

## CONTEXTUALIZATION: LOCATING THREADS IN THE LABYRINTH

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### Introduction

Despite its wide usage, it is extremely difficult to define exactly what the term 'contextualization' refers to. This is so because this term itself is used by a large number of disciplines within the theological world, and not always in the same sense. Equally, related terms such as 'context', 'situation', and so on are also far from clearly defined and used in a concise manner. This paper will attempt to focus on a very limited number of matters which to my mind are still in some need of clarification. I will not attempt this clarification in any definite sense here, but will merely try to put some of them on the table, in order to perhaps point to a few aspects which are in dire need of further research and reflection. The tentative nature of this discussion is reflected in the title of this article.

### 1. The 'rise' of contextualization and contextual hermeneutics, or: discovering the obvious?

For many years broad distinctions between different interpretations of the Bible, and the underlying hermeneutical presuppositions, were made in terms of 'Theology' and 'Other Theologies' such as Liberation Theology, Third World Theology, Feminist Theology, Black Theology, and so on. This reflects a perception about the nature of 'theology', which is fairly uncritical of its own roots, history, and ascendancy, and which assumes that 'theology' is something that exists in a pure form, not hampered by external factors, as are the 'others'. In recent decades this notion has come under enormous fire. With the explosion of new approaches to the Bible, methods of exegesis, readings of and approaches to ancient texts and various influences of other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, literary and reception theories, *et cetera*, on biblical interpretation, there has also come a renewed awareness that contrary to the dogmatic legacy of the positivism, no interpretation takes place in a vacuum. The context in which interpretation takes place, and the circumstances of the interpreter are factors which demand special attention (see Lategan 1990:1-2). All of this has increasingly opened the eyes of interpreters in recent years, to recognize that what was conveniently termed

'theology' in the past, was actually nothing more than Western/European/Anglo-American ways of reading the Bible, which is far from free of reflecting its own historical and cultural specificity. This led, amongst other things, to the rise of 'contextualization' in the Third World, as well as in the First World.

### 1.1 In the Third World

In addition to this realization, especially since the early 1960s there have been a number of deliberate interpretative programs which 'consciously' try to do away with the traditional (Western) understanding of the Bible, and which try to be more relevant to its own specific context. Examples of this are the various theologies which developed in Latin America (such as the theologies of liberation by Míguez-Bonino 1976; Gutiérrez 1973), African theologies (Mbiti 1970; Kato 1975; Pobee 1978), South African Liberation and Black Theologians (Boesak 1984; Mosala 1989) and African American Biblical hermeneutics (Cone 1984; Cummings 1991; Reid 1990), biblical interpretation in the Pacific Rim Countries and Asia (Fabella & Park 1989, Cataldo 1991). These programs each in its own way served to make theologians world wide more aware that every theological paradigm reflects its own presuppositions, and interpretative methodologies, and that these are largely 'contextually' determined. The issues in Asian biblical interpretation, for instance, are quite different from those in Central American theological discussion.

Until very recently there has been relatively very little awareness of and recognition given to this specific fact amongst theologians in the Western tradition. In recent years, in many countries of the Third World, in a very critical appraisal of traditional, (Western/European) biblical interpretation, and to some extent a rejection of it developed - often because these 'new' hermeneutical methodologies developed in countries/areas which were subject to the results of Western colonization, and subsequent Western missionary activities, which resulted many times in a total Westernization of and/or eradication of indigenous cultures. In the era of colonial expansion very little room was allowed for the specifics of the context in interpreting Scripture. The general result in theology and Christian missions was merely to duplicate Western religious practices, beliefs, and ways of interpreting religious documents, seldom with any sensitivity for indigenous cultural needs and traditions.

