

Part III

Reflections

The Contextualization of Theology

Henk Van Der Laan

1. Preliminary Remarks

The answer to the question concerning the possibility, necessity and legitimation of a contextualization of theology, depends on the answer to the question regarding theology itself.

Sometimes one speaks about the theology of the Old Testament or of the New Testament; a theology of Paul, John and of the other apostles. Even Jesus Christ has been called a theologian. Others speak about a theological approach to matters of politics, economics, culture, art and race, because their purpose is to approach Christianly the issues in these realms.

Augustine, following the Roman author Terentius Varro, defined theology as “de divinitate ratio sive sermo”, i.e. a rational discourse or a talk about divinity. In this definition a theoretical and a non-theoretical element are connected with each other. It is “ratio”, i.e. theoretical, systematic, scientific knowledge. As a talk it is a practical explanation, which should be believed. The subject matter of investigation is “divinitas” or divinity. This implies a discourse about the structure of the divine, of God, his possibilities in the difference, coherence and unity of his attributes. This idea of theology is based on the one hand upon revelation in Scripture, and on the other hand upon the rationality of the divine Being, who is open to rational investigation by theoretical thought or reason — an idea which has its source in Greek philosophy: in Parmenides, Plato and Aristotle.

Under the influence of Philippus Melanchton and Theodoor Beza a form of

Protestant Scholasticism was developed, which has been influential in orthodox Protestant Christianity up till today. Theologians have drawn a line from God as a supreme, intellectual or rational being, to Scripture, which is seen as a divine revelation of a system of truths or propositions, and from there to the confessions of the church as ecclesiastical reflections on the truth of Scripture. Finally, theology has been seen as a rational account of the content of the confessions and of Scripture. God is rational, his creation is rational and his Word in Scripture is rational.

The above-mentioned positions make it clear to us that the character and content of contextualization of theology depends on the idea of theology that undergirds the scholarly activity of a theologian. Besides, several issues come to the fore; the term "theology" is used for non-theoretical and for theoretical activities and their results. In a non-theoretical sense it involves the act of faith, and the whole life of faith in its ramifications regarding the aspects of Christian life. It is belief in God, trusting him upon his Word in Scripture and living Christianly. In a theoretical sense it means, according to Karl Barth, an account of the content of the proclamation of the church in an attempt at comprehension and exposition, at investigation and instruction. The "Subject" is the Christian church as a community.

Augustine and Protestant Scholasticism in all its shades assume that God is the object of theological thought via Scripture, because God is a rational Being, whose divinity can be analysed in a theoretical mode of thinking. This assumption brings God under the sovereignty of human theoretical thinking and places him in fact in the same framework as his creation, whose structures can be investigated and empirical reality clarified.

We should go in another direction. Our thesis is that theology is a scholarly discipline concerning the aspect of faith as one of the aspects of created reality, within the whole order of creation and of societal forms. Its activity is a theoretical-logical one, i.e. a critical investigation of the life of faith in communal relationships, its content, object and norm. As a theoretical reflection it tries to comprehend and to clarify the structure of faith in a logical-analytical way.

2. Theology as Pistology: reflection on faith

Theology does not give faith, or provide the norms for faith. The norms for faith can only be known via Scripture. The activity of faith itself is a positive answer to the Word of God in Scripture. Faith is obedience to the norms given by God and finding certainty concerning man's life, the creation in which he lives, the history in which he participates and the future which is promised to him by God. The basis is self-surrender to God.

Theology, however, as a theoretical reflection upon the norms of faith, the faith-response of the believing community and the interaction between these two, should be qualified as "pistology". There is no "logos", and no theoretical reflection possible upon the Being of God or upon the divinity of God. Only within a pagan framework is theology, as theo-ontology, possible. However this idea should be rejected because it includes the idea of the

rationality of being and the legitimation of theology as a science concerning being as being. The whole idea of being is a mythical idea, created by man, who has made reason the sovereign ruler of the universe.

Faith, as an attitude of certainty directed towards God, who transcends the boundaries of createdness, is only possible because man is created with a function of faith, according to which he responds to God and his will as documented in Scripture. Man can refuse, too. In this case he tries to find other gods, norms and ways of life. He seeks the basic certainty for his life somewhere else. He forms another world-view by surrendering himself to other powers. The bible calls it unbelief, or belief in other gods. Man can reflect upon that kind of faith, too, in a theoretical-logical attitude. The result is that in distinction from, and over against, Christian theology, stand other theologies, as in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and tribal religions. Even the theoretical reflection of Ludwig Feuerbach upon human faith, in which he comes to the conclusion that theology is anthropology, is a form of negative theology, or better, a form of pistology in a non-Christian sense.

The acknowledgment of these facts makes contextualization even more complex. There is not only contextualization of Christian theology but also of every non-Christian theology, and a contextualization between theologies in dialogue with a missionary perspective from any possible religious conviction.

To speak, then, of Theology as a function of context means that it possesses the following characteristics:

Firstly, it is a time-bound human activity with its limitations within the boundaries of the God-given order for creation. It is not a divine activity, nor a participation in divine life, nor a formulation of a set of eternal truths.

Secondly, it has a historical character. I take history in its broadest and deepest sense: the development of the covenant of God with mankind in the context of the development of the Kingdom of God.

Thirdly, contextual theology is characterized by a specific culture or civilization. Theology in the European-American civilization cannot be repeated in the civilizations of Asia, Africa and South America. There is a difference in history, social life, religious convictions, political realities and ecclesiastical developments.

