




Contextual Theology according to Contemporary Theologians and Evangelical Theologians: Is Contextual Theology necessary as a Discipline?

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 <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.106.2028>

Abstract

This article aims to discover the roots of the debate between evangelical and contemporary theologians regarding contextual theology, evaluate both, and question the necessity of contextual theology. To achieve this goal, the author uses a qualitative research approach with a comparative research method, especially historical comparative research method. Based on this method, the fundamental difference between evangelical and contemporary theologians regarding contextual theology is the scriptural worldview that appears in the understanding, reasoning, philosophy and interpretation, as well as their respective models of contextual theology. Contemporary contextual theology is a continuation and/or evolution of liberal and/or modern theology with an agenda of liberation in the context of a pluralistic society. The contextual theology of Evangelical theologians is the continuation and development of Reformed theology (tradition) with a holistic mission and evangelization agenda. In fact, all fields of theology, such as biblical, systematic, historical, philosophical, let alone practical, must be contextual, so contextual theology does not need to stand alone as a field let alone a discipline.

Keywords: Contextual theology, contemporary, evangelical, theologian, differences.

Introduction

Christian theology is essentially the result of a careful and lengthy research process starting from the study of the Bible (textual) as the main source with attention to its context, formulated by the church (communal) as a doctrinal or theological formulation of the church with its context as well (Vries, 2016: 6), and formulated and preached in a specific time and space context (contextual) (Van, 1994: 25). Therefore, Christian theology must be concerned with the three domains of textual, communal and contextual. Each of these domains also has its own context. In other words, in theologizing, there are multiple contexts (worlds) (Meylahn, 2017), there are at least three contexts that should be considered, namely the context of the text (past: the Bible), the context of the community (past and present) and the specific context (present and future) (Lumintang, 2009: 132-134). The absence of any of these three domains is certainly not theology. Biblical theology must be contextual. Systematic theology must be contextual. Historical theology must be contextual, let alone practical theology. All theology is contextual" (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020:1). As such, contextual theology does not need to be a stand-alone discipline.

Apparently, contextual theology is necessary to recognise the demands and importance of context in theology (Ng'ang'a, 2017: 27-29), and to critique indigenisation and colonialisation in theology/church (Pears, 2010: 13). Since Shoki Coe and Aharoan Sapsezian introduced the term contextualization in the Theological Education Fund (TEF) report entitled Ministry and Context (1972), many studies on contextual theology and/or contextualization have gradually emerged



(Guirguis, 1995: 420). Many national and international seminars and conferences discuss contextualization themes and topics. In addition, many writings in the form of books and journal articles have been produced on contextual theology and contextualization. Darmaputera classifies contextual theology into two types, namely first, theology that strongly emphasizes social, political and economic contexts such as liberation theology, black theology and feminist theology; second, theology that strongly emphasizes cultural contexts, generally developed by Asian thinkers, such as Choan Seng Song, Koyama, and Indian and Korean thinkers (Darmaputera, 1997: 16-17). These two types of contextual theology, basically share the same hermeneutical presuppositions, which are classified as liberation theology and or contemporary theology because they focus on efforts to answer contemporary issues (today) regarding social and economic inequality in society and addressing non-Christian religions (Smith, 2001: 203-258). Such contemporary theology is an evolution of modern theology (Babie, 2020: 323-343).

The contextual theology of contemporary theologians was responded to by the contextual theology of evangelical theologians with the formulation of the Manila Manifesto (July 1989) which resulted in 21 (twenty-one) Affirmations. The 18th affirmation is: "We affirm our duty to study the society in which we live, to understand its structure, values, and needs, and to develop appropriate mission strategies" (Douglas, 1990: 27). Evangelical theologians are quite cautious about contextual theology and contextualization initiated and pioneered by theologians from the ecumenical camp. Because the departure point of the Evangelical theologians is from the text to the context, while the departure point of the ecumenical theologians is from the context to the text, so they are willing to change the text for the sake of context. They then talk about contextual theology, especially in a cultural context, but in relation to mission and evangelism. Of course, this shows the progress of the missionaries with their missiology (Vries, 2016). In this case, missiologists are at the forefront of contextual theology. This is similar to what Van Engen meant by Tripartite when he explained mission theology, namely: "Biblical and theological presuppositions and values (A) are applied to the ministry and mission endeavors of the church (B), and are set in the context of specific activities undertaken at specific times and places (C) (Van, 1994: 22). In the last two decades, evangelical theologians have begun to discuss contextual theology with regard to social, political and economic issues in the frame of "holistic mission".

There is a debate between contemporary contextual theology and evangelicals. Contemporary theologians construct their contextual theology in terms of social, economic, political and cultural responsibilities, and even if they talk about evangelism, it is in another sense; whereas evangelical theologians construct their contextual theology in terms of mission, evangelism and culture. There are at least six main points of debate between contemporary theologians and evangelicals on contextual theology: (1). Evangelicals: The gospel transcends culture; contemporary: Evangelical: culture-bound. (2). Evangelical: The Bible is the final authority; contemporary: Bible is parallel and subject to context. (3). Evangelical: point of departure from the biblical text; contemporary: point of departure from the social context. (4). Evangelical: culture can be a bridge for the communication of the gospel; contemporary: the possibility of God's revelation in religions including culture. (5). Evangelical: danger of syncretism if excessive with culture in contextualization; contemporary: syncretism as an indication of deep contextualization. (6). Evangelical: anthropological as socio-cultural context analysis; contemporary: anthropological analysis, elements of conflict in society as context analysis (Sanchez, 2015: 291-292).



Many writings from both Evangelical and contemporary camps have presented their respective contextual theologies, but none have compared the two while critiquing (evaluating) and proposing other ideas. Benno van den Toren and Liz Hoare wrote *Evangelicals and Contextual Theology: Lessons from Missiology for Theological Reflection*, arguing that contextual theology will help develop models and methods for doing contextual theology that evangelicals are more comfortable with (Toren & Hoare, 2015: 77-98). After an overview of the changes in theological approaches since the mid-20th century, Ovidiu Moldovan reveals both the achievements and the dangers of contextual theology in his article *Achievements and Hazards of Contextualisation in Theology: The Case of Christian Mission* (Moldovan, 2024). Peter O. Okafor observes in his article titled *the Challenge of Contextual Theology* the danger of contextual theology that tends to emerge from and for the demands of the context, paying little attention to the text, therefore he emphasises the Bible (text) as the main source of theology (Okafor, 2014: 2-3).