Hiebert (1987:104-106) argues that the 'rise of colonialism' (which proved to the West its cultural superiority, and for Western Christians the superiority of the Western version of the Gospel), the 'theory of cultural evolution' (where it is accepted that all cultures will develop in a linear fashion towards a civilized state equal to that of Western culture, or simply die out), and the 'triumph of science' (with the resultant positivistic epistemology, in which theology could be objective and ultimately true, while all other religions were

viewed as subjective and false) resulted in a period of theological 'noncontextualization' where everything was evaluated in terms of the missionaries' cultures, which were largely the European, and in which other cultures were viewed as inferior, primitive, distorted, false, backward, and so on. Other cultures were just not taken seriously. It must be stressed, however, that this was the accepted practice in most cases, but there were of course, instances where there was more of a cultural awareness (Wilberforce, Venn, Anderson). The long-held beliefs about the superiority and excellence of Western intellectualism changed rapidly in the post-colonial era. The collapse of empires, which resulted in new independent nations, world wars which shattered the optimism of the 19th century, the development of new anthropological insights where individual cultures were appraised in terms of cultural diversity and pluralism (Hiebert 1987:108), and the radical questioning of the positivist models on a wide front, which challenged the traditional understanding of the nature of science as objective, lineal and progressive (Kuhn 1970). Hiebert (1987:108) concludes that 'since we could no longer show that one theory or paradigm or culture was better than another, we could no longer speak in absolutes of truth'.

This provided, of course, amongst other things, ideal breeding ground for 'contextualization', a term first used in the publication *Ministry in context: The third mandate program of the Theological Education Fund 1970-77*, published by the Theological Education Fund in 1972. This term refers to what was previously called 'adaptation', 'accommodation', '*possessio*', 'indigenization', 'dialogue', and 'confrontation' (Taber 1987:33) - the way in which cultures adapt the Christian message, and make it relevant for a specific situation. Etuk (1985:219) largely agrees with this, and states that the factors underlying contextualization theology are the 'political awakenings' in the Third World which challenges and rejects the influences of the colonial era, the 'quest for national unity', and the 'conflict of ideologies' where Western capitalism is rejected and abandoned in favour of other ideologies. The explosion of publications on this theme all over the globe since the early 1960s is a clear indication of a massive paradigm shift in accepting alternatives in interpreting the gospel for specific situations (see also Cataldo 1991:132-142). The differences in various cultures are now taken much more seriously by most theologians, and especially by those in the Third World. For instance, in Latin America, Liberation Theology developed because of a deep need for the contextualization of the Gospel, to make it relevant for the economically and politically oppressed.

## 1.2 In the First World

The massive shifts in theological and philosophical paradigms that have taken place in the past few decades also resulted in some significant changes within the theological thinking of countries of the First World. In these countries the shifts in understanding of cultures and the rejection of many positivist ideas,

also influenced concepts about specific aspects of individual cultures. Thus the substrata in these cultures also came under scrutiny in the light of these developments. Traditional perceptions regarding authority, groups, subcultures and social classes in specific Western cultures were also being challenged, and subjected to severe criticism - and also in theological terms. Groups and sections of society which were traditionally subject to some kind of oppression or suppression by dominant sectors of society found a new freedom in protesting against the traditional place assigned to them in society. The role and function of religion in upholding the *status quo* also came under scrutiny and was severely criticized. In the United States of America, Black Theology and later Feminist Theology and Gay Liberation Theology developed in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, and can also be termed 'contextual' developments, since they also reflect some reconsideration, interpretation and application of the gospel for their specific situation and context, over and against more traditional biblical interpretations which tend to support the *status quo*.

All this was, of course, aided and abetted by the explosion of (and subsequent appropriation of these by theological disciplines) methodologies in a number of fields, such as sociological research, anthropology, linguistics, semantics, semiotics, intercultural communication, and so on. Together with the plurality of available methodologies and interpretations, the new thrust of awareness of cultural diversity and the limitations of positivist endeavours, sparked the current wave of contextualization, contextual theologies and methodologies in a number of theological disciplines. There has also been a shift in the sense that traditionally, that where even the contextualization was done by people from outside these cultures, there is nowadays a growing number of contextualization models being developed from within specific cultures or cultural groupings. Taber (1987:33) remarks on the situation where outsiders interpreted on behalf of indigenous people that

... at best these efforts were partial, they were inevitably shallow, and above all they were done *by foreigners for* native participants in the various cultures. Now the reversal is in full spate and Third World Christians are taking charge and doing their own hermeneutics, their own theology, and their own liturgy (Taber's italics).

This has also altered the whole picture of contextualization, and contextual hermeneutics considerably. More and more theologians and church leaders voice sentiments such as that by Havea (1977:3-4):

Christianity must be rooted in our own soil ... The weakness of foreignness is that it will become a second-hand knowledge and the glad tidings become lukewarm. This foreignness needs to be transformed into a first-hand, native-rooted Good News to the pacific.

