

Malua Theological College
TH 202/A Modern Christology
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WEEK 1 – INTRODUCTION

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1. Introduction

Modern Christology is a branch of Christian theology that examines the person and work of Jesus Christ in light of contemporary issues and perspectives, building upon traditional understandings while also engaging with modern thought and scholarship. It seeks to articulate the Christian belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and to understand the implications of this belief for Christian faith and life. In other words, modern Christology seeks to address questions and challenges raised by modern thought, science, and social issues, reinterpreting traditional doctrines in ways that are relevant and meaningful to contemporary believers.

Modern Christology is closely associated with the concept of contextual theology; hence, it might be beneficial for us to explore the concept of contextual theology before we dive into exploring some of the views of post-modern and modern Christology.

2. What is Contextual Theology?

John Macquarrie defines theology as “*the study which, through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith, seeks to express the content of this faith in the clearest and most coherent language available.*”¹ In other words, theology is simply “faith seeking understanding.”

Now, if we were to change it to Christian theology, we might say that theology is “of our Christian faith, trying to understand the things of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.” The one thing that reminds us is that once we start to read theology, it can sound very different depending on ***when and where it was written***. It is not that Scripture or God has changed.

¹ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 2009), 1.

The differences are the places and cultures – the origin of the faith that “**seeks to understand.**”

Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans writes, “*There is no such thing as 'theology'; there is only contextual theology... the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context is really a **theological imperative***” and cannot be “something on the fringes of the theological enterprise. It is at the very centre of what it means to do theology in today’s world.” –This theological movement, which had emerged in the early 1970s, reflected the commitment of theologians in certain Caribbean Christian communions to produce theology that responded directly to relevant questions and concerns of that context. Falling under the general subject of contextual theology, this movement had special concerns for challenges associated with the region’s long history under one form of colonial domination or another.

We can therefore say with confidence that the aim of contextual theology is not only to understand and interpret God’s act, or to give reason for their faith, but to help people in their struggle to change their situation in accordance with the vision of the Gospel.

In other words, the most creative moments in theology have arisen out of the church’s response to new challenges in a given historical context. They bear the cultural and social imprints of the time, and thus theologians of every age are committed to interpreting the Gospel in a way that is relevant and meaningful to the realities around them (example: *Jesus the Coconut of Life* - Rev. Dr Sione Amanaki Havea; *Taualuga Theology* - Rev. Si'u Vaifale, etc.)

But let us be reminded of the fact that “contextual theology” originated in the attempt first of missionary theologians, and then of indigenous theologians, to express theology in terms of the symbols and values of a particular culture. Bevans speaks of contextual theology as, “a way of doing theology in which one takes into account the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the church; the culture in which one is theologising; and social change within that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.

The Christian faith can be understood and interpreted, according to Bevans, not only on the basis of ‘scripture and tradition’, but also on the basis of ‘concrete culturally conditioned human experience’. Contextual theology reflects on the ‘raw experience’ of the people. It represents an incorporation of Christian concepts, stories, and symbols on the one hand, with the particular indigenous culture of the people on the other.

There has been a growing realisation worldwide that contextualised or local theologies are the key to the future appeal of the Christian faith. Contextuality, in the field of theology, therefore denotes attentiveness, the determination to listen to the voice of the poor; and conscious and intentional rootedness in the culture, in religion, in the historical currents, in

the social locations and situations of people as well as in gender. It aims to alter conditions in the Church and in society that are counter to the deep intent of the Gospel and seeks to include *voices* which have been excluded [*leo o loo taotaomia*] in the participative process of theologising.

We do theology contextually because *it is in the midst of our everyday lives that God meets us*. Hence, we listen to the stories of the poor, of women, and of each culture and race, and their diverse interpretations of the Bible's stories.