Even though the twentieth century has come to an end and we are moving into the twenty-first century, the debate on contextual theology between contemporaries and evangelicals has not ended. Indeed, they are irreconcilable due to their different worldviews and points of departure. For this reason, there has not yet been a comparative study of contemporary and evangelical contextual theology, nor has there been a study of reconciliation between the two. In addition, there has been no writing that criticises both and questions the need for contextual theology as a separate study or discipline. This is because all theology is contextual. The purpose of this paper is to find the roots of the debate between evangelical and contemporary theologians regarding contextual theology, evaluate both, and affirm that the contextual domain is not theology, but only one of the characters and domains of theology. The purpose of this paper is thus also to compare contemporary contextual theology with evangelicals, and specifically to answer the question 'should contextual theology be considered as a discipline in its own right, alongside biblical, systematic, philosophical, historical and practical theology?'. The answer to this question is a contribution to the consideration of all endeavors to do Christian theology in all times and places.

Research Method

To answer the research questions of this paper, the researcher uses a comparative research method. This comparative research method is an integral part of the comparative study of religions (Freiberger, 2019:195-197), including comparative studies of theology between internal theologians of a religion (AVCI, 2018:2), and one of them is a comparative study of contextual theology according to contemporary theologians and evangelical theologians. Comparative research is the act of comparing two or more things with a view to discovering something about one or all of the things being compared. Comparative theology is in part a comparison of theologies, and entails reflection on theological themes and also theological method and purpose as exemplified in various religious traditions (Cornille, 2021:10). The researcher systematically compares contextual theology approaches so as to identify similarities, differences, and relationships between them. The goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the subjects being studied by contrasting them in a meaningful way. Meaning and method in comparative theology then offers a synthesis of and a blueprint for the emerging field of comparative theology. The comparative study of contextual theology between these two views not only provides a clarity of the different, and even contradictory, thinking between the two, but also demonstrates the parallel thinking that can lead to the same result (AVCI, 2018:4). Freiberger suggests a comparative approach by developing a methodological framework for comparison, evaluating each study, and examining both to find commonalities between them (Freiberger, 2019: 195-197). Since historical



documents are one of the important aspects of comparative research between contextual theology according to contemporary theologians and evangelical theologians, this comparative research also follows the historical comparison method (Neuman, 2013: 522-523). With regard to this research paper, the research steps of this paper are as follows: *Firstly*, to explain the meaning, background, philosophical and interpretive foundations and models of contextual theology of contemporary theologians and evangelical theologians. *Second*, to evaluate and assess both the contextual theological views of contemporary theologians and evangelical theologians. *Thirdly*, to critique contextual theology by answering the question: does contextual theology need to stand alone as a discipline? (Freiberger, 2019: 522-523). These three steps are followed in this research paper.

Result and discussion

Contextual Theology of Contemporary Theologians

In order to understand contemporary theologians' paradigms of contextual theology, the following examines their definitions, backgrounds and rationales, philosophical and interpretive foundations, and models of contextual theology.

Definition of Contextual Theology by Contemporary Theologians

Contemporary contextual theologians directly bring together or create a bridge between text and context. According to Darmaputera: 'Theology is nothing but an attempt to bring together dialectically, creatively and essentially the 'text' and the 'context', between the universal 'kerygma' and the contextualised reality of life (Darmaputera, 1997: 9). Likewise, Agustinus Setiawadi tried to build a contextualised Old Testament theology in Indonesia by building a bridge between text and context (Setiawadi, 2017: 256-273). Furthermore, with reference to H.G. Reventlow's writing, Setiawadi states that: "For the Indonesian context, I interpret his opinion by concluding that we ourselves determine which approaches are most appropriate and useful for the texts we read and interpret and for our respective contexts" (Setiawadi, 2017: 269).

Although it may seem that Setiawadi is neutral in trying to bring together or bridge between text and context, it is the interpreter himself who determines both the approach and the benefits of the interpreted texts. Furthermore, in general, contemporary theologians or interpreters directly bring text and context together. This is also reviewed by Johann-Albrecht Meylahn, that: "Correct reading of the Text on the basis of the latest exegetical discoveries in New Testament and Old Testament studies, as well as the correct reading or analysis of the context on the basis of the insights gained from the latest development in the science" (Meylahn, 2017). Between the correct reading of the text (Bible) and the correct reading of the context (Science) is the study of the relationship between biblical data and scientific data (social, economic, political, cultural, etc.). This is the same as what Darmaputera meant before, namely bringing together the text (Bible) and context dialectically.

What is meant by trying to bring text and context together is to get light from the context in order to understand the text. Bevens emphasises that: "As we study scripture and tradition, we not only have to be aware of their inevitable contextual nature; we have to read and interpret them within our own context as well" (Bevens, 2008: 5). In other words, it is 'our' context that contributes to the understanding of the biblical text. Stephen B. Bevens also defines contextualisation theology



as 'the attempt to understand the Christian faith in a particular context - truly a theological imperative. As we understand theology today, this is a process that is part of the very nature of theology itself (Bevans, 2008: 3). Lourdino A. Yuzon rewrites Bevans' definition that 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 theologizing; and social change within that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation" (Yuzon, 1994).

This definition of contextual theology above, does contain three domains, namely text (Gospel), community (Tradition) and culture and social change (Context), but the emphasis is on context as his critique of traditional or classical theology that emphasises text (Gospel) and church (Tradition) (Yuzon, 1994: 3-4). The domain of context is seen as very important in theologising. Indeed, the starting point of contextual theology is context in all its dimensions. This is believed for two reasons: Firstly, because of the importance of human experience as a source for reflection on Christian faith and morals; and secondly, because it is rooted in concrete human experience in a particular cultural and societal context (Yuzon, 1994: 1-2). text (the Bible and the theological tradition of the church), but the context. Bevans also emphasises the absolute importance of context for understanding texts and traditions (particular church teachings), as he states: "When we recognise the importance of context for theology, we are also acknowledging the absolute importance of context for the development of both scripture and tradition" (Bevans, 2008: 5). Context is seen as important and text-determining to the extent that Bevans states: "We have to read and interpret them (text and tradition) within our own context as well" (Bevans, 2008).

