

READING REPORT
Models of Contextual Theology
by Stephen B. Bevans
(Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005)

Thesis: The theologian wants to remain faithful to Scripture and he also wants to make the Word of God intelligible to people. In fact, there is no other option. Theology is always expressed in some context; outside of the mind of God, theology exists in no pure form. Add to this task the diversity of cultures all over the world and it should be apparent that this is no casual undertaking. It is called contextualization. Bevan has identified six distinct models for doing this contextualization work; this work of “mediating meaning.” The author posits three sources of theology: Scripture, tradition, and human experience, i.e., context. By adding that third element, he introduces a temporaneity to theology, going so far as to say that we no longer speak about “one, right, unchanging theology.”

The six models are: 1) The Translation Model, 2) The Anthropological Model, 3) The Praxis Model, 4) The Synthetic Model, 5) The Transcendental Model, and 6) The Countercultural Model. There is something for everyone here. Evangelicals will appreciate the Translation Model as developed by David Hesselgrave, as will conservative Catholics as it was espoused by Pope John Paul II. Those with Marxist leanings will like the Praxis Model. Many Postmoderns will radiate to the Transcendental Model.

Informed missionaries wrestle with these issues every day. We should *all* wrestle with these issues for two major reasons: 1) We all possess a theology that is, to some degree, culturally adjusted. It is actually more adjusted than we know. Thinking these issues through may help us each clean up our own theology by getting as close to the pure core as possible. 2) We live in such a world of globalization. The cultural issues that used to be so far away and were the exclusive province of the missionary and the anthropologist, are now living next door and sitting at the next desk. Every responsible Christian needs to learn to be a culture-reader and gain skill in Gospel contextualization.

Interpretation: The author uses the illustration of the Western view of rice. It’s just rice. But to an Asian, there are all kinds of different words for rice. Similarly, there are many kinds of theology depending on the culture. This is a serious non sequitur. Even the Westerner knows there are different kinds of rice, even if he doesn’t have unique words for them. And, at the bottom of it all, everyone knows that it is still *rice*. An evangelical needs to read this book with due caution, for the writer is no evangelical. He espouses an evolutionary theology in the Old Testament, e.g., Yahwist and Elohist theologies (page 7) and rejects the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles. He sees humanity as good and holy which is a significant departure from the doctrines of sin. He believes that pluralism must be encouraged. Polygamy has merit. The story of the Syrophenician woman is about Jesus being shaken out of his prejudice. (54)

Having gotten that out of the way, the book does an excellent job of cataloguing the six models, pointing out strengths and weaknesses, and describing the writings and contribution of several exponents of each model. The six treatments appear to be academically honest and are presented in an irenic spirit. Like it or not, all theology is contextualized. It is only a matter of degree. This guide is brief but thorough and will serve the theologian well.

Application: As a preacher I have always striven to eliminate cultural accretions from my teaching as much as I am conscious of it. Further, although I do not address very many other ethnicities in my dominantly Anglo church, I do address a younger generation that has a very different worldview and epistemology than mine. These models supply a very helpful grid for understanding how others think and how a preacher can present truth in a way to at least be heard, and hopefully even understood. Further, with new adventures of cross-cultural teaching in my future, this will soon be cutting-edge material for me in seeking to connect with international students.

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