

CONTEXTUAL PHILOSOPHY: AN ESSENTIAL PILLAR FOR THE CHURCH'S VISION IN THE FUTURE

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Abstract

For the success of the mission of the Church, constant adaptation of her perennial teachings to the changing global contexts is necessary. Although the Good News of the Kingdom of God consists in permanent gems and is consequently unchangeable from the substantial perspective therefore, the need to couch this divine message into categories of thought relevant to specific peoples is undeniable. This is the content proffered to the Church in general, and to theologians in particular in several magisterial documents such as *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Fides et Ratio* of John Paul II on the one hand, and *Aeterni Patris* of Leo XIII, on the other.

Basing itself on the African situation, this article argues that the contemporary mission of evangelization has to be anchored on the cherished values inherent in the cultures of the various peoples. The kernel of Divine Revelation (Scripture and Tradition) has to be maintained intact, but the cultural expressions which serve as the vehicle for imparting this treasured Word have to be interpreted using the positive dimensions found within the numerous world-views of Christ's flock. Through this way of repackaging the eternal Word, the

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Church will be able to remain relevant to the modern world which is tending towards an appreciation of transient values at the expense of permanent ones.

Keywords: Context, Contextual Philosophy, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Effective Theologizing, *Fides et Ratio*, Relation between Philosophy and Theology

Introduction

This presentation envisages four main blocs. Under the first treatment, we intend to expose preparatory terrain whereby we shall dwell on the preliminary considerations of the topic. We shall proffer two schools who propose an explanation of the origin of theological discord in theologizing. We shall infer that there is actually no essential antagonism between the duo in so far as each trend carries basic elements of truth. The paper will also lay bare what we conceive of as the right notion of "real contexts," and afterwards append to this the elementary concepts of theology on the one hand, and philosophy on the other. This will catapult the expose' into the second major segment of argumentation.

In so far as theology presupposes philosophy,¹ also on the basis of the etymological implication of the latter, a logical sequence of reasoning will attempt to justify the stance that in all cultures inheres a philosophy. Otherwise the call to contextual theologizing would be but an illusory aspiration. The espousal of no specific philosophy, to be seen below as the stance by the Church, would also be rendered unrealistic and impracticable. The justification can be drawn only in maintaining that there is a philosophy, perhaps latent,² among all peoples no matter their habitat or global recognition.

The third section of the quartet will focus on what is meant by effective theologizing. Drawing from the antecedent preliminary treatment, the division will revolve around the notion of theology. A relentless search into Church documents for the right understanding will also be pivotal here, especially succoured by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and some related contemporary concepts like New Evangelization and Deeper Evangelization. Finally, the presentation will rest on the conclusion that theology deserves to be classified as effective only if pastoral dimensions can be retrievable from its inferences.³ It will be

¹Charles Nyamiti, *African Theology: Its Nature, Problems and Methods*, Kampala: Gaba Publications, 1971, 34ff.

²Charles Nyamiti, *African Theology*, 34ff.

³Charles Nyamiti, *African Theology*, 5ff. See also Karl Rahner, "Neu Ans Pruche de Pastoral theologian die Theologiealsganze" in *SchriftenzurTheologie*, IX, 127-147.

observed that whether the implementation of such a proposed gem is easy or difficult remains immaterial. For a useful recommendation retains its utility even if the human race finds it difficult to inculcate this innovation into practical life.⁴

The ultimate consideration, which we interpret as the soul of the paper, will delve into the indispensability of the contextual philosophies for effective evangelization. Having elaborately pinpointed the premises whose necessary conclusion will be that an absence of a philosophy is tantamount to an impossibility of a related theology, this last bloc will justify the formulation of the title⁵ along the avenue that cherished cultural categories of thought among a people are their⁶ best instruments for effectively analyzing God.⁷

1. Preliminary Considerations

One of the conspicuous dimensions of theologizing is “theological discord.” Positively viewed, this latter can serve as a springboard for theological profundity in so far as such an academic climate challenges thinkers into revisiting the inferences earlier reached. Wonder, however, arises which cannot be ignored: what is the breeding ground for scientific, or more specifically theological, discord?

While some scholars maintain that methodologies employed are the right response to the seeming impasse,⁸ others proffer the categories used in the respective methodologies as the justifiable explanation.⁹ Thus according to the first category of thought, scholars

⁴God does not expect his children to be successful but faithful. The aspect of success, even if it may be congruously (but never condignly) a merit, is secondary. The primary requirement is fidelity.