Contemporary Theologians' Reasons for the Necessity of Contextual Theology

Contextual theology is gaining favour as scholars provide arguments on the importance of contextual theology. Shoki Coe, one of the originators of the term contextualisation, asserts the necessity of contextualisation, arguing that indigenisation is dangerous because it is oriented towards the past, whereas contextualisation is more dynamic and open to the future (Coe, 1992: 14-15). In a later development, Stephen Bevans stated that contextual theology is a theological imperative, as it takes seriously human experience, social location, specific cultures and social change within a particular culture (Bevans, 2008: 3-4). Lourdino A. Yuzon also, in his *Toward A Contextual Theology* asserts that contextualisation is not optional, but rather an imperative that comes from the way God relates Himself to the world (Yuzon, 1994). Contextual theologians are convinced that the world is the context that God is primarily concerned with, hence context and contextualisation is not optional but a necessity.

As mentioned in the introduction, contextual theology emerged as a critique of traditional or classical theology. Traditional theology is generic, universal, unchanging and above culture; hence it is considered a failure. The reason for the failure of traditional theology is revealed by Peter Onyekwelu Okafor: "They fail to place the issues of their contextual status at the forefront of their theological process" (Okafor, 2022). Quoting Stephen Garner's writing, he added that: "Contextual theology refers to those theological approaches that place and celebrate the context at the center of the praxis of theology" (Okafor, 2022). Bevans also criticises the weaknesses of classical or traditional theology and promotes the strengths of contextual theology: (1). Classical or traditional theology is grounded in the Bible and (church) tradition, which will never change, on which cultural expressions are conditioned; whereas contextual theology is a recognition of the validity of another locus of theology, namely contemporary human experience. (2). Classical theology understands theology as something objective, fixed and unchanging; whereas



contextual theology understands theology as something highly subjective (not relative and private), i.e. the human person and human society are culturally and historically bound (not value-free) (Bevans, 2008 3-7).

Furthermore, Bevans presents external and internal factors that state the reasons why contextual theology is a necessity. The external factors are: (1). First and third world dissatisfaction with traditional theology, where traditional theology is meaningless in our own cultural patterns and forms of thought. (2). The oppressive nature of traditional theological approaches, such as the oppression behind black theology in the Americas and liberation theology in Latin America. (3). The growing identity of local churches demands the development of a truly contextual theology. (4). Underlying these three external factors is a fourth factor, namely the understanding of culture provided by contemporary social sciences. The internal factors are: 1). The incarnational nature of Christianity which is based on the incarnation of Christ. 2). The sacramental nature of reality, where God is revealed not in the world of ideas, but in the real world. 3). The shift in understanding of the nature of God's revelation as a factor that determines the contextual nature of theology. (4). The catholic or inclusive essence of the church. (5). Contemporary theology sees the revitalisation of the doctrine of the trinity as the centre and source of Christian theology in the human context (Bevans, 2008: 9-15). Of these factors, the external ones are about the context, while the internal ones are about the Christian tradition (community).

Philosophical Foundations and Contextual Interpretation of Contemporary Theologians

Contextual theology is built on philosophical foundations, namely a new epistemology (Bosch, 1995: 423). Contextual theology is 'from below' and its main source is the social sciences. This new epistemology is a transition from the old epistemology. The old epistemology is traditional theology, which is theology built from above, sourced from philosophy, namely the Bible (text) and church tradition (community). What is important in the new epistemology is the emphasis on the priority of praxis (action), with its six pragmatic statements, namely: (1). There is a deep suspicion that not only Western science and Western philosophy, but also Western theology, where conservative or liberal, despite (or because of?) their claims that knowledge is neutral, are actually designed to serve Western interests. (2). The new epistemology rejects the idea of the world as static that is simply explained. (3). Emphasis on commitment as the first act of theology, more specifically, commitment to the poor and marginalised. (4). In this paradigm, a theologian can only theologise credibly if he does so with those who suffer. (5). Emphasises on doing theology with a hermeneutic of action. (6). The priority of doing in contextual theology is the hermeneutic circle, from praxis to reflection (subjective) (Bosch, 1995: 424-425).

The six statements in the preceding paragraphs reveal that the contextual theology of contemporary theologians is built on the philosophy of pragmatism. Pragmatism is one of the contemporary philosophies that emerged in the late modern era that emphasizes the aspects of action, operation and meaningfulness that are real in context (Lumintang, 2024: 119). According to contemporary theologians, four types of context, namely present human experience, social location, cultural identity, and change in a context (Bevans, 2010). The pragmatism of contextual theology emphasizes action (praxis) and real usefulness in the four contexts. Praxis and orthopraxis are the criteria that contemporary theologians set for contextual theology. Bevans states similarly that: "There is the criteria of orthopraxis. The theological expression should lead to the practice of justice, peace or holiness" (Bevans, 2010). Certainly, because of orthopraxis (contextual) theology as a critique and counter to orthodoxy (traditional).



From the philosophy of new epistemology and pragmatism, contemporary contextual theology is understood as an interpretation of the Christian faith that emerges in awareness of the context itself, in contrast to traditional interpretations (Okafor, 2014). In this case, interpretation does not result in a study of God, but rather a study of what God says and does in a context (Okafor, 2014). Contextual theology has always actualised a theological method that considers contemporary culture, history, and forms of thought, along with Scripture and tradition, as legitimate sources for theological expression (Bevans, 2008: 2). In this case, they tend to align text, tradition and context. Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vahakangas write of the balance between text (biblical and historical) and context (historical, contemporary thought, cultures and living faiths) (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020: 4). This is the hermeneutical circle initiated by liberal theologians and continued by contemporary theologians. The hermeneutical circle focuses on analysing the context, with the basic assumption that the context can be read (analysed) correctly, and with the aim of fixing the problem as stated below (Meylahn, 2017):

First, we experience reality, which leads us to ideological suspicion. *Second*, we apply this ideological suspicion to our understanding of reality in general, and to Scripture and theology in particular. *Third*, we experience a new way of perceiving reality that leads us to the exegetical suspicion that the prevailing interpretation of the Bible has not taken important pieces of data into account (this calls for rereading the Bible text). *Fourth*, we develop a new hermeneutic, that is, we find a new way of interpreting Scripture with the new perceptions of our reality at our disposal (Van, 1996: 39).