### 1.3 Something completely new?

All of the above should not be interpreted that we are now faced with some significant new or unprecedented development. Far from it. To a certain extent all theological traditions are constantly engaging in a process of contextualization - even theologians who are not even aware of this fact, inevitably engage in this (see Deist's 1991a treatment of *inter alia* Potgieter's theology). Thus contextualization is not only a phenomenon of the Third World or of segments of Western society, but an aspect which must be reckoned with in all theological traditions and situations. This means that to a certain extent the problem of contextualization and contextual hermeneutics is as old as religion itself. Even Early Christianity struggled with this. The ways in which Paul utilized Hellenistic ideas, language structures and formulations in his presentation of the (Jewish) message of Jesus to believers in Asia-Minor and Europe, and the appropriation of the Hellenistic terminology of *logos* in the Johannine prologue are but two among a number of examples of how early Christianity contextualized the gospel. There can also be very little argument against the statement that Bultmann's demythologizing program of New Testament material is actually a contextualization of the New Testament message to make it more acceptable and accessible for modern (European) people. It was, of course, never viewed in this light, because it was done by a European theologian and for Europeans, and was just received as a alternative 'theological' program, but in fact, its context determined its specifics. For this reason Bultmann (1955:241-242) says:

Are we to read the Bible only as an historical document in order to reconstruct an epoch of past history ... ? I think our interest is really to hear what the Bible has to say for our actual present, to hear what is the truth about our life and about our soul.

Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:39-47) also treat the theology of Jürgen Moltmann as an example of an European contextualization program. It thus seems reasonable to state that 'contextualization' is not a new methodology, but merely the discovery of something already in existence, that is, the realization of and conscious articulation about the way in which theological reflection operates anyway.

A number of theological disciplines have also begun to appropriate the term 'contextualization' and utilize it with reference to aspects such as mission, church structures, theological education, theological ethics, church growth, *et cetera*. Because of the over-utilization of the term, the fact that most theological disciplines use it, and the resultant fuzziness of meaning, it is perhaps advisable to use the term contextual hermeneutics when referring to programs of interpreting and understanding the Bible in ways which take contexts seriously (see also Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:31-35 on terminological difficulties in this regard), rather than using the term contextualization which can refer to virtually anything. Despite the fact that exactly the same processes are involved, it is also useful, to my mind, to retain the terminology of 'contextual

hermeneutics' over and against the term 'hermeneutics'. Although all hermeneutical programs are contextually determined, not all of them are conscious of this fact or try to reflect on this. For interpretative programs which are deliberately and consciously take contextuality seriously, it might be advisable to use the term contextual hermeneutics.

Furthermore, a scrutiny of the current state of affairs world-wide, and the surprising lack of critical theoretical analyses, reveals that continued research field of contextual hermeneutics is an absolute necessity, since it is in the field of hermeneutics that the interpretation of the gospel is examined in the light of not only pragmatics, but also theoretically in terms of epistemology, conceptual frameworks and underlying presuppositions.

## **2. Loose threads, or: some unresolved issues in contextualization and contextual hermeneutics**

The realization that contextualization in its many forms is gaining ground worldwide, is one thing. Understanding and evaluating exponents and the specifics of individual programs is, of course, something quite different. There are many unresolved issues in this field, which call for very careful analysis and reconsideration, especially since the question can indeed be asked whether we are dealing with something new, or just discovering what we have been engaged in all along. Furthermore, it must be realized that to discover a loose thread here and there, is one thing - to use the threads to escape from the labyrinth is again something quite different. I will therefore merely indicate some loose threads that might help us a little, but will not be so posterous as make an escape from the labyrinth.

Even a very superficial examination of different contextual theologies from around the world reveals that it is very complex matter indeed. There is very little agreement as to what exactly the term contextualization refers to, and there is also very little obvious common ground between different approaches to contextualization.

### **2.1 Real or perceived differences between First World and Third World?**

Generally speaking in the field of contextual theology, there is the perception that there are enormous differences between traditional interpretations of the Bible and the interpretation of the Bible in the various contextual programs. This perception comes from both sides, both from the more traditional theologians and from the 'contextual' theologians.