3. Contextual Theology and Samoan Christian Approach

The word “context” is derived from the Latin words *con* (meaning “together”) and *texere* (meaning “to weave”). Combining the two terms, we have the term *contextus*, which means “a joining together” or “weaving together”.² Hence, for something to be contextual, a number of circumstances or identities must be knitted or woven together.

Hence, in a sense, the term contextualisation refers to the process of adapting and expressing theological concepts in ways that are understandable and relevant to a specific cultural context. It involves translating the core messages of Christianity into the language, symbols, and practices of a particular culture.

Central to the process of contextualisation is the concept of **Inculturation**. Inculturation is a deeper level of contextualization that involves the mutual transformation of both the Gospel and the culture. It seeks to allow the Gospel to take root in different cultures, enriching both the local context and the broader Christian tradition.

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In other words, Bevans recognizes that theology is not developed in a vacuum but is influenced by the particularities of the situation in which believers find themselves. This approach seeks to make theology relevant and meaningful to people within their own contexts.

² Kaiyu Wan, “A Brief History of Context.” IJCSI International Journal of Computer Science Issues, Vol. 6, No. 2, (2009): 33-42, accessed July 08, 2024, <https://arxiv.org/pdf/0912.1838>

³ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 1.

Bevans here goes beyond classical or traditional theology by postulating three main sources for contextual theology, namely, the *Scripture*, *church tradition* and *socio-cultural context* in which one is theologizing. In other words, it is conceivable that contextual theology was inspired with the very origins of the faith through socio-cultural experience. This means that contextual theology is rooted in the human's desire and yearning to learn and to understand more about God, and to make sense of his presence within a specific spatial location. It is equally the case that the Bible is a product of contextual underpinnings.

Rephrasing what Bevans says, we can say that contextual theology is our attempt at revaluing our *faaSamoa* by way of re-emphasising the fact that no viable Samoan theology can be done without appropriating the Samoan worldview. Here, the aim is to be *critical* of the appropriation of theology already represented in Western concepts and background. Our task as Samoan theologians is to seriously look towards rethinking and re-expressing the original Christian message in a Samoan cultural perspective.

In other words, we have the important task of confronting the Christian faith and the *faaSamoa*, and it is through this interactional process that we have an inter-penetration of both. We have lived with the comforting sense that the Christian faith has and will continue to enlighten our Samoan culture.

Thus, the faith of revelation contained in Biblical writings and traditions is critically re-examined for the purpose of giving them a Samoan cultural expression. Thus, there is integration of faith and culture, and from it is born a new theological reflection that is truly Samoan and Christian. In this approach, therefore, a Samoan theology means Christian faith “seeking and attaining” a Samoan cultural expression, and in the words of Bevans, “in a language that is clear and coherent.” Therefore, the essence is that where the Christian faith is not re-thought and re-expressed in the *faaSamoa*, it may be hard for our people to truly and fully embrace the fullness of the Gospel.

Consequently, the overall purpose of contextual theology is to make the Christian message more relevant and accessible to diverse cultures and communities. In doing so, the process of contextualisation must honour and embrace the voices and experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups. It aims to transform both the Church and society by addressing specific injustices and promoting holistic well-being. Contextual theology demonstrates the dynamic and adaptable nature of the Christian faith, showing how it can be authentically expressed in diverse settings while remaining true to its core message.

4. Key Principles of Contextual Theology

- > **Dialogue:**
 - Engages in conversation with the local culture, other religious traditions, and various social contexts.
 - Seeks mutual understanding and learning.
- > **Praxis:**
 - Emphasizes action and reflection as interconnected processes.
 - Theology is not just about abstract ideas but also about *lived experience* and *practical engagement* in the world.
- > **Hermeneutics:**
 - Uses interpretive methods that take into account the specific context of the community.
 - Recognizes that biblical texts and theological traditions need to be understood in light of contemporary realities.
- > **Community:**
 - Values the insights and contributions of the entire faith community, not just academic theologians.
 - Encourages grassroots participation in theological reflection.