One example of contextual interpretation that applies hermeneutical circles is that of feminist theologians. Like many contemporary theologians, they reject traditional theological interpretations that place the Bible as the primary source. They are suspicious of the Bible, which they believe is written and interpreted from a male-dominated perspective that oppresses women. They reinterpret the Bible by conducting historical analyses of women's roles, revising patriarchal elements in androcentric texts and translations, looking at stories from women's perspectives, rediscovering the works of women authors, in order to liberate women from the patriarchal oppression of traditional biblical interpretation (Setzer, 2017). David Boch calls this kind of interpretation critical hermeneutics (Bosch, 1995: 22-23). Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza is one of the most prominent feminists. She wrote *Reading the Bible with a New Eye* and a book entitled *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. There are at least three ways of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza's feminist hermeneutics: (1). Hermeneutic of experience, which departs from the fact that women's experiences are generally marginalised and not used in determining religious, social and community norms. (2). Hermeneutics of suspicion, hermeneutic of suspicion of hermeneutic work that needs to be analysed, observed, investigated and brought to the surface, and does not receive attention. (3). Hermeneutics of transformative action, which explores changes in relations of domination found in texts, traditions, and everyday life (context) (Fiorenza, Elisabeth, & Schussler, 2020: 23). The contextual theology produced by this type of hermeneutic is contextualised with social, political, economic issues in a pluralistic society.

Contextual Themes and Models according to Contemporary Theologian

Contextual theology, because of its emphasis on context, is usually about context. Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vahakangas list the themes of contextual theology that often appear as themes of discussion and writing, among others: "Interfaith plurality, global capitalism, ecumenical liberation theology, eco-anxiety and the environment, postcolonialism, intercultural and gender



fluidity (LGBT), neo-Pentecostalism, contextual public theology, world theology, and forgiveness and reconciliation” (Bergmann & Vähäkangas, 2020: 11). These themes emerge from the continental theological voices of Latin America, Asia and Africa. Douglas J Elwood has long featured emerging themes of Christian theology specific to Asia, including contextualisation, full humanity, indigenous culture, Philippine theology, Indian Christology, renewal, creation mission, theology of religious pluralism, liberation, development and other similar themes (Elwood, 1992: 3-378). In particular, the themes of contextual Christology are contained in the book ‘The Face of Jesus in Asia’ such as Jesus and Krisna, Christ and Buddha, Christ in the context of Islam, Christ in the Context of Various Religions, Jesus and the People, Christ and Women, and so on (Sugirtharajah, 1996: 13-418). In Indonesia, the themes of contextual theology are collected in a book entitled *Text and Context: Cross-Cultural Theology*. The themes include contextual theology, theological spiral, contextualisation, postcolonialism, hybridity, plurality and dialogue democracy, ecology, and politics (Setio, Wibowo & Widjaja, 2019: 24-381).

As context is the emphasis of contemporary theologians, the resulting theological models are theological models that originate and boil down to cultural and social contexts. Robert Schreiter in Okafor's writing, similar to Eka Darmaputera stated in the previous section, informs two types of contextualisation, namely cultural contextualisation, which emphasises identity such as Africa, Asia, Latin America; and contextualisation with regard to social demands such as Latin American liberation theology (Okafor, 2022). Yuzon describes the models of contextual theology at the beginning of his paper that:

It may be borne in mind that contextual theology is an umbrella term. This is to say that there are many, not one, contextual theology. For instance, Black theology, Feminist theology, Minjung theology (Korea), Dalit theology (India) theology of struggle (Philippines), Latin American liberation theology are all contextual theologies that have emerged out of particular historical realities to which the liberate aspects of the Christian message are addressed Yuzon, 1994).

In general, this model of contextual theology emphasises the social context, as Choan Seng Song did with his theology of transposition, where he was willing to change the text (the Gospel) for the demands and acceptance of the context (Song, 2012: 16).

Furthermore, guided by social critical interpretive systems, such as liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, Song invites Asian theologians to pay attention to real social problems in the Asian context (Song, 2012: 16). Shoki Coe also based his contextual theology on the incarnation and called for theological attention to the oppressed, the poor, the imprisoned and the neglected (Coe, 1992: 17). Minjung (Korea) is a model of contextual theology that strongly emphasises the context of the socio-political struggles of Korean churches (Lumintang, 2024: 652). Theologians and Models of contextual theology in Thailand are Kosuke Koyama with his *Kerba Theology*; Raymond Fung and Peter K.H. Lee are Hong Kong contextual theologians; Tissa Balasiriya is a Sri Lankan liberation (contextual) theologian (Lumintang, 2009: 392-397). In the Indonesian context, Agustinus Setiawidi's research revealed five tendencies of Indonesian theologians in theology, namely (1). There is a kind of ‘burden’ to prioritise national interests over local-regional ones. (2). Generally, the works of Indonesian theologians are dominated by text (interpretation) rather than contextualisation. (3). Social justice is a widely studied topic. (4). Respect for elements of local values and culture as a correction to Western theologians. (5). Most



of the works of Indonesian Old Testament theologians apply the translation model of Stephen B. Bevans (Setiawidi, 2017: 266-267).

Contextual Theology of Evangelical Theologians

It must be recognised that historically, evangelical theologians have merely followed the trend of contextual theology started by (contemporary) ecumenical theologians. Martin Goldsmith mentions that: “Evangelicals in particular have been slower to see the need of contextualization that more liberal Christians (Goldsmith, 2020). Although slower than liberal theologians, evangelical theologians have carefully processed their contextual theology. Their contextual theology can be understood in the following descriptions of the definition, rationale and background, philosophical and interpretive foundations, and models of contextual theology.