For instance, to the Western mind statements like

The Bible should not be used as a measuring rod to dismiss or support developing ideas and theologies. Attempts to develop ideas and theologies should be curtailed if the Bible is 'overused' to legitimize them,

especially when thinkers, theologians, and their critics have been indoctrinated into respective kinds of theologies (Pokawin 1987:31)

and

The common people are putting the Bible in its proper place, the place where God intended it to be. The are putting it in second place. Life takes first place! (Mesters 1983:122)

fall very strange on the ear. (But in all fairness, it must also be asked how strange some of the formulations of Western theological/philosophical tradition must have sounded to the peoples of Africa or Papua New Guinea or Brazil?)

The problem of really coming to terms with the 'new' or contextual models is aided and abetted by an absence of theoretical reflection in these circles, because of the extremely pragmatic nature of many of the contextual theologies, designed to serve a specific context (see for instance most of the articles in Trompf 1987). It would seem that there are a number of Liberation Theologians (e. g. Mesters 1983, Rowland & Corner 1989, Boff 1987) African American exegetes (e. g. Reid 1990, Cummings 1991, Felder 1991) and Feminist Theologians (e. g. Schüssler Fiorenza 1983; 1985a; 1985b; 1989), South African black theologians (Mosala 1989, Sebothoma 1989), etc. who are involved in a more theoretical kind of reflection, but most contextualization models and theologies develop without really paying attention to these aspects.

The differences found amongst the various contextualization exponents themselves, are by no means less than the enormous differences between the methodologies followed in more traditional circles *vis à vis* the emerging ones. I realize, of course, the dangers of speaking about a 'Western theological tradition' which is hardly a homogeneous philosophical and theological entity, but I do so in broadest possible terms to indicate scholarship, church traditions, and methodologies which share to some extent the same philosophical and interpretative roots, and which developed basically in Western, Anglo-Saxon Europe/America and was continued with very little deviance and with very close links to this tradition, in various locations/countries in the Americas, Asia and Africa. (For instance, the theological training given by most of seminaries of the Afrikaans speaking Churches in South Africa, can be classified as Western, and reflect very little specifically African features, despite a presence of Christian churches in Africa for more than 300 years. They are closer to a European interpretative community than to an African one).

### 2.1.1 Differences in methodology?

Perhaps one way of approaching the difference between contextualization models and that of the traditional (Western) interpretations, is to reflect on the basic methodology used in the different traditions. There can be little doubt

that so far in the history of the interpretation of the Bible, the historical-critical method in its various forms has played an enormous part, especially in last few centuries. This method, and various variations of it has perhaps also been the method used *par excellence* by Western interpreters, despite the severe criticism of it in recent years. Even some of the more evangelical and fundamentalist approaches utilize some of these aspects to some extent in their readings of the Bible, even if it is very little, and selective. Vorster (1984) correctly points out that although the historical critical method is of crucial importance for understanding ancient texts, it also has its limitations. One of its possibilities/limitations is that if applied, it serves to indicate the enormous difference between the world of the text and the world of today. This can be very fruitful, but it can also have the effect of alienating modern readers from the text. Rowland & Corner (1989:35) remarks:

While the journey into the past has offered us insights aplenty, our historical preoccupations have left us with a feeling that the biblical world we have constructed is alien to us.

Overemphasizing this aspect of reading the Bible could make the Bible meaningless and irrelevant for any specific situation today, and this has happened in many instances. Rowland & Corner (1989:36) even go as far as speaking of the 'magisterium of the historical critical method' in the Catholic Church today (probably with reference to official training and interpretations), and it is also true for most mainline Protestant denominations. The introduction of other methodologies into biblical studies, and the rise of contextualization have presented scholars steeped in this way of dealing with biblical texts, with some serious challenges. It must also be stressed here that the historical critical method also gained its popularity because of its relevance in a very specific context and time, and some would even go as far as terming the historical critical analysis of the Bible as a contextual method. The concern with history, and the emphasis on the context of the biblical writings, played an enormous role in the challenging and critiquing of ecclesiastical power, formulations, influence and ideologies of the previous century. Traditionally accepted dogmas were now challenged in the light of the historical context of biblical texts used to support these positions. This also revived an interest in the Bible as such, as seldom before. However, the continued preference given to this method in the end defeated its own potential, and served to stress the enormous differences between the ancient and modern world, and greatly diminished its impact on modern lives.

