

Research Article

Contextual Theology and the Challenge of Globalization

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Abstract

For several decades, particularly from the 1950s, discussions began about the need to contextualize the Gospel message to make it relevant to specific contexts of people groups in order for proper integration and establishment of the message of Jesus Christ among the various cultures of the world. In this article, we shall show that several arguments have been used to establish contextual theologies in a bid to demonstrate their relevance in the frontiers of Christian missions on the vanguard of Christian campaigns. Even the field of systematic theology and practical theology are not left out as the discussion of contextualization is argued through biblical theology, to show that God all along has used the approach and methodology of contextualization in reaching His creation, and deployed the same through the redemptive process—incarnation, thus, the need to recognize its critical position, and hence secure for it a seat of prominence in theology and ministry. Given that the context discussion of contextualization arose essentially seven decades back—a time, when nations of the world were divided along cultural, religious, political and economic barriers, contextual theologies were critical to making sense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ among the different worldviews and cultures of the world. In recent times, however, the world has shrunk to a global village, thereby collapsing these barriers and erasing diversity. Against this background, a historical methodology is employed to critically examine and demonstrate how globalization has become a thorn in the flesh of contextual theologies.

Keywords

Contextualization/Inculturation, Theology, Globalization, Culture, Challenges

1. Introduction

Julius, T. Makoni
(http://www.westcott.cam.ac.uk/resources/articlesandsermons/Globalisation_Challenges_Theology_Makoni_March08.pdf Retrieved May 31, [1], insightfully stated that Societies in the world today are the products of tremendous upheaval, not only politically, socially and economically but also technologically and epistemologically. In other words, because of rapid strides in the development of information technology, even the remote corners of the world are being connected through a grid of almost instant communication. This has resulted in breaking down traditional barriers between ‘local’

and ‘regional,’ ‘national,’ and ‘international.’

Furthermore, globalization according to Makoni is, “a surge in migration mobility is rapidly increasing the urban mix of faiths, cultures, and peoples around the world.” http://www.westcott.cam.ac.uk/resources/articlesandsermons/Globalisation_Challenges_Theology_Makoni_March08.pdf.

Against this background, at the religious flank, for several decades, particularly from the 1950s, discussions began about the need to contextualize the Gospel message to make it relevant to a specific context of people groups in order for proper integration and establishment of the message of Jesus

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Received: 7 November 2024; **Accepted:** 23 November 2024; **Published:** 12 December 2024



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Christ among the various cultures of the world. This reasoning led ultimately to the need for theology to be formulated uniquely among the various cultures and worldviews around the globe. This study makes bold to assert that contextual theology fundamentally rests on the reality of diversity in and uniqueness of human cultures of the various people groups around the world. Its practical purpose only finds expression on the ground that there is much variance as you move from one culture to another, and each nation is unique in its own right with its own dynamics and peculiarities. Therefore, this difference makes them think differently and see differently. Thus, if you are going to expose all of them to an idea or concept, there will therefore be a need to uniquely package the idea or concept in such a way that will fit into the unique peculiarities of the various entities of the people groups.

However, when a situation arises wherein the lines of division begin to blur out, and uniqueness begins to give way to the universal, and interaction begins to increase between cultures, bringing about more levels of interconnectedness which creates more social acceleration that removes barriers and their differences, such as are the contemporary realities we see today in this globalizing world, then this begs the question of whether or not the approach that is based upon 'uniqueness and difference' is still relevant at such a time.

This article briefly considers contextual theology(ies) and the challenge of globalization as an attempt to lend a voice on the place of inculturation and contextualization through which platform ancestral theology especially Christology is formulated in Africa. To drive the inspiration of this study, I employ historical methodology. E. C. Osuala [2] defines historical methodology as, searching to find out.... interprets past trends of attitude, event, and facts...written in a spirit of critical inquiry for the whole truth." David Haji Kajom [3] gives a slightly different nuance to the term, for him, a historical methodology is, "To obtain a better understanding of the present, through the evaluation of the past, and an intelligent prediction of the future."

Consequently, this paper evaluates the assertions of the proponents of contextual theologies in the light of globalization—a belief that hangs on the proverbial, 'global village,' to beam a searchlight on the future.