Definition of Contextual Theology by Evangelical Theologians

Evangelicals approach contextual theology with great caution, because examining the starting point, process and outcome of contextual theology of liberal and contemporary theologians is contrary to their view of God's revelation. Evangelical theologians recognise that the revelation of God (the Bible) is unchanging and is the starting point and source of contextual theology. Paul G. Hiebert offers Critical Contextualisation, where: “The Bible is seen as divine revelation, not simply as humanly constructed belief. In contextualisation the heart of the Gospel must be kept as it is encoded in forms that are understood by people, without making the Gospel captive to the context” (Hiebert, 2010: 83). Goldsmith also confirms the evangelical critique of contextualisation pioneers (non-evangelicals), namely that they do not uphold the absolute authority of the Bible as the word of God (Goldsmith, 2020). That is why evangelicals then do contextual theology, but with an evangelical paradigm, which places the Bible as the highest authority and the main source of theology.

Initially, since 1974 with regard to The Lausanne Covenant, evangelicals began to pay attention to what contextual theology was concerned with in the fifth affirmation on Christian social responsibility, the tenth affirmation on evangelism and culture, and the thirteenth affirmation on freedom and persecution (Douglas, 1989: 20-23). The notion of contextualisation is already evident in the subtitle: ‘The whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world’. Awareness of the demands of contextual theology is growing among evangelicals, as seen in The Manila Manifesto of 1989, affirmations 8, 17, 18 and 20 as follows:

(8). We affirm that we must demonstrate God's love visibly by caring for those who are deprived of justice, dignity, food and shelter... (17). We affirm the urgent need for churches, mission agencies, and other Christian organization to cooperate in evangelism and social action, repudiating competition and avoiding duplication. (18). We affirm our duty to study the society in which we live, in order to understand its structures, values, and needs, and so develop an appropriate strategy of mission... (20). We affirm our solidarity with those who suffer for the Gospel, and will seek to prepare ourselves for the same possibility. We will also work for religious and political freedom everywhere (Douglas, 1989: 26-27).

The notions of contextualization and contextualization of evangelicals always link evangelism and social responsibility. In particular, evangelicals' concern about context is seen in their efforts to study the society in which they live, to understand its structure, values and needs, and all for the sake of mission, i.e. developing appropriate mission strategies. Thus, evangelicals' contextual



theology is first and foremost about mission and evangelism, and evolves into holistic mission, including solidarity with fellow believers who suffer for the sake of the gospel in many parts of the world, as well as fighting for religious and political freedom everywhere.

In later developments, evangelical theologians formulated a contextual definition as written by Dean Gilliland: “The word must dwell among all families of humankind today as truly as Jesus lived among his own kin” (Gilliland, 2000: 225). Furthermore, contextualization in mission is: “The effort made by a particular church to experience the Gospel for its own life in light of the Word of God” (Gilliland, 2000: 225). Gilliland further defines the term contextualized theology as:

The dynamic reflection carried out by the particular church upon its own life in light of the Word of God and historic Christian truth. Guided by the Holy Spirit, the church continually challenges, incorporates, and transforms elements of the cultural milieu, bringing these under the lordship of Christ. As members of the body of Christ interpret the word, using their own thoughts and employing their own culture gift, they are better able to understand the Gospel as incarnation (Gilliland, 1989: 12-13).

From this definition, contextual theology starts from the Bible and church tradition (text), through the role of the church (community) in a culture that submits to the lordship of Christ, interpreting and understanding the gospel from its own way of thinking and culture (context).

Evangelical Theologians' Reasons for the Imperative of Contextual Theology

The terms contextualization and contextualization are terms initiated by the ecumenicals, and adopted by the evangelicals in a different sense and manner (Chai, 2015: 4). Nevertheless, not all evangelical theologians so easily accept the change of terms from “indigenization” to the term and agenda of “contextualization”, due to the fact that contextualization has been tainted by the thoughts of liberal theologians (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000: 27). herefore, evangelicals understand the task of contextualization to be limited to the relevant and faithful communication of the unchanging text in the language and cultural thought forms of those to whom the message is communicated in the context of the church's task of mission. Evangelicals therefore understand the task of contextualization to be limited to the relevant and faithful communication of the unchanging text in the language and cultural thought forms of those to whom it is communicated in the context of the church's task of mission and evangelism. Being overly cautious with contextualization, there are not a few who call their thinking and activities contextualization, but in fact they are not or cannot be.

Paul G. Hiebert classifies contextualization in four forms, namely: (1). Non-contextualization, which only emphasizes the news delivered, but without caring about the recipient and its context. (2). Minimal contextualization, which only translates liturgy including Western church songs into local languages, appoints and ordains church officials using church positions with foreign terms. (3). Uncritical contextualization, i.e. adopting cultural elements to the point of changing the gospel, as in Europe, where churches became part of world culture. (4). Critical contextualization (Hiebert, 2010). Specifically regarding critical contextualization, Hiebert means: The Bible is seen as divine revelation, not simply as humanly constructed beliefs. In contextualization the heart of the Gospel must be kept as it is encoded in forms that are understood by the people, without making the Gospel captive to the contexts” (Hiebert, 2010: 84-94).



Evangelical theologians are increasingly open to contextual theological studies. Therefore, almost all evangelical authors who write about contextual theology begin their writings with a study of contextualization in the Bible. To convince the reader, David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen begin their book with a description of contextualization in the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments, accompanied by approaches and examples. Likewise, in the subsequent discussion, they present historical data on contextualization in the mission of the churches from the beginning to modern times (Hiebert, 2010: 93). Arthur F. Glasser wrote *Old Testament Contextualization* and Dean Gilliland wrote *The New Testament Contextualization* (Glasser, 1989: 32-73). Likewise, Yakob Tomatala is convinced that contextualization is biblical as his description of contextualization and the Old and New Testaments shows (Tomatala, 1993: 11-32). Not only do they provide a different understanding from that of liberal and contemporary theologians, but they also emphasize that contextualization is God's will, from the Bible.

