



Teofilo Kisanji University

TEKU Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (TJIS)

<https://www.teku.ac.tz/tjis.php>

BOOK REVIEW

Received: 6th May 2021

Accepted: 21st June

Published: 25th June 2021

Available at
www.teku.ac.tz/

Matheny, D.P. (2011). *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick. Pp. xv+130; ISBN 13: 978-1-60899-967-5. Price \$10; Paperback

Elia Shabani Mligo

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Teofilo Kisanji University, P.O. Box 1104, Mbeya, United Republic of Tanzania.

Correspondence: eshamm2015@gmail.com

Paul Duane Matheny is Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics at the Philippines Christian University and at Union Theological Seminary in the Philippines. His book draws our attention towards contextual theology as opposed to the traditional Western kind of theologizing that still hold the “traditional answers to old questions.” Contextual theology is like a “stone rejected by the builders” currently acquiring great reputation in the non-Western world. Contextual theology is the source of what the author calls “New Christianity” moving the epicenter of Christianity away from the West to the non-Western world. The rise of “New Christianity” and contextual theologies is due to shift in the method of doing theology. “It is becoming clearer that theology is not the work of an individual, but of the praxis and cultural mediation of concrete communities of faith.” (p.x)

The first chapter unfolds with the hope for a “global Christianity” envisaged by the West in the twentieth century and the missionaries’ endeavours to send missionaries to the so-called “mission fields”—the Third World nations. However, it bears witness to the abrupt changes in the beginning of the twenty-first century. While mission studies were highly emphasized in Western seminaries and university theological units in the twentieth century, they became marginalized in the twenty-first century. The author notes: “Today the ‘evangelizing nations’ are weak evangelists at best, while the epicenter of Christianity is migrating to the South settling among the homes of the peoples who were ones identified by church leaders from the West as ‘mission fields.’” (p.3) Being heavily hit by secularism, the West, that claimed to be missionaries to the South, live as neo-pagans less concerned with Christian faith. “The non-Western world is now the home of the great majority of Christians, while committed Christians in Europe are few and far between.” (p.4) This turn in the epicentre of Christianity is what provides non-Western churches the mandate to do mission work to the industrialized states of the Western world.

Chapter two argues for the need to use contextual methods within theological processes. It asserts that the church of the twenty-first century faces challenges of globalization that make the use of contextual methods inevitable in order to enhance authentic mission and theological study. It argues: “Good theology happens (...) when the theological process embeds the gospel message in

the cultural memory of a particular community.” (p.25) It concludes with two emphatic statements: first, “When we fail to take the context of our texts or of our listeners seriously, we miss the truth.” Second, “The expectation that theology be contextual reflects the conviction that theology taught as universally valid is inadequate.” (p.39)

Chapter three discusses the helpfulness of contextual methods in the overall ecclesial practices of Christian theology. It begins by asserting that a good theological practice “is not a search for universal truths that can be applied in all contexts and times, but rather an engagement with the lives of peoples and communities.” (p.43) The author is convinced that “God’s truth is for everyone and is not a preserve of a particular culture and worldview.” (p.43) Contextual methods are helpful in making theology real in the lives of people by being tools for self-criticism and provision of spaces for faith communities to articulate their lived-experiences in relation to the revelation of God.

Chapter four informs how contextual theology unfolded as an issue within theological circles. It begins with Karl Barth’s letter to “Christians of South East Asia” to encourage them to speak what they want to speak, responsibly and carefully, and for God’s sake (pp.59–60). Karl Barth’s letter became a stimulus for the out-breaking of the new theology of “New Christianity” in the Asian continent. The author states: “As they introduced it, contextual theology is not a theology; it is a response to a call for wisdom from peoples of faith and their churches. It was a call for authentic Christianity in the face of the problems of new and often very challenging contexts.” (p.61)

In the beginning of chapter five, the author states: “the proper theological use of contextual methods is healthy and promotes and enriches the life of faith among Christians around the globe.” (p.83) By using the Emmaus story from the Gospel of Luke, the chapter illustrates how Christian life leads to faith seeking understanding. The author reflects how God and Jesus Christ are understood by people at the margins of society.

One important thing is worth mentioning in the conclusion of the book: faith communities are important places for theological reflection. The Holy Spirit works within

communities to enable people in those communities hear biblical stories and what is expected of them within their cultural contexts. In this case, “The use of contextual methods leads ultimately to contextual churches, with different theologies, visions, and biblical interpretations.” (p.116)

However, one reservation to note in this book: through the discussion, the book hardly addresses the question of power relation between the North and the South, and economic power in particular, which most likely makes the South have a big church in terms of numbers but small theology in terms of the ability to propagate theology in terms of publications and conferences. Leaving this unaddressed, the book leaves the reader with the question: how can one justify that the epicentre of Christianity is not still in the North, taking into account the long history it has boasted and the economic power it has in propagating theology? To my view, the book would be more balanced if the above questions were clearly addressed.

Despite the above reservation, this book deserves academic praises. It is intelligibly written in the language that theologians can understand. The author focuses his argument on the use of contextual methods in the processes of contextual theology of mission. This focus makes the author’s argument strong and convincing.

With this said, the book is recommended to students of systematic theology and mission studies in seminaries and theological faculties in universities. It may also be useful to current missiologists and contextual theologians to further discussions on how to do mission contextually in this twenty-first century context.