2. Arguments of Contextual Theologies in Christian Missions

It will be appropriate first to consider the idea of contextual theology before moving on to some of the challenges globalization poses to it. Contextualization happens to be a concept that is quite broad and has different trademarks or understandings from one discipline or tradition to another. Moreover, there are also some other concepts such as indigenization and inculturation that are related to the idea of contextualization which finds application in shedding light

on its usage, especially in theological discussions. However, from whichever angle the idea of contextualization is viewed, it may be argued that the idea of contextualization carries an underlining presupposition of ethnocentrism. There is always a sense of focusing and emphasizing the need to pay attention to, or factor in the uniqueness of the ethnic dynamics of the context under consideration. Opoku K. A. [4] notes cogently, "The person who is dressed in other people's clothes is naked, and the person who is fed on other people's food is hungry."

There is a drive to ensure that, the features which distinguish the people group as a unique culture are maintained or preserved in the process of introducing new ideas. And the new ideas are to be expressed in terms that bear the texture and character of the ethnic group.

Contextualization as a concept began to find an inroad into theological discourse in the 1950s as earlier noted. David J. Hesselgrave [5] pertinently commented on its introduction into theology thus;

Whatever may have been the occasion of the very first usage of the word 'contextualization,' it made its public debut in World Council of Churches (WCC) circles. Back in the late 1950s the International Missionary Council (IMC) launched the Theological Education Fund (TEF) and gave it its first ('advance') mandate, which was to provide aid to certain theological schools around the world in the form of funds, textbooks, and facilities.

In consequence, other meetings were held in subsequent years to reform the mandate through more developmental stages ultimately leading to a clarification of, "what the originators of the term 'contextualization' had in mind when they got around to define what it involved in the official documents of the TEF [6]. Then the following lengthy statement was made:

The third mandate's strong emphasis on renewal and reform in theological education appears to focus upon a central concept, contextuality, the capacity to respond meaningfully to the Gospel within the framework of one's own situation. Contextualization is not simply a fad or catch-word but a theological necessity demanded by the incarnational nature of the Word. What does the term imply?

It means all that is implied in the familiar term 'indigenization' and yet seeks to press beyond. Contextualization has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of third-world contexts. Indigenization tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of traditional culture. Contextualization, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterize the historical moment of nations in the Third World. Yet a careful distinction must be made between authentic and false forms of contextualization. False contextualization yields uncritical accommodation, a form of cultural faith. Authentic contextualization is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God's Word and His world, and moves toward the purpose of

challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment TEF [6].

The clarification given above is indicative of the need that the framers of the concept had to wrestle with to introduce the idea. Its intention is meant to achieve an approach of making the gospel presentation align with and relevant to the uniqueness of the context in the hope of a more effective engagement with the culture. This idea is similar to what the Roman Catholic Mission's approach to inculturation seeks to realize. Vivencio Ballano [7] in his article "*Inculturation, Anthropology, and the Empirical Dimension of Evangelization*," presented the various shades of Roman Catholic explanations for this. He aptly pointed staunchly.

Pope John Paul II, who popularized this theological term after Vatican II through his writings, broadly defined inculturation as 'the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures,' *Redemptoris Missio* 1990, para. [7]. The RCC's International Theological Commission defines inculturation as the 'the Church's efforts to make the message of Christ penetrate a given sociocultural milieu, calling on the latter to grow according to all its particular values, as long as these are compatible with the Gospel,' (para. 11). John Paul II consistently and insistently emphasized the sovereign power of the gospel to move freely and autonomously in its transformation of culture in the process of inculturation of faith" Schreier [7]. Church documents after Vatican II also consistently stressed the role of faith in the evangelization of human culture *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, para. 54; *Redemptoris Missio*, para. [7] and exhorted Christians to defend the right of all to a culture, the promotion of an integral culture, and above all, the harmonization of culture and Christianity (International Theological Commission 1988, para. 3).

Several arguments and debates have been ongoing ever since then to show that the contextualization approach is one of the major answers for Christian missions. The arguments are even advanced to show that, lack of effective contextualization was responsible for the failure of Christian missions in certain contexts where Christianity had a presence at some point and eventually died out. Duncan G. A. [8] agreed with John Pobee in pointing out this fact about North Africa. He asserts keenly, "Pobee is correct to say that early theologians such as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine, did not sufficiently engage their North African milieu (although Clement of Alexandria, Basilides and Valentinus, Coptic and monastic communities seemingly did) and that the church went into a severe decline as a result."

This argument was taken further by Shenk Calvin E. [9] highlighting six critical factors where contextualization was not effectively implemented as being responsible for the failure of the Church in North Africa, which eventually led to the taking over of the region by Islam. These factors include inadequate evangelism, failure to develop an authentic national Church, Christian literature mainly in Latin [and not

in the local Berber language], identification of Christian faith with imperial power, suppression of the Donatists' attempt to contextualize, and appeal of Islam to the indigenous population (who were contextualizing their missionary approach).