In addition to biblical arguments, as mentioned earlier, evangelical theologians also present theological and historical arguments. Benno van den Toren, Liz Hoare present three fundamental convictions for the need for contextual theology: (1). All theology is contextual; (2). All theology is practical; and (3). The importance of theological reflection for the practice of Christianity and the importance of developing the habit of theological self-reflection as an essential part of theological training and ministry (Toren & Hoare, 2015: 5). Charles Van Engen presented a number of theological topics including: Mystery of revealed hiddenness, The Mystery of revelation in multiple contexts, responses to the mystery: contextualization model, new covenant, a biblical model for knowing God in context and the new covenant, a model of contextualization today, and the conclusion is that God's new covenant in new context (Van, 1989: 74-95).

Foundations and Patterns of Contextual Interpretation of Evangelical Theologians

The root of the difference and even conflict between evangelical theologians and liberal and contemporary theologians is the attitude towards the Bible. Evangelical theologians believe and recognize the Bible as the authoritative and powerful word of God. This statement became explicit in The Lausanne Covenant (1974) and The Manila Manifesto (1989) (Douglas, 1989: 19-27). Dean Flemming reiterates the emphasis of evangelical theologians on six steps of context-indigenization, namely: First, the initial step begins with the recognition of the Bible as the authoritative, inerrant word of God. Second, it continues with the process of studying the Bible by means of grammatical and historical exegesis. Third, finding the results of exegesis in the form of biblical theology of both the Old and New Testaments. Fourth, formulate biblical theology into systematic theology. Fifth, applying it into a theology of mission (Flemming, 2005: 59). The process of contextual theologizing of evangelical theologians, starting from the Bible to mission, contrasts with liberal and contemporary theologians who start at the context.

Evangelical theology for the most part begins with a high view of Scripture as being authoritative and inerrant. Evangelicals argue that God's revelation is mainly found in the Holy Bible, which is believed to be timeless and can be applied anywhere. Thus, theology begins with the text of the Bible, and the theologians determine to understand God's truth as revealed in Scripture. Evangelical theologians then often work within a specific framework where the biblical message is the grounding of faith, and then the theology is applied or interpreted in specific contexts that arise. The liberal and contemporary theologians very often start with the context in which theology is being done and they look at human experience, culture, history, and even social issues as the foundational starting points for any and all theological reflection.



David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen criticize the originators of the term “contextualization” (Theological Education Fund) who often speak of authentic contextualization in relation to context, but for them authentic contextualization is: “pertaining to the fidelity of a message to the authority and content of God's will as revealed in His creation, in human conscience, and especially in His Son and His Spirit-inspired word (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000: 199). In other words, for these two contextual theologians from the evangelical camp, placing fidelity to the Bible and the teachings of the Bible as a presupposition of contextual theology. From this presupposition, they propose the step of interpreting the Bible by determining the meaning of what it says. There are three elements that are carried out continuously, namely revelation, interpretation and application.

From this process, it is then necessary to understand seven contextual dimensions, namely: First, worldview: the way of understanding the world. Second, cognitive processes: ways of thinking. Third, linguistic forms: how to express ideas. Fourth, behavior patterns: ways of acting. Fifth, communication media: a way of transmitting news. Sixth, social structure: how to get along. Seventh, sources of motivation: how to make decisions (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000: 200-210). Through these seven dimensions, authentic Christian contextualization is:

The Bible is interpreted in such a way that, as closely as possible, the author's intent is discovered using sound hermeneutic principles. Through this process, the influence of the interpreter's own culture is gradually overcome. Then the gospel message is expressed in a form appropriate to a particular receiving culture, so that it is meaningful and convincing to the audience in that culture (Hesselgrave & Rommen, 2000: 211).

Furthermore, Charles Van Engen summarizes evangelical theologians' assessment of narrative theology in five main concerns: First, a deep concern for narrative theology that deals with the wholeness of the text. Second, the interaction between the text and the community (the faith tradition of the church). Third, the two-horizon relationship between text and interpreter with a historical-grammatical approach to the text and then from the text to the specific context. Fourthly, biblical narrative theology helps to read the Bible in a holistic perspective, where the whole life of God's revelation is taken into consideration in reading the text (Van, 1989: 58-59). Such contextual theologizing does not fall into the practice of limiting and even changing the text (the Bible) for the sake of the demands of the context. That is why evangelical theologians often criticize Catholic church theologians for their adherence to tradition, in many cases making them more tradition-bound in their biblical interpretation and theology (Goldsmith, 2020).

Finally, this point would be incomplete without mentioning Paul G. Hiebert's contribution on Form and Meaning in the Contextualization of the Gospel. Hiebert initially provides a historical overview of how the relationship between “form and meaning” was equated by the philosophy of positivism (19th century), separated by the philosophy of pragmatism (20th century), and reunited by the philosophy of critical realism. This study reveals that contextualization is not an easy, simple, and short task but a long process, while encouraging to provide an adequate approach, evaluating the notion of meaning and form of culture with its symbols (Hiebert, 2010: 101-120). Charles Van Engen supported Hiebert's thoughts by emphasizing that “Same Meaning, Many Forms” dan “Same Meaning, Fuller Knowledge” (Van, 1994: 76-78). Hiebert also made a meaningful contribution to Critical Contextualization with the following five steps: *First*, interpreting culture - gathering information uncritically. *Second*, interpreting the Bible and building hermeneutical bridges, what the biblical text meant to the original author and audience, then translating the



message of the Bible to people in their culture. *Third*, evaluating local customs in the light of biblical understanding and decision-making. *Fourth*, developing new practices that are contextualized. *Fifth*, be aware of the dangers of syncretism, must be in accordance with the gospel (Hiebert, 1992: 88-92).