⁵The use of the indefinite article “an” before *indispensable tool* is intentional. It recognizes the role of the Holy Spirit as the essential pillar of the Church’s vision in the future, and only secondarily brings in the contextual philosophies.

⁶The possessive pronoun “their” refers to the people.

⁷Here, revelation should be understood as God’s self-transmission.

⁸Frederick Wanjala, *Basics in African Theology: A Cogent Mentor in Charles Nyamiti*, Roma: Leberit Publishers, 2008, cover page. In commenting on Wanjala’s choice of focusing on methodology in contextual theology, Whelan is convinced that the author is handling an element which gives birth to theological discord.

⁹Charles Nyamiti, Interview by author, September 2014. Charles Nyamiti is one of the greatest theologians on the African continent. He has authored over eighty works and numerous doctoral dissertations have been written on him globally. Currently, he is publishing a series *Studies in African Christian Theology* while also teaching as a part-time lecturer at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, situated in Nairobi, Kenya.

handling the same cultural theme would differ in the outcome of their scientific reflection depending on whether they were divergent in their way of proceeding or not. For example, a corroboration of the phraseology "Christ, the Ancestor" would therefore either bear basically similar results provided the thinkers use the same methodology or divergent outcomes if the methodologies employed are equally divergent.

The second opinion tends to disapprove of this finding. Methodologies could be the same, or even identical, and yet yield differing results. In other words, two scholars may use the same methodology and yet emerge with completely different outcomes. This, the argument continues, is what constitutes originality in theologizing. The cultural category selected is the determining factor, and not the methodology employed as such.

In my opinion, the two reflections are not at loggerheads in so far as the latent hurdle for agreement rests more on emphasis than on the actual substance of the contention. What emerges clearly, however, is the importance of the prolegomenon¹⁰ in contextual theologies.¹¹

The topic of the article could actually be variously couched with an interrogative formulation: Do real contexts impact on theologizing? Shouldn't real contexts impact the way theology is done? What are the impacts of real contexts in theologizing? It is evident that the invitation fronted by the theme is not "to theologize" so as to come up with a theology *per se*,¹² but on the "how" of theologizing. The kernel of the theme is on the mode, the way of doing theology within real contexts. Differently put, the invitation is intended to discourse on the prolegomenal¹³ aspect of theology.

From the aforementioned guiding theme, we have extracted the sub theme "Contextual Philosophies as the Indispensable Tool for Effective Theologizing." The justification for this inheres in the

¹⁰By a prolegomenon is meant the introduction, the utility, the sources, the methodologies, the nature (and so on) of a science or discipline.

¹¹See Frederick Wanjala, "Marketing Further the Prolegomenal Dimension of African Theology," *African Christian Studies* 24, 4 (Dec. 2008) 7-32; Confer also the second publication of the article under Frederick Wanjala, "Marketing Further the Prolegomenal Dimension of African Theology," *African Christian Studies* 25, 2 (June 2009) 83-108; Frederick Wanjala, "Editorial," *African Christian Studies* 27, 3 (September 2011) 5.

¹²A theology "per se" or a theology "in itself".

¹³ See the explanation of the notion already given above.

correct understanding of “real contexts”¹⁴ on the one hand, and “effective theologizing” on the other. Real contexts, therefore, imply that the facts (in this case, socio-anthropological data under the context being studied) on the ground correspond to what one has in the mental faculty. Before one embarks on relating or interacting the contextual findings with revelation, one needs to ensure that the latter are correctly gotten hold of without prejudiced accretions.¹⁵ The anthropological data should be a genuine reflection of the status quo. At this juncture, one may make a hypothetical assertion: if real contexts connote the status quo of the people within that context in question, then real contexts imply the life situation¹⁶ of those people. Thus real contexts connote the life situation in a given context, or the way of looking at the world (life) by a specific people. This is the philosophy of such a people which, for our purpose, could conveniently be adapted to the contextual philosophy.