In addition to this it must be realized that the historical critical method has attained, rightly or wrongly, some kind of 'political' or 'ideological' status in the current debate, as the method preferred by the First World theology over and against interpretations of the Third World (see Boff 1987). For instance, the fact that the historical critical method usually takes its starting point presumably from the text, in many instances made it possible for interpreters to use this 'critical' method in programs which are in fact far removed from



any critical reflection. The notion of 'The Word of God' being accessible by reading the text in this way, helped to establish the notion that it is possible to access the 'Word of God' in a pure, non-political, non-ideological, and ironically, non-historical fashion, something severely criticized by *inter alia* Mosala (1989:16-18), who also stands very critical of the historical critical method (1989:124).

The predominance of the historical critical method in First World interpretations, and the seemingly existentially meaningless theology (for people in the Third World) that resulted from this, prompted the current re-examination of the implications of this, in terms of the hermeneutical point of departure.

### 2.1.2 Differences in point of departure?

It is commonly held that the biggest difference between traditional scholarship, and contextual programs, is the difference in the point of departure. It is also this difference that is the cause why so many contextual theologies are rejected out of hand in First World circles. One of the implications of the historical critical method, which arose in the last 200 years, was that the focus has been, with varying intensity, on the text and the world of the text, which includes the original author. (Only very recently has there been a shift to include the reception of the text, and the role of the reader, see McKnight 1988, who terms this approach as a post-modern use of the Bible). In the traditional paradigm, the point of departure is the text, the world of the text, and the (original) meaning of the text. This is apparently diametrically opposed to the way in which hermeneutics is approached from, for instance, Liberation Theologies. Mesters' remark (1985:10) sums this perceived difference up:

The principle objective of reading the Bible is not to interpret the Bible, but to interpret life with the help of the Bible.

Rowland & Corner (1989:40) also remarks in this regard that 'the experience of poverty and oppression is for the liberation exegete as important a text as the text of scripture itself'. Mosala (1989:67) even entitles one of the chapters in his book 'The historical and cultural struggles of the black people as a hermeneutical starting point for Black Theology'. It is clear from these remarks that the hermeneutical point of departure is quite the opposite of that practiced and propagated in the majority of Western traditions about reading the Bible. However, these remarks should not be construed as if these interpreters from the Third World are totally ignorant of the importance of the difficulties of this point of departure, and Mesters (1983:132-133) himself realizes this, and points out some of the difficulties, but without offering suggestions as to their resolution. There are also other Third World interpreters that take these aspects seriously, but too often the work of contextual theologians from the Third World are rejected exactly because of this difference which seem so deviant in Western traditions, despite the fact that these theologians often are also steeped in Western theological traditions, and seriously try to reflect on this (see Rowland & Corner 1989:45-46; Boff 1987). In addition,

the various exponents of this hermeneutical point of departure further use different approaches to work out the details of the program. For instance, Boff (1987) argues that there are two ways in which (liberation theology) exegesis is conducted in this paradigm: the one is the 'correspondence of terms' method, where the current contexts of today and that found in the Bible are equated on a one to one basis, as if it is reflecting exactly the same circumstances. Boff rejects this model for the 'correspondence of relationships model' in which he professes to take historical scholarship seriously, but which follows the methods of interpretation by biblical interpreters prior to the development of the historical critical method. Rowland & Corner (1989:62) says Boff utilizes *inter alia* the work of Von Rad on biblical traditions to

... demonstrate that exegesis practiced by liberation theologians in the present is consistent with the forms of exegesis practiced by the authors of the Old and New Testaments. He sets out to show that the approach of the liberation theologian is actually biblical approach, since it was one practiced by the biblical writers themselves! (Rowland & Corner's exclamation).