Evangelical Theologians' Models of Contextual Theology

In his book *Mission on the Way*, Charles Van Engen describes and distinguishes between four common models of contextualization, namely: *First*, contextualization as communication, which is the attempt to demonstrate cultural sensitivity seriously and carefully in relation to the recipient while also trying to remain faithful to the preacher's understanding of the gospel. *Second*, contextualization as cultural relevance with four types: syncretism, accommodation, situation theology, and biblical theology oriented to Asian culture, for example. *Third*, contextualization as liberation because of economic, social, and political issues. *Fourth*, contextualization as interfaith dialogue in the context of a multi-religious society. *Fifth*, contextualization as an effort to know God in a pluralistic context, with biblical covenant theology as the model of the author (Van, 1994: 73-75).

Hardly a single model of cultural contextual theology from Indonesian evangelical theologians has surfaced in the national literature, except for works in the form of theses, theses and dissertations at several Indonesian Christian religious universities, including the Indonesian Gospel Institute Batu, East Java and the International Reformed Evangelical School of Theology, Jakarta. Indeed, books or journal articles containing research results in the form of contextualization models of the gospel and certain cultures in Indonesia are hardly found in bookstores and journals of theology and mission, except in the libraries of Christian religious colleges in Indonesia. This is due to "code of ethics" considerations of not revealing to the public the particular ethnic community that is the object of scientific research, and also not revealing contextual strategies to the public. Of the many student theses and theses that have been guided by the author himself, some have written contextual theology. One of them is a thesis entitled: "Contextualization of the Gospel to the Kejawen Believers through the Philosophy of "Manunggaling Kawula Gusti", by Denny Kriswintoro, an alumnus of the International Reformed Evangelical School of Theology. This research cannot be made public for these two reasons.

An Evaluation of the Contextual Theology of Evangelical Theologians and Contemporary Theologians of other denominations

From all the previous discussions, the similarities between evangelical and contemporary theologians in contextual theology are that both understand that contextualization is a meeting between text and context, and both also recognize that contextual theology is important and even a necessity in theology, because it is God's will as written in the Bible and in accordance with the nature of science. Although they both view contextualization as an effort to bring together or bridge between the text (past) and the context (present), the fundamental difference between the two is the difference in interpretation systems. Evangelical theologians place the text as the starting point for theologizing, while contemporary theologians place the context as the starting point for theologizing. Evangelical theologians try to do contextual theology, making the context understand the text from the epistemology and culture of the context, but not at the expense of the text, by not changing the essence of the text. Contemporary theologians, on the other hand, seek to do contextual theology, making the context understood and supported by the text, even determining the nature and content of theology for the sake of the context (Bosch, 1995: 432), so



they are willing to sacrifice the text, changing the meaning of the essence of the text in favour of the context.

The root of the sharp difference between evangelical and contemporary theologians is in the way they view the biblical text (bibliology). Evangelical theologians recognize the Bible as the word of God, the most authoritative, as the primary source of theology, the eternal truth (unchanging) that comes to any context with the principle of biblical incarnation, so that it is always understood and relevant in every context. Evangelical theologians retain the reformation heritage that the Bible is the word of God. The Bible interprets the Bible, so it is free from the influence of interpreters, so it should not be suspected as liberal and contemporary theologians suspect. Contemporary theologians recognize that the Bible is suspect because it was written and understood in a past that does not fit the present context, including being written in a cultural context dominated by men in the past, and does not fit the context of today's readers, namely women. Evangelical theologians place the Bible as a mission message delivered to humans in their respective cultural contexts, and as a source, model and guide (orthodoxy) in addressing issues of injustice in society, while contemporary theologians make the Bible a "light" that supports and encourages the church to act (praxis), operational and beneficial in the midst of issues of social, economic and political injustice that produce inequality and violence in society (pragmatism), such as liberation theology, black theology, feminist theology, religious theology (religious pluralism).

Looking at the initiators and developers of contextual theology, contextual theology has been criticized as dangerous theology. Shoki Coe has received various responses to the terms contextuality and contextualization, which overemphasize context over text, and regarding this, he states that it is contrary to the true intent of contextualization (Coe, 1992: 13-14). The next danger is theology without a stand or chameleon, says Shoki Coe (Coe, 1992: 16). Nevertheless, the contextualization work being done by liberal and contemporary theologians is considered dangerous by evangelicals, so they are somewhat late to contextual theology. For this reason, Harvie M Conn criticizes the reluctance of evangelical theologians in doing contextual theology (Conn, 1978: 45-46). Evangelical theologians are highly critical of contextual theologies that prioritize the context in favor of the text (the Bible). Therefore, Paul Hiebert, an evangelical missiologist, proposed "Critical Contextualization". The reason is that context is not neutral. Cultural contexts contain elements of good and evil, healthy and perverted, including mystical elements (powers of darkness) and cannot be separated from the influence and contamination of human sin. Uncritical contextualization will tend to fall into the practice of syncretism (Hiebert, 2010: 93). In addition to the danger of syncretism in contextualization, there is also the potential for absolutist language in contextualization (Bosch, 1995: 656). Contextualization absolutism is an attempt to universalize the results of contextual theology of a person and or group of people, thus repeating the practice of westernization and colonialization, such as Western theology being consumed by churches in Asia.

Looking at the trend of contextual theology produced by evangelical and contemporary theologians, two polarizing poles can be seen, namely the northern hemisphere pole and the southern hemisphere pole. Contemporary theologians reject and replace traditional or classical theologies formulated by and for churches in the Western context (northern hemisphere), while evangelical theologians continue and develop them in the context of Asia, Africa and Latin America (southern hemisphere). Contemporary theologians construct contextual theology more likely for the demands of social, economic and political contexts. This is understood because contemporary theologians place context as the main thing in theology. Whereas evangelical



theologians construct their contextual theology, more likely for the demands of mission and evangelism. This is understood because evangelical theologians place the text (the Bible) as the main thing in theologizing.