The soul of our argument, therefore, is that if theologies are to bear fruit (or rather, if theologies are to be effective), the theologian is under obligation to construct them employing contextual philosophy as the fulcrum for the interpretation of God’s self-communication to humanity.¹⁷ Before we delve into contextual philosophies, however, it behoves us to briefly refurbish the general notions of theology and of philosophy as the stepping stone for the scientific claims we shall make.

a) African Christian Theology Traced from the General Notion of Theology¹⁸

1.0. Theology (reflection about a deity)

1.1. Non-African

1.2. African (informal reflection about a deity using African categories of thought, or African worldview)

¹⁴It may be helpful here to recall the basics of metaphysics whereby being is categorized as “real” and “logical” or “mental”. Whereas the former refers to the type of being whose existence is independent of thought, the latter points to a being which exists in the mind of the thinking subject such that it ceases to exist as soon as it is not the object of thought.

¹⁵In social anthropology, it is recommended that field research should be approached without a prejudiced state of mind, or at least a quasi non-prejudicial mental state (see www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/190459/epoche).

¹⁶We shall be using the expressions life situation, world-view and weltanschauung as synonymous in the text. See also Charles Nyamiti, *African Theology*, 1-4.

¹⁷Moreover, God himself does not communicate *in vacuo* but in concrete situations of history.

¹⁸See also Charles Nyamiti, *Jesus Christ, the Ancestor of Humankind: Methodological and Trinitarian Foundations*, Nairobi: Cueva Press, 2005, 22ff. What is given in bold typing is the analytical line of our interest.

1.2.1. Non-Christian

1.2.2. Christian (informal reflection about the Christian deity using African worldview)

1.2.2.1. Non-Scientific/Non-Academic

1.2.2.2. Scientific/Academic (formal or scientific reflection about the Christian deity using African worldview)

1.2.2.2.1. Liberation- how would Christ respond to a specific African situation? Here, a scholar analyses the situation at stake (Part I), and then employs Church Teaching to demonstrate how Christ would have responded to such a situation (Part II).

1.2.2.2.2. Inculturation — one uses data from the African situation to explain Church Teaching (Scripture and Tradition).

1.2.2.2.2.1. Non-Speculative/Socio-Cultural Trend

1.2.2.2.2.1.1. African Theology of Reconstruction

1.2.2.2.2.1.2. African Political Theology

1.2.2.2.2.1.3. African Narrative Theology

1.2.2.2.2.1.4. Theological Discussions on Practical Issues Related to Polygamy, Funeral rites, Use of Local Foodstuffs or Beverages for Eucharistic Rituals, etc.

1.2.2.2.2.1.5. Theologies of African Independent Churches (largely spontaneously and unconsciously created usually by people not trained in theology)

1.2.2.2.2.2. Speculative/Systematic Trend: has three main characteristic, namely

i. uses philosophy to interpret Church Teaching and African socio-cultural data

ii. Is both ontological (from above) and functional (from below)

iii. Emphasizes the Noetic aspect

The above schema illustrates what theology connotes right from the general etymological angle (reflection about a deity) to the specifics of contextual African Christian theologies of inculturation and liberation.¹⁹ Any reflection demands some categories of thought to be employed. The same holds true for the reflection about God. The categories could be rendered by what we have called above "worldview". All peoples have a worldview, or a way of looking at the world.²⁰

¹⁹The etymology of theology, namely *theologia*, could be transliterated as *theos* (a deity) and *logos* (reflection, discourse).

²⁰Loosely, a people's worldview could be equated to their cultural cosmology. In this sense, the cosmology of a people could be understood as their philosophy.

b) Notion of Philosophy

- *Love of Wisdom*

As early as around 600 BC, Pythagoras defined philosophy as "*Philíates Sophias*,"²¹ which was afterwards given the etymological English rendering *Love of Wisdom*. Such ancient groundwork is important before the full understanding of the science is appreciated. As we are aware, philosophy has a number of levels. This holds true also in the empirical sciences, politics, law and even in what we call common sense. This notwithstanding, however, at its highest level philosophy is the science of knowing.²² It is the wisdom of man as man which he acquires by the labour of his intellect, and this wisdom is gained with much difficulty.²³

- *Lumen Sub Quo*

During the scholastic age, a new element was added to the understanding of philosophy. Previously, an affirmation had already been reached by philosophy that human beings know by what is called the natural light of the human intellect.²⁴ It can be deduced from current scholarship that this is a quality common to every purely human science.²⁵ To advert to scholastic language, the rule of philosophy, or its criterion of truth, is the evidence of its object. In other words, the medium or light by which a science knows its object is its *lumen sub quo*, technically construed to mean the light in which the science apprehends the object of its knowledge. Each of the different sciences has its own distinctive light.²⁶ Adapting this system to theological thought, traditional theology envisaged philosophy not exclusively in the Pythagorean sense of *philíates sophias* but also in the *lumen sub quo* cloak. Thus philosophy could also be construed as *lumen sub quo ad studiandum theologiam*.²⁷

²¹See <http://ftp.colloquium.co.uk/jacques.htm>, accessed on 19th October 2014.