Boff is clearly very far removed for traditional European hermeneutics, but there can be no denial that his program addresses some issues so far neglected in our more traditional approaches. Perhaps the time has now come to seriously reflect on and engage in discussion with exponents from traditions which take their point of departure from 'outside' the text, with regard to its implications for hermeneutical programs and the place of the results of historical critical research in contextual interpretation. See also the observations of Deist (1991a:6) on the fact that not all theologies that are relevant for a specific socio-political situation are necessarily contextual. Similarly the question must be asked about the relevance of a (contextual) theological program once the context/situation/social condition that gave rise to the need this endeavour happens to be solved. Should one contingency give rise to yet another and then another, with the resulting changes in point of departure? This is one of the issues in contextualization and contextual hermeneutics that requires specialized and ongoing research, since it accounts for one of the apparent major differences in biblical interpretation today. The specific nature of the term 'context' must also come under close scrutiny. How broad should this be defined? Only in socio-political terms? Is this the context only of the oppressed, or does that also include the context of the oppressors? Can a theological program really be 'contextual' if it only takes one specific 'context' such as 'black', or 'feminist experience', or 'social-political context' into consideration? Should a contextual program not include many more aspects to be truly contextual? See also Deist's (1991a:1, 8-15) argument that not all models for a specific contingent situation are necessarily contextual, and the argument that a much broader basis for the construction of contextual theology is needed, that is, the hermeneutical point of departure should be

broadly based, and not narrowly concentrate on only one or two aspects, as is currently often done.

The above argument to the effect that there is a very clear difference between point of departure between traditional models and contextual programs, is in line with what is most commonly believed/perceived with regard to differences between traditional and contextualization models. But perhaps the time has also come to reflect on these differences and ask the question whether there is indeed this kind of difference? The question can indeed be put if it is possible to start 'from the text'?

Recent developments in especially reception theory have indicated the enormous role of the reader in contributing meaning to a text. The reader is not a *tabula rasa* upon which the text writes a message. Far from it - the reader brings his/her own presuppositions, circumstances, abilities, context, to the text and all of this contributes to reading and interpreting the text. Recent developments in the sociological analysis of the biblical world, and the application of sociological theories to the text of the Bible also tends to point in this direction. The world we reconstruct on the grounds of these theories is nothing more than a theoretical reconstruction, based on the input of the modern interpreter, and is thus not only not free from presuppositions but is in fact a reflection of the current situation, sociological and cultural context of the interpreter. Rowland & Corner (1989:37) even argues that the

... sociology of the New Testament must involve a penetrating analysis of the social formation of the contemporary reader too ... The sort of people we are and the kind of interests that we have must necessarily determine, or at least affect, the biblical world we recreate.

It is clear from this that through the supposedly historical-critical method, with its semblance of objectivity (which many interpreters still uphold), it is not so easy to access the text directly, and start the interpretation process from there. It could be that theologians in the Western tradition could be guilty of exactly the same fallacy of which they accuse exponents of Liberation Theologies, or Feminist Theologies, *id est*, of manipulating the text, and to find meanings in the text which strengthen their own particular situation in reality! (see Deist 1991a on Potgieter's supposedly 'pure' reading of the Bible). All of this also has epistemological implications, and again it must be stressed that some research on this aspect is absolutely necessary, and could contribute significantly to our views and perceptions about the compatibility or incompatibility of certain theological traditions. For instance, the question regarding the role and influence of post-modernism on epistemological constructs is also a question that needs to be reflected upon by theologians, as Smith (1991:653-670) argues.

The epistemology that banishes the world is commonly called holism. Theoretical holism argues the organic character of thought: concepts cannot be understood in isolation; their meanings derives from the theoretical systems in which they are embedded. Practical holism goes on

from there to argue that, because thinking invariably proceeds in social contexts and against a backdrop of social practices, meaning derives from - roots down into and draws life from - those backgrounds and contexts (Smith 1990:661).

Epistemological research in this regard is absolutely necessary (see also Deist 1991b for an example).

The question should be asked: are the differences between First World and Third World theological hermeneutics really the point of departure, or is it something else? In addition, the whole understanding of the concept of 'context' demands serious reflection in the light of this, for the reason that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate the context of the ancient documents, from that of the modern readers. The exact relationship between these two, and the implications of this for making conclusions need to be worked out in much more detail.

## 2.2 More loose threads or: accounting for differences and similarities between contextualization models

Not only are there some (real or perceived) differences between more traditional interpretations of the Bible and those that claim to be more contextual, but there is also a plethora of differences between exponents of contextualization models themselves.