Mission and evangelism are the main concerns of contextual theology of evangelical theologians and missiologists, because evangelicals have been identified with mission and evangelism since the beginning of evangelical groups. Therefore, since the beginning of contextualization, mission and evangelism have been the focus of the efforts of evangelical theologians and missiologists in contextual theology. Brian A. de Vries writes similarly: "It is important to note that from its origin, the term contextualization was directly related to the practice of missions" (Vries, 2016). It is affirmed in the Manila Manifesto that: "In the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, God has given us authoritative revelation of His character and will, His act of redemption and its meaning, and His mandate for mission" (Douglas, 1989: 25). The Bible (text) and the mission mandate are what makes evangelical theologians and missiologists eager to construct contextualized mission and evangelism. This spirit is a correction to the pattern of mission and evangelism that pays little attention to the text (the Bible) but emphasizes the context as is the tendency of liberal and contemporary theologians. This spirit is a correction to the pattern of mission and evangelism that pays little attention to the context of evangelicals who are very wary of the contextual dangers of liberal and contemporary theologians.

Criticisms of Contextual Theology: Does Contextual Theology Need Stand Alone as a Discipline?

On the one hand, contextual theology emerged as a critique of Western or first world theology dominating churches in the Southern world, resulting in the realization and awakening of its own theology, of, by, in and for a particular context. First world theology has alienated and paralyzed Christianity in the third world to cope with the demands and challenges of its own context. On the other hand, Christian theology is polarized into contextual theology and non-contextual theology. Addressing one problem brings about the other. Addressing one extreme (left), gives birth to the other extreme (right). Contextual theology is the extreme left, and traditional theology is the extreme right. Contextual theology is more concerned with context, tending to ignore text; and traditional theology is more concerned with text, tending to ignore context. Contextual theology tends to be absolutist (Bosch, 1995: 656), or neo-colonialism (present), just as traditional theology tends to be universalism or colonialism (past). This polarization of two poles or two extremes has resulted in divisive opposition and crippling inequality. Whereas contextualization is an effort to theologize by bringing together text and context, or rather connecting from the text (the Bible), through building a bridge, namely the community (church) in the context to continue the bridge to a particular context in all space and time.

Connecting the past text (the Bible) with the present context here and there requires a bridge, namely the church (theology). The theologian is the church. The church is the only one given the mandate and ability to theologize in its own context. Theology is not only social theology for liberation, economic theology for justice, and political theology for welfare, nor is it only cultural theology for mission and evangelization, all of which are part of Christian theology. Thus, contextual theology is not another part of Christian theology, but an integral part of Christian theology. Because all Christian theology is contextualized (Toren & Hoare, 2015: 5). There is no theology that is not contextualized. What is not contextual is not theology. According to Wahju S.



Wibowo that “Actually, the term ‘theology’ itself implicitly contains contextual meaning because there can be no theology without context (Wibowo, 2019: 109). Therefore, contextual theology does not need to stand alone, separate from the five fields of theological study, namely biblical, systematic, historical, philosophical and practical and this is since all areas of theological study and each area of study is contextualized.

Contextual is not one of the natures of theology, neither is it the only nature of theology. While it is an important approach, particularly in the current world of religion, there are various other ways to understand and study theology. Contextual theology clearly emphasizes interpreting and applying theological concepts in relation to specific cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. This approach is then particularly relevant in diverse global settings, where diverse experiences and backgrounds tend to shape one's deeper understanding of faith. Therefore, there is no need to construct contextual theology as an independent type or field of theological study or as one of the theologies, let alone as the only theology. Contextual is the nature of all theologies (Franke, 2005: 84). The whole of theology itself is contextual, so each field of theological study is also contextual. Biblical theology must be contextual.

Systematic theology must be contextual. Historical theology must be contextual, philosophical theology must be contextual, let alone practical theology. Although context is important, it should not be regarded as the only way to understand theology (Bosch, 1995: 431). Contextual is not the only theology, not one theology, but the nature of theology. Charles Van Engen, himself an expert on mission theology, lists contextual as not the only property of mission theology, but one of the properties, in addition to being relevant, coherent, consistent, simple, supportable, confirmable, doable, transformational, and productive (Van, 1994: 30-31). Since contextual is just one of the characteristics, it is not appropriate to make it the only type or field of theology such as contextual theology. Since the nature of theology is contextual, there is no need to construct a separate theology whose name is contextual theology. It is hoped that this article will stimulate all theologians in all fields of study, competencies and all forms of ministry demands to build contextual theologies, such as contextual biblical theology, contextual systematic theology, contextual historical theology, contextual philosophical theology, contextual pastoral theology, contextual Christian education, contextual leadership, and so on.

Conclusion

Truth is often polarized at two different angles and even against each other, resulting in imbalance and even paralysis of the learners and practitioners of truth. This is what has happened throughout the history of the church and theology, especially in the modern era with the emergence of two camps of theologians who are in conflict with each other, namely the camp of evangelical theologians and the camp of contemporary theologians. Evangelical theologians place the Bible as a subject that comes to and illuminates the context, while contemporary theologians place the Bible as an object that is influenced, illuminated and even determined by the context. This is the root of the difference in contextual theology between evangelical and contemporary theologians. As a result, for half a century, in addition to the continued debate between the two camps of theologians, with the two camps of the church, there has also been a continued imbalance in the role of the church. Churches influenced by contemporary contextual theology tend to emphasize social responsibility through social and humanitarian actions, while churches influenced by contextual theology of evangelical theologians emphasize spiritual responsibility through mission and evangelism.



The reader may immediately propose to synthesize these two opposing theses, bringing together the “text” of evangelical theologians and the “context” of contemporary theologians. However, it should be realized that the two are different in their point of departure and point of destination, so it is impossible to bring them together, let alone integrate them. In fact, we have yet to find a contemporary theologian who has integrated his contextual theology with the evangelicals' contextual theology. Likewise, evangelical theologians who try to fit into the contextual theology of contemporary theologians are in the midst of a vast, hot and fierce desert of temptation that can dry up, exhaust and mislead their way home. There is only one way to overcome this imbalance, and that is to stop contextual theology as a stand-alone discipline, and instead mobilize all theologians in all fields of theological study to formulate all theologies and each field of theology into contextual theologies, in keeping with the nature and function of all theologies, and also in keeping with the nature and function of the church

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Conflict of Interest Statement: *The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.*



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Pharos Journal of Theology ISSN 2414-3324 online Volume 106 Issue 1 - (2025)
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