Calvin [9] further went on to graciously provide four factors for the success of the Church in Egypt that effectively contextualized the gospel message in their own context. He noted that the Church in Egypt engaged in the following; "evangelization of the local population, provision of literature in the vernacular language of the people, development of monasticism which had a way of integrating the gospel locally by the monks, allowance for the natives to participate in leadership, and the contextualization of their theology."

As wonderful as the promises of contextualization hold, it has one fundamental challenge. There is always the question of defining the extent to which elements in the primordial culture may be accommodated in the process of making the gospel indigenous. When care is not taken to this end, the danger of syncretism ensues, or at best, the native believers end up with folk religion and it is precisely for this reason that my previous volume demonstrates concern when African theologians employ pre-Christian models derived from the cult of the ancestor to describe Jesus Christ as an Ancestor. For me, ancestor Christology has the tendency of blurring Jesus the Christ of the Abrahamic covenant to African Christians Reuben Turbi Luka, [10].

This is one of the challenges which arose among the methodologies of some African Christological discussions that developed along the line of seeing Jesus Christ as an Ancestor, as I noted before, "It is however, our conviction... that contextualization as theological methodology that gives room for the formulation of ancestor Christology among Protestant/Evangelical theologians in Africa risk the peril of being unfaithful to the Abrahamic covenant Luka, [10].

Unfortunately, when contextualization is used to formulate Ancestor Christology—to the extent that it is pushed to its logical conclusion, it has the risk of opening a back door for syncretism which can lead the African believer into a situation that takes him back into the idolatrous practice of the African ancestor worship much more than it promises to indigenize the gospel.

As a response to this, Byang H. Kato [11] argued extensively for an approach that will uphold the uncompromising status of the Holy Scripture in the process of making it culturally relevant. On the subject of contextualization at Lausanne [12] he notes unwaveringly,

This is a new term imported into theology to express a deeper concept than indigenization ever does. We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never-changing Word of God in ever-changing modes of relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualization of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.

Our concern to preserve the legacies of the Roman-North African patriarchs: Tertullian and Athanasius led me to vehemently critique this ancestor Christological methodology while proposing a different approach to a Christology that can still retain the African flavour yet biblically balanced.

Therefore, efforts were made to give a clear definition of contextual theology that defines and clearly delineates a framework that is within the limits of an accurate gospel message. Thus, Richard W. Engle [13] proposed a definition, saying, "Contextualization is showing the whole Bible relevant to the total individual in all his relationships of life. " This does go beyond indigenization. When planting the gospel in new soil, the goal is to affect the total life of the society. Intermediate goals include: 1) salvation and spiritual growth of individuals, 2) the effect of the saved on their families and community, 3) the establishment of a local church that meets the criteria of the New Testament with respect to definition, structure, function, and program, and 4) a biblical relationship between the saved and the social institutions of the target culture. The proposed definition assumes a thoroughgoing biblical anthropology that goes beyond a "trichotomy vs. dichotomy" discussion or a definition of personality as "a being who possesses intellect, emotion, and will," [13]."

In order to set forth a clear approach to implement a balanced and critical contextualization approach, Hiebert, Paul G., Daniel Shaw R., and Tite, Ti éiou [14] highlighted four steps to critically contextualize if we are going to examine and effectively respond to folk religion. The first step is phenomenological analysis, where the local worldview is studied from the people's point of view. The second step is an ontological reflection, whereby, their truth claims are tested with scripture. The third step is for churches to evaluate critically their existing beliefs and customs in the light of their new biblical understandings, and to make decisions on the basis of this newfound truth. The fourth and final step in missiology is transformative ministries that help people move from where they are to where God wants them to be.

Besides this age-long challenge that the risk of syncretism and folk religion poses to contextual theology, a new challenge that comes at a fundamental level arises. This is the challenge of globalization. It was earlier pointed out that; contextualization is essentially predicated on the difference in the uniqueness of each ethnic group. The reality of globalization which tends to remove this difference and uniqueness through universalization, challenges contextualization at a fundamental level. This we will consider in the next section.

3. Globalization and its Challenging Impact on Contextualization

Globalization has become a buzzword in contemporary times in almost all sectors of society. It constitutes a Centre

of discussion as its impact directly or indirectly influences society, economically, politically and otherwise.