²²See <http://ftp.colloquium.co.uk/jacques.htm>

²³See <http://ftp.colloquium.co.uk/jacques.htm>. In *Introduction Generale a la Philosophie*, Jacques Maritain holds this stance while also drawing a line (thin though it is) between philosophers and wise men.

²⁴Cfr <http://ftp.colloquium.co.uk/jacques.htm>, accessed on 15th October 2014.

²⁵We refer here to all sciences as human in contrast to theology which employs also a supernatural communication made to man and called revelation, hand in hand with the light of faith.

²⁶*Lumen sub quo* or *medium seu motivum formale*. The two terms are synonymous in meaning.

²⁷Literally, this would mean "the light under which theology is studies."

c) Relationship between Philosophy and Theology

Without retracing the numerous scholastic coinages²⁸ some of which are very helpful for contemporary theologizing,²⁹ let us point out that it would be arrogant to suppose that early men could not speculate.³⁰ If, for example, we were honoured to transport to the Catholic University of Eastern Africa the early man from the caves of Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania and invite him to read this article, he might well ask why and how, and then consider what the outcome of his joining us might be. He would consider options; in other words he would speculate. Actually, speculation is an element of common sense.³¹

At this juncture, we consider it academically justifiable to assert that even primitive civilization speculated. It was this fact which guided daily life. In the preceding arguments, we have called this "worldview" or "philosophy" in the wide sense of the word. The early man, consequently, had a philosophy.³² The fact that this exercise was informal does not preclude it from being classified as philosophical.³³

2. Contextual Philosophies

In a fundamental sense, there can be no theology without its implied philosophy. For philosophy supplies the middle term of theological thought. This is true of both rational and intuitive theology.³⁴ The fact that the Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* points out

²⁸Although the scholastic age is, at times, frowned upon as having entangled itself in "splitting hairs" in theology, this epoch bears invaluable growth to Church doctrine today. As we shall see below, sincere contextual theologizing must take into account the gains made by the scholastic heritage. Otherwise grasp of integral doctrines risks being lost.

²⁹For example, the famous *philosophia ancilla theologiae*.

³⁰The infinitive "to speculate" simply means "to consider the possible outcome of actions."

³¹It is almost certain, however, that this basic faculty of common sense had not been raised into a system until about 800 BC. Until then, people had to rely on what we call common sense and tradition rather than a formal set of rules like logic or any agreed guidelines to the testing and development of ideas.

³²A way of looking at the world; a pattern of thinking which guided life.

³³Not all philosophy has to have an Aristotelian or Platonic form. This is philosophy in *sensus stricto*. The existence of this category of philosophy presupposes the existence of the extended sense too.

³⁴A common error of our time is the assumption that one's chosen philosophical viewpoint is self-authenticating as the fundamental or comprehensive medium of up to date theology. Among those more prone to that error are form-critical Scripture scholars. Indeed. Some go as far as assuming that each theological discipline may

that the Church has no preferred philosophy³⁵ also serves to augment the veracity of our assertion. If the Church has no preferred philosophy and yet invites all peoples to theologize³⁶ there is an implicit inference that all peoples have a valid philosophy.

3. Effective Theologizing

Down through the centuries, the Church has proposed in her mission various ways of fulfilling the Lord's commission (Mt 28). In the early Church, for example, the effective way of concretizing this divine mandate was through vital Christian communities.³⁷

In our own time, various documents have been issued to guide this noble goal.³⁸ Secondly, new models of evangelization have been proposed. Prominent among these are the New Evangelization and Deeper Evangelization.

The repeated use of the term new evangelization by John Paul II is reminiscent of the encyclical *Evangelization in the Modern World*³⁹

approach the inspired Scriptures only as they are presented by form-critical scholarship. The fact that these scholars are not aware of their own philosophical medium of thought serves to increase their self-assurance. An initial task of contemporary theology is to isolate and describe the philosophical medium and literary genre of modern Scripture scholarship. To do so means to consider the literary production of exegesis as raw material for its own theological investigation. Such renewed theological investigation can be successful only to the extent that it clearly recognizes its own medium of thought, which in turn requires an awareness of the functioning of a double noetic principle: the interior light of faith and the illumination of natural reason.