The differences between the various exponents of different contextualization models can, of course, be accounted for in a number of ways. As Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:127-196) point out, the differences exist because of differences in philosophical perspective, anthropological perspective, communication perspective, and so on. However, differences in theological perspectives play a most crucial part in this, and it is to this aspect we would like to pay attention here, since it has direct bearing on the way in which the hermeneutical program (regardless of its point of departure) is conducted, and will perhaps help us to understand different contextualization programs a little better, and could help us to place them theologically into context.

Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:144-157) argue that differences between contextualization models can to a great extent be ascribed to the theological orientation from which they grew. They distinguish four theological orientations, namely, Orthodoxy (in the sense of theologically conservative, adhering to traditional Christian doctrine, strong emphasis on revelation, Bible as authentic disclosure of God's will, no continuation between human and divine, Bible above culture), Liberalism (in the sense of the acceptance that all men have the same religious potential, and acceptance of the validity of all sincere endeavours to discover religious truth, it assumes a continuation between human and divine, Bible one book among many. Since there is no final truth Christian doctrine is constantly in the process of being shaped in the light of contemporary models of understanding, culture determines religion), Neo-or-

thodoxy (in the sense of a position where the Bible is considered to be fully human literature, and thus subject to higher criticism, but it also reveals God's will, upholds some of the traditional orthodox doctrines. Kierkegaard, Barth) and Neo-liberalism (between liberalism and Neo-orthodoxy, place for revelation in the Bible - subject to human reason. Horton, Oxnam). Each one of these models have specific views of the Bible, the use of the Bible, revelation, value of human reason, authority and so on: all factors which are of crucial importance in any exegetical program.

These different theological matrices give rise to various contextualization models and methods. In the orthodoxy paradigm, emphasis is placed on the supracultural aspects of biblical revelation. The cultural specifics of the biblical situations are recognized, but it is held that the inspired biblical message transcends this to result in a perfect revelation of God's will. This is called Apostolic contextualization by Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:149). Contextualization done in this paradigm is

... the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate cultures and within their particular existential situation (Nicolls 1975:647).

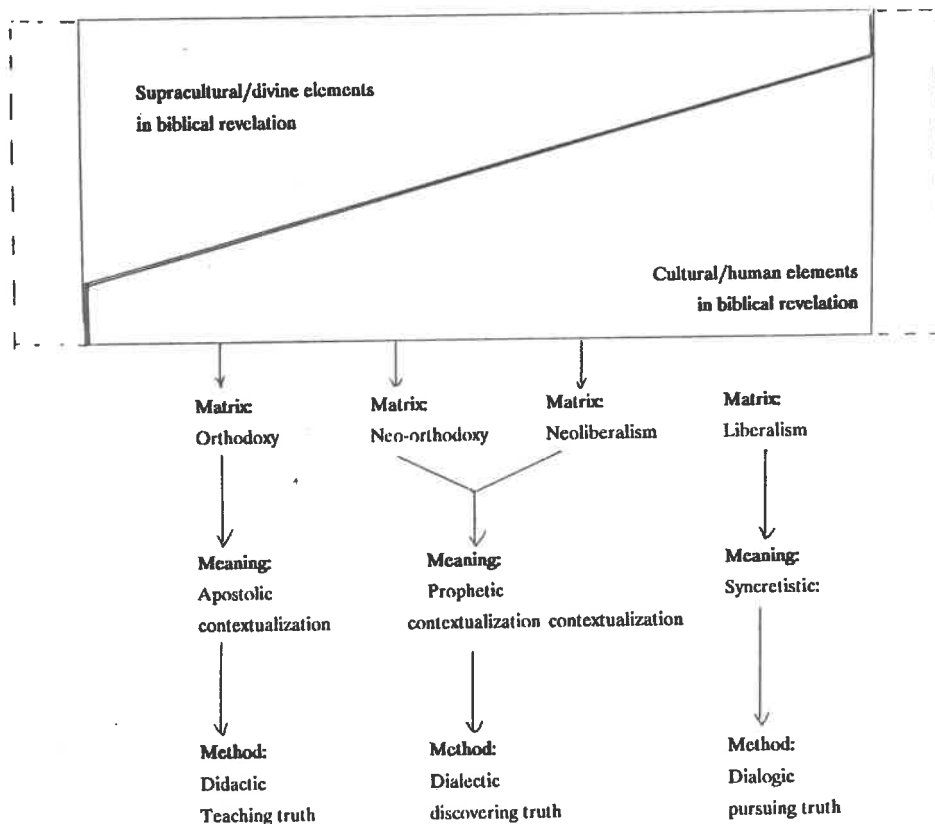
The method followed in this paradigm is that of teaching the biblical truth as absolute truth. Scripture plays an important part, and the dogmas based on this, is to be taught to other non-Christian cultures, once a communicational bridge has been established.

