God (as the predictions of the prophets had been fulfilled) and that Jesus is the expected Messiah. These uses reflect a realistic perspective (as realism tries to 'prove' and convince by reasoning) and a positivistic and biblicistic perspective. Contextuality does not come to the fore. Little attention is paid to the biblical context (only by means of introduction). No attention is given to the pupils' contexts. The developmental phases of the pupils are not taken into account and the socio-cultural contexts are ignored. The question then arises: what is the relevance of this section for the pupils? Personally I do not see the relevance at all - except perhaps for the very general profession that

Jesus is the Son of God, but for that there are many more and better texts and lines of argumentation.

Of course it is easy to criticise and far more challenging and difficult to make suggestions.

Personally I think that the Isaiah text should be incorporated into a section dealing with comforting; assuring the pupils of the presence of God in difficult times. In this way it corresponds with Maslow's second level: security - safety and protection. These crisis situations may vary. In the so-called black schools, for example, the pupils may feel threatened in a political-military way and may have quite a similar experience to that of Ahaz. Care will have to be taken not to handle this section biblicistically by associating the anti-Assyrian coalition with specific political coalitions. It must be emphasised that the most important thing to do is to trust in God and to know that He is present. White pupils may experience a political-military threat from the so-called freedom movements. The same principles then apply. In both groups there may be despair in other areas, such as social crisis situations, the feeling that they are being threatened by certain groups and do not know where they belong. In this situation the message of Isaiah is also applicable.

The New Testament's use of this text can also be used to put this comforting aspect in a broader context. Jesus came to be God with us; to deliver us from whatever crisis we experience. Motives on the second, third and fourth level of Maslow's hierarchy of motives will be addressed in this regard.

5. Conclusion

Popularising contextual theology for Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies is an enormous challenge and opportunity. This must be dealt with urgently, seriously and in a creative way. Not only the future of Religious Instruction and Biblical Studies is at stake, or of Theology, but the future in general. If this challenge is accepted, popularisers and theologians can make a significant contribution to the future - of the pupils, the country, the religious life and churches and to life in general.

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