³⁵John Paul II, The Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1998, art. 5. See also the proceedings of Vatican II whereby the espoused Thomistic Philosophy is not intended to replace the thinking pattern of the various peoples who form the Church.

³⁶Note that theology, as stated previously, implies a philosophy.

³⁷See the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, art 89. Confer also Mt 10:11-12 (Jesus made the family the centre of worship and the base for evangelization); Acts 8:3 (After Pentecost, the followers of Christ met in homes for the breaking of bread and shared meals); Acts, passim (Saul persecuted the Church by breaking up family meetings); Acts 2:12 (Peter was saved from execution through an overnight prayer vigil in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark); Acts 18:2-5 (the strengthening of Paul by Priscilla and Aquila for a return to full ministry); Acts 18:26 (the conversion of Apollos and his empowerment to minister in the Spirit); Rom 16:4-5 (gratitude of the gentiles). Other biblical examples where homes served as ecclesial communities are Col 4:15 (community of Nymphas), Acts 18:7 (community of Titus Justus), Rom 16:23 (community of Gaius), Philem 2 (community of Philemon).

³⁸For example, the two Apostolic Letters by John Paul II, namely *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (1994) and *Novo Millenio Ineunte* (2001).

³⁹Encyclical Letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.

by Paul VI. By so writing, the latter was responding to the new challenges that the contemporary world creates for the mission of the Church.⁴⁰ According to Dave Nodar, John Paul saw the need for relaunching evangelization in the present life of the Church.⁴¹ Quoting the Pope's speech to Latin American Bishops,⁴² Nodar rightly maintains that the Pope does not mean a new message. Evangelization cannot be new in its content since its very theme always the one Gospel given in Jesus Christ.

4. Indispensability of Contextual for Effective Theologizing

As seen above, theologizing is aimed at evangelization. On the other hand, the latter is intended to inspire the growth of faith. Since faith is itself immensurable, it may be difficult to point out whether evangelization has been effective or not. However, there are some benchmarks which this divine mandate to humanity should bear as pointers to a possible increase of faith. Thus contextual philosophies, employed to construct "corresponding" contextual theologies, are more likely than general or 'foreign' theologies to contribute to a people's faith. It is in this fact that once can trace their relevance for the future of the Church's mission in so far as:

1. They are built on the cherished cultural heritage of the people.
2. They are an acknowledgement that God communicates himself to all peoples through their cultures.⁴³
3. They suit the thinking pattern of the various peoples in whose cultural expression they are constructed.
4. They show that there are elements of revelation outside Israel (Old Testament) and Christianity.⁴⁴
5. They explain the fact that all people are "People of God", not exclusively Israel of old.
6. They show that the Church recognizes the ecclesial character of Non-Christian religions.⁴⁵

⁴⁰See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Knopf: New York, 1994, 114.

⁴¹Confer www.christlife.org/evangelisation/articles/C-newevan.html, accessed on 3rd October 2014.

⁴²www.christlife.org/evangelisation/articles/C-newevan.html

⁴³Cfr. *logos spermatikos* of Justin Martyr (seminaverbi.wordpress.com/logos-spermatikos).

⁴⁴Cfr. Judaism in the Old Testament with regard to Israel, and the following with regard to Christianity: *Lumen Gentium*, arts. 2, 16; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, art.7; *Dei Verbum*, art. 3, 4.

7. They falsify the erroneous interpretation of the doctrine that outside the Church there is no salvation.⁴⁶

8. They show that the Church has understood herself better by not identifying herself with the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

The presentation has established that any theology is based on some philosophy. The categories of thought employed by the latter necessarily determine the concepts inherent in the evolving theology. The line of argument we have pursued has been that if categories of thought embedded within a peoples philosophy are used to explicate the divine teaching, there is more likelihood of comprehension among the case study focused upon than if alien philosophies are the medium of interpretation. The resulting theology bears a greater potentiality in augmenting the faith among the people whose heritage has been used.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Cfr. *Nostra Aetate*; *Lumen Gentium*, art. 15; *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, art. 15.

⁴⁶Cfr. *Ad Gentes*, art.7; *Lumen Gentium*, art. 8, 16.

⁴⁷This resulting theology is however, useful for any people whatsoever insofar as the categories of thought transformed and inserted into the Church are analogously found in divine revelation.