In the liberalism program there is ample room for the accommodation and combination of various cultural practices, belief systems, religious practices and understandings. This results in syncretistic contextualization, where there is ample opportunity for interfaith spirituality, the 'cosmic' Christ, and the movement is to pursue new truths about the relationships between God and the human world as manifested in various religious traditions. Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:153) refers to the theology of John S Mbiti as an example of this. Neo-orthodoxy and Neo-liberalism theological approaches both result in what Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:150) call prophetic contextualization, where

... the primary emphasis here is on the 'insight' of the contextualizer and the cultural, political, and other circumstances in which he finds himself. Contextualization involves entering a cultural context, discerning what God is doing and saying in that context, and working and speaking for needed change.

The neo-orthodox versions of this put more emphasis on Scripture, tradition and history to discover truth, whereas the neo-liberalism version puts less emphasis on Scripture and emphasizes experience gained by participation in circumstances and struggles more. Many liberation theologies fit into this category. Hesselgrave and Rommen (1989:157) schematically represent the dif-

ferent contextualization models based on the various theological matrices as follows:



I have found the above slightly modified scheme very helpful in distinguishing various contextualization models from one another, and to describe intuitively felt (but not spelled out) correspondences. Of course, the above schema does not explain all possible differences and correspondences, and can indeed be added to, but at least it is a way of identifying theological differences between the various possibilities. This has a number of resultant implications for aspects such as methodology, epistemology, and the relative weight assigned in models to supracultural elements, Scriptural inspiration, tradition, cultural specifics, and so on. It is also very helpful in the sense that it can also help to indicate similarities between various contextual hermeneutical

programs, which on the surface seem to be very far apart, but in actual fact are much closer theologically. The above is but one way of depicting various theological traditions. There are more, and more research on these aspects is definitely needed. One possible way in which this schema can possibly be extended is to add two other categories each on the extremes of the spectrum. One can possibly term these ultra-orthodoxy and ultra-liberalism, where the former will leave no room at all for human elements in terms of the production and interpretation of biblical texts, and the latter will leave no room at all for any divine aspects in the whole process. Deist (1991a) treats two practical examples of different approaches - one fits the Orthodoxy model (Potgieter) and the other the Neo-liberalism (Mosala), but a close scrutiny of the implications of their programs reveals that they are in fact not that far from being at the extended extremes of Hesselgrave and Rommen schema. As with the other aspects we have touched upon so far these observations are very provisional, but can at least be used as a starting point to begin to account for the differences between various contextual approaches.

### **3. Conclusion**

In this article I have raised a few issues pertaining to aspects of contextualization and contextual hermeneutics which go hand in hand. The explosion of literature dealing with these aspects, and the rising global recognition of the importance of the various contexts which come into play in the exegetical process, necessitates some systematization and categorization which can benefit all parties involved in all of this. There are serious prejudicial barriers to be overcome in what we conveniently called the Western Tradition, which hinders serious dialogue between exponents of this particular orientation and those of the Third World/contextual theologies. The voices of these theologians should be critically appraised, and not summarily be dismissed, as it is often the case. On the other hand it is also true that the Western Tradition cannot be rejected in simplistic terms as being oppressive, colonial, sexist, and so on. The relative value of this community of interpretation and its legacy should also be recognized, and the perceived differences between the various traditions taken into consideration before passing judgment. It is also clear from the above that the conscious realization of the importance of the context is presenting interpreters of the Bible with new challenges, both in interpreting Scripture and interpreting reality. This is especially true in a society such as the South African one, where changes in society will place new demands of relevance and appropriateness on theological disciplines such as Biblical Studies. Continued research in some of the aspects mentioned above will certainly contribute to a better articulation of contextualization models and their underlying methodological presuppositions, and will hopefully help us to advance to meet the challenges of new circumstances in a way that will do justice to the various aspects involved in the complicated process of interpreting the Bible responsibly and in a relevant fashion.

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