Joanne Neal [15] noted that the term globalization initially debuted in the English language in 1959 and was first included in the 1961 Webster's dictionary. However, the origin of its root word *globe* can be traced back to the Latin term *Globus* which was then adopted by the British in the 15th century. The word *global* emerged in late 17th century English and about two centuries later came to take on the meaning of being 'on a planetary scale'. Since the 1980s, globalization has become part of our everyday vocabulary.

The major implication of globalization is that, due to modern advancements in science and technology in the modern means of communication and transport, especially the internet, interaction has become more possible than ever before. People from remote parts of the world can freely transact business without the limitation of space in the shortest possible time like those in the same location. This makes trade and economics a major force that drives globalization. Now, a produce seller in a remote village in Africa can freely sell his produce to a factory in any part of the world, America, Europe, or Asia, without having the need to leave his village.

Noting the impact of globalization, Tony Blair [16] rightly explains that globalization is a movement that;

Pushes people together, to live together, thrive together, regardless of place of birth. Therefore, the important factor is that we share the status of being human, not what typifies us in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. People are losing identity. People feel threatened by the forces of globalization because the truths people grew up with are being challenged by other religions, or secular, to one's own.

A phrase that typifies the reality of the implications of globalization Blair is pointing out here is the fact that it is making the world a "global village." A concept denoting the fact that the world has shrunk, thereby, resulting in homogeneity as against heterogeneity. Thus, there is an interconnectedness that results in deprovincialization and deterritorialization of regions. Consequently, Reader J. [17], Luka [10] states remarkably,

Increasingly people have to think of themselves in terms of a multiplicity of identities ... gone are the days when one could define oneself in terms of a singular geographic space. In large part due to technologies, there has been a 'dissolution of oneself, a fragmenting of interests, values and affiliations such as that the individual has different identities that can vary as widely as the different interests, values and affiliations one might have.

Furthermore, Reader [17], Luka [10] keenly argues, "Globalization also 'creates homogeneity and a standardization of both place and culture, thus destroying real difference.'"

As uniqueness begins to give way and the differences begin to fade due to the active forces of globalization, a new paradigm begins to emerge, which is a universalization of the

culture and homogeneity between ethnicities.

Friedman Thomas L. [18] agrees with this implication of globalization stating that “Indeed, it is becoming clear that the flat-world platform, while it has the potential to homogenize cultures, also has, I would argue, an even greater potential to nourish diversity to a degree that the world has never seen before.”

All these realities of globalization pose a challenge to theological ethnocentrism which contextualization is based. Thus, there is a need to review the theological paradigm in view of the dynamics of globalization with respect to contextual theology. Josh Yates (LOP: [19]) came close to this issue when he said, “Increasingly, calls for “new paradigms” of “partnership” and “internationalization” are the standard agendas for mission agencies, conferences, and publications.”

Seeing globalization as a movement as Blair demonstrates, which has come to stay, presupposes a movement that appears to be unstoppable, how then should the Church respond? It is required of the Church not to feel helpless in the face of globalization, but rather to understand its dynamics and develop a response. Neal [15] is absolutely right to have quoted Bishop Peter Selby who raised a critical concern saying, “Globalization is also God’s project. God is about globalization, otherwise, there wouldn’t be a Church. The issue is whose globalization is it going to be? Is it going to be Mammon’s globalization or is it going to be God’s globalization? And if it’s going to be God’s, then what are going to be the ground rules?”

Globalization and its attendant dynamics have become yet another concept that has entered into the arena of theological discussion, and it is high time, the discussion about globalization is directed towards the challenge it poses towards contextualization, with a view to rethink contextual theology.

4. Recommended Approach to Christian Theology in a Globalizing World

From the foregoing it is clear that, in a globalizing world where the paradigm is changing from ethnicity to a global village, there is a need for an all-inclusive theology and not an exclusive one that is limited to a race or culture of a specific people group. This implies among other things that our theological construction must guard against sympathy with parochial ethnic, and cultural mentality to a broad—based inclusive formulation that encapsulates all contexts as the God of Abraham intentionally became the God of all nations and peoples’ groups (Gen 12:1-3). This submission is particularly important in view of the emergence of the new paradigm to Christian ministry which became the only means during the recent COVID-19 pandemic wherein there was a total lockdown, and the only available channel for corporate worship was through live streaming service on the internet.

This is a case in point towards the need to reimagine the

missionary approach towards globalization. So, what will be the possibility of contextualization in a multiethnic service where hundreds of people from all over the world constituting people from among the Africans, Arabians, Asians, and Caucasians, are participating in a single service?

