

# Biblical foundation for developing contextual theology



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Christianity which we follow today may not exist if there were no contextual theology. We would all have to learn Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and culture of Israel by compulsion and then try to fit into the religious practices like circumcision, Sabbath and Jerusalem. It would be a problem for people other than the Jews to really understand and accept.

Contextual theology helps people to know God better as it makes the Gospel relevant to the people of a particular time and context. This paper attempts to draw out the Biblical foundations for formulating contextual theologies by briefly discussing the nature of Christian theology in general in relation to 'context,' the nature of contextual theology and some of the prominent contextual theologies today. 1. What is Christian Theology?

The traditional definition of the term theology refers to the meaning derived from the two Greek words "Theos" and "Logia" and perceived as the study of the word of God or understanding the knowledge of God.

Identifying the limitation of this definition, in his book, *Introducing Theological Ethics*, Shimreingam gives three scholars' opinions of theology: According to Sebastian Kappen, theology may be defined as the analytic, critical, articulate, dialogical and committed reflection on our primordial encounter with God.

Kurien Kunnupuram said, theology should be experienced based, praxis oriented, dialogical and inter-disciplinary." Gustavo Gutierrez opines that theology will be a critical reflection on historical praxis, following out that praxis and a confrontation with the world of the Lord that is accepted and

lived by faith. We can also say that, Christian theology is developed from a particular culture of Jewish, and Greek- Roman cultures.

The Bible was written and edited in Hebrew and Greek language and concluded under the Roman Empire setting. It means the main substances of long-established Christian theology were designed with the culture of Hebrews and Greeks. Christian Theology is “ fully reflective understanding” of the Christian witness of faith in terms that are intelligible and related to human existence. Owen C. Thomas in his book Introduction to Theology, mentions that Christian Theology is to attempt to know and interpret the story of what God has done.

He further says that theology is normative in the sense of attempting to determine what the true Christian faith is, to distinguish right doctrine from fake doctrine, to determine what is and what is not part of Christian faith. Alister E. McGrath’s book, Christian Theology states that, for Christian theology, God’s revelation is not simply a making known of facts about God, but a self-revelation of God. Revelation of ideas about God is to be supplemented by revelation of God as a person, a presence as much as content. 2. Towards the Emergence of Contextual Theology in Asia

In a general understanding, most theologians have agreed that theology since from the beginning of early Christian era has always been contextual in its own time and experiences of the people, in the sense there is no theology which is not contextual. In the classical way, theology is understood as an academic discipline, a methodical quest and therefore, it is an individual’s intellectual pursuit after truth.

But what is happened in Asia or the third world countries is that theology as a human discipline needs to articulate one's faith in the context, where people are striving for social and economic justice, peace, freedom or liberation from various exploitations and discriminations.

Therefore, theology should be contextual so that it becomes relevant to the people's faith or else the good news of the gospel becomes unrealistic, in the sense Christ would have become an unapproachable God, which has nothing to do with the history of humanity.

Rethinking theology was a prior concern towards the emergence of contextual theology in Asia. The missionary theologians felt the need for effectively relating the Gospel message to the soil of Asia and this resulted in the development of various concepts or theological approaches. This process was pioneered by Matteo Ricci in China in 1582 and Robert De Nobili in India in 1605, which means they were the earliest to raise the question of adopting indigenous forms for expressing the Christian faith.

Rethinking theology by Asian Christians began in 1770 in Korea where a group of lay people took the lead. In India, Madras Rethinking Group play a significant role of relating theology to the Indian context under the chief exponent of Chenchiah and was continued by other Indian theologians like P. D. Devanandan, Raymund Panikkar and M. M. Thomas.

The period of 1970's was seen as the advent of another new approach in rethinking theology, in the sense that particularly in the Asian countries the process of secularization, technology and the struggle for human justice characterized the historical moment of the Asian nations. Not only the <https://assignbuster.com/biblical-foundation-for-developing-contextual-theology/>

traditional culture, but the realities of all these processes has led to the realization of Contextual Approach, which is often described as indigenization in India, also known as the Critical Asian Principle.

The Association of Theological Schools in Southeast Asia, The Northeast Asia Association of Theological Schools, The Board of Theological Education (India and Sri Lanka) and the Christian conference of Asia collaborated in this enterprise. The Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches (WCC) also co-operated in this attempt.

In 1966, WCC, in the context of rapid social change that was sweeping the world at large interpreted the Gospel as the concern for a praxis oriented and justice or liberation oriented. The findings of the Church and Society Conference influenced the whole ecumenical thinking represented by the WCC, for it was this Conference which said that the Gospel could be meaningfully related only when it is related to the sufferings and anguishes of the poor and the oppressed.

The Theological Education Fund (TEF) of the World Council of Churches first introduced the term contextual theology in 1972 which was then headed by a Taiwanese theologian, Shoki Coe. Before this, Westerners used terms such as accommodation, adaptation, inculturation and indigenization to denote methods of theological expression in a non-Western context, methods which to a lesser or greater extent utilized the native culture and worldview as the basis of theological articulation. 3. What is Contextual Theology?

K. C. Abraham states, " All theologies are contextual theology even the classical ones." Shimreingam L. Shimray also supports that all theologies are <https://assignbuster.com/biblical-foundation-for-developing-contextual-theology/>

contextual by saying, “ Each of them has emerged in particular context based on particular historical reality of certain people.” Contextual theology is doing theology with own context, it can be done by referring to the culture, customs and life experiences.

It makes us understand God in particular context. Our background influences our understanding of God and the manifestation of our faith. In other words contextual theology is one that foregrounds truth and occurrence Theology which is not relevant with our own time cannot be a perfect theology because theology is reflective of time, culture and current concerns.

In his Models of Contextual Theology, Stephen B. Bevans quotes Henri Bouillard’s statement, “ A theology that is not up to date is a false theology.” Brian Wintle also writes, “ Unless a person who is thinking theologically is rooted in his context and think from that perspective, his theology will not be truly relevant.”

Theology and its meaning changes according to the change of time and human experiences. It is because different people have faced reality differently and had acquired different meaning of theology which is conditioned by their personal realities. 4. Basic Criteria for Authentic Contextual Theology

Contextual theologians have searched for and proposed some criteria for evaluating the authenticity of contextual theologies. In general one need to commonly agree that no one criterion is adequate to determine the genuineness of a contextual theology.

There are several proposed criteria have emerged. The following are some major ones. (i) A contextual theology must have an inner consistency and a continuity relationship with Scripture and subsequent church tradition.

It must be able to express fundamental Christian beliefs and ethical values such as God is love. It also must be believable and acceptable by the church.

(ii) K. C. Abraham expressed that contextual theology must be grounded and inspired by the principle of a preferential option for the poor, which means it must be judged by the outcome of the result of whether or not it removes human suffering and promotes life. (iii)

A contextual theology must be able to express in worship and the activities of the Christian ministry. (iv) In his book *Imaginary Christs: The Challenge of Christological Pluralism*, Richard Grigg mentioned that every expression of Christ must be judged by at least three criteria.

First, it must bear a clear family resemblance to the New Testament Christs. Second, it must reflect the traditional belief that Christ is the presence of God, which means people must able to recognize that God is uniquely present and at work for them and the world. Third, every understanding of Christ must address the expectation that Christ provides redemption. 6.

Biblical Foundations in Doing Contextual Theology