As I argued. “Theologians who employ new methodologies from African worldview and primal traditions to formulate Christian theology can produce Christologies in ways that present Jesus as a multi-hydra figure since there are no theological norms to establish a universal identity of Jesus Christ in Christendom.” Luka, [10].

This shows the need to consider a more global approach. In other words, if the entire world is shrinkingly being narrowed down to a single village, why then the insistence on a contextual theological formulation that tends to slice Jesus Christ into a piece of Cake? As I believe, the pressing issues ravaging the African continent are the same devastating challenges that confront America, England, China, India, Israel, and elsewhere.

The question that begs for answers in view of this is, “If the world is shrinking, narrowing, and becoming a global village, does that affect contextual theological models like ‘Contextualization’ and ‘Inculturation’”? To put this in perspective, it will be necessary to consider Ormerod, Neil J. and Shane Clifton’s [20], Luka [10] blunt and elaborate argument below,

The biblical world was a world divided into tribes and nations, each competing over land and resources, each speaking a different language and worshipping different gods. On the biblical account, this state of division was not part of God’s original intention for humanity. Rather, it is understood to be the result of human sin, symbolized in the myth of Edenic disobedience and the incessant conflicts plaguing the lineage of Adam and Eve, leading to the hubris manifested in the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) ... While diversity is clearly not the cause of the problem of evil manifest in this manner, it does provide fertile ground in which evil can prosper. Christianity has its own response to this history of diversity and conflict. The Tower of Babel finds its rejoinder in the gift of tongues, through the power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). The fateful disruption of humanity is overcome through the power of the gospel, which all hear ‘in their own language’ (Acts 2.6). The conflicts engendered by social, linguistic, cultural and gender differences are overcome through the power of this same gospel (Galatians 3.28), which Christians are commanded to spread to all nations (Matthew 28.19). God is no longer just the God of the Jews or of any nation. Rather, God wishes all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2.4). In its reversal of the divisiveness of Babel, Pentecost provides a proleptic foretaste of what is to come: the proctological unity of human history becomes the eschatological goal towards which the Church moves. Christianity is launched on its task and mission to become a truly transnational, transcultural community. Within this community, diversity is not abol-

ished but placed within the higher integration of a common faith. The intervening history of Christianity has been the unfolding of this dynamic, caught between the dialectic poles of particularity and universality, between apostolic rootedness and culture-transcending Catholicity.

Yates (LOP [19]) pointedly quips, "Globalization leads us to consider anew the words of the Lord's Prayer: 'Father, thy will be done on Earth as it is in Heaven.'"

All these go to say that, whereas, there could have been a time that contextual theology might have had some relevance, however, in a globalizing world, a more universal approach will be needed. And as can be seen from Ormerod and Clifton's argument, a culture-transcending Catholicity as an approach was re-enacted at Pentecost. This is because, in the original design of creation, the Divine mandate for man had a global outlook, Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule... over all the earth..." Gen 1:26 (NIV emphasis mine). And when Christ came to restore man from the fall, He emphasized the same global approach, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" Matt. 28:19 (NIV emphasis mine).

More than ever before, there is a need to develop a global theology that is relevant in every context regardless of where it finds expression. This is the only theology without bias to any context that can be relevant in this modern global village.

In my perspective, it is the seed of the Gospel in its purest form, without the coloration of any particular human cultural "flower pot" (or context) that is globally needed now. The argument is simple, if globalization is real, and it means the shrinking or narrowing of the world, our contextual theologies should equally be shrunk or narrowed into a globally relevant message.

5. Conclusion

Contextual theology, an attempt to domesticate the Gospel has dominated a major section of theological debate for a long time. It is grounded on the fundamental difference in human cultures and civilization, and the need to present the unchanging truth of the gospel message in a culturally relevant way to the various unique people groups.

In a world that is becoming one through the forces and dynamics of globalization, where the previous barriers of uniqueness and differences are blurring out, what is the implication of this to contextual theologies such as contextualization and inculturation?

This study argues that, as there is a shrinking and narrowing down of the previous wide expanses between human cultures and civilizations upon which contextual theologies are founded, so also, there should be a shrinking of our theologies into a global theology. So, we should not continue to clamour for contextual theologies that are more exclusive, to global theology that is all-inclusive.

Abbreviations

IMC	International Missionary Council
NIV	New International Version
RCC	Roman Catholic Church
TEF	Theological Education Fund
WCC	World Council of Churches

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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