Lastly, contextualization of theology always has a communal character, as it develops in a community with ecclesiastical, confessional, economic, social, ethnic and other aspects.

3. The Context of Theology in History

For practical reasons I want to limit myself to the development of theology in Western civilization. Keeping in mind that theology cannot be identified with Christian theology, we discover that the beginning of theology did not

take place in the Christian era, but in the Greek world before Christ. Its content was determined by the interlacement of pagan religions, rational philosophy and political-religious guidance and expectation. This gave birth to a triple concept of theology: the mythological theology of pagan polytheism; the physical theology of the philosophers, who gave a rational doctrine about the nature of the gods; and the political theology of the state, which gave the Greek states — and, later on, the Roman empire — their religious basis.

In the context of antagonism between physical or philosophical theology and mythical theology, the idea of theology as a scientific discourse about being as being was developed. In this sense Aristotle understood theology as the highest branch of philosophy, working according to logical laws and giving scientific evidence about the arche, or first principle of all beings.

This idea of theology was contextualized in the Christian era. On the one hand, it stood in the context of the Hellenistic-Roman culture against all forms of mythological thinking and polytheistic belief in the gods of the ancient world; on the other hand, it stood in the context of the biblical message. A transformation took place, and this transformation was a synthesis between the gospel and ancient philosophical thinking. It was a blend of pagan philosophy and Christian belief via (i) the theory of the Logos under Stoic influence, (ii) the idea of revelation and universal education by God (iii) allegorical exegesis under the influence of Philo Alexandrinus, and (iv) the idea of nature and the supernatural. The basic idea which undergirded these forms of synthesis was the idea that God had brought himself into a multiform context with man, which opened the door for human contextualization both in practical life and in theoretical discourses.

The identification of the Stoic idea of the divine Logos with the biblical notion of the Logos led to the conception of the revelation of the Logos in the history of Greek philosophy. In this way Christians defended the unity of truth between pagan philosophy and biblical revelation.

The Catechetical school of Alexandria stressed the idea of God as the educator of mankind. This school came to another form of contextualization: God educated the Greeks via philosophy, the Jews via the Old Testament and the Christians via the whole Bible. Philosophical reason and scriptural authority were the two sources of truth.

Clemens and his school aimed at a theoretical understanding of the content of the Bible with the help of philosophical categories borrowed from the Greeks; to justify this concept he used an allegorical exegesis of the Bible. In this school the leaders made a distinction between three kinds of people: the “hylici”, or materialistic people, who accepted mythical theology, the “psychici”, or common believers, who accepted the Bible in faith; and the “pneumatici”, or theologians, who understood that we have to reason and to justify our faith with the help of reason, so that we achieve gnosis as theoretical insight into the content of revelation.

From this one could conclude that theoretical reflection gives us a deeper

insight into God and his dealings with this world than does a faithful surrender to the living God; that an aristocratic and elitist group should give guidance to the Christian community. The pre-Christian idea that theoretical knowledge makes man truly human gave Christianity a feature which it has almost never lost. "Fides quaerens intellectum", instead of "fides quaerens Deum", became a basic concept.

A last and most influential form of contextualization was developed with the basic motive of nature and the supernatural. It found its mature and well balanced formulation in the thought of Thomas Aquinas. In his "Summa Theologica" and his "Summa contra Gentiles" he investigates the problem of salvation and destination. Both aspects, according to Thomas, depend on knowledge of the truth concerning God. We need a holy doctrine based upon revelation. For this reason man has received the light of natural reason which has its climax in philosophy.

The highest branch of philosophy is natural theology. Man has also received the light of divine revelation in Scripture. Supernatural theology investigates the content of Scripture and the doctrine of the church. Both are accepted by faith. The idea of salvation for man determines the idea of revelation and the idea of rational knowledge. Its context is the situation of the whole of mankind. Muslims, and pagans who do not have Holy Scripture, have the possibility of using the means of natural reason; Jews have the Old Testament and Christians both Old and New Testament. Although natural reason and supernatural faith are distinct from each other, both are coherent and serve the divine purpose of the salvation of mankind. In the context of "nature and the supernatural", the church can bring the Gospel of salvation to man.

At the end of the Middle Ages this form of contextualization became more and more questionable. It resulted in a new development, which made clear that reason and faith, as two authorities in connection with each other, could not be maintained. On the one hand, modern man with his belief in reason came into existence and determined the development in Western civilization; on the other hand, the movement of the Reformation developed in the context of the decline of Medieval culture and the coming into being of a new culture. Its context was a double one. Like pedagogical Humanism it went back to the sources: Scripture written in the original languages, from which translations were made into the native languages of Europe. Regarding Scripture itself, it went back to the Jewish Canon and rejected the Apocrypha. A new understanding of Scripture brought not only theology in another context, but shaped other contextual societal forms in which theological activity took place: the churches of the Reformation.

However, during the period of the Reformation and afterwards, especially in the 17th century, theology moved out of context. Theologians went back to the old idea of synthesis. Clear examples are Olevianus' commentary on the Catechism of Heidelberg, Melancthon's *Loci Communes* and Theodoor Beza's theological publications. Also the organization and curricula of theological seminaries and faculties show us the scholastic mind of the theologians in the second half of the 16th and in the 17th century. This way of

thinking found its ecclesiastical expression in the Canons of Dort and the Westminster Confession, which are in fact not confessions of faith but a mixture of confessional statements and theoretical expositions of a theological-philosophical character. The result was that theology stood in the context of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy.

4. The Context of Theology in our Age

Theologizing does not merely take place in the context of theological schools and faculties with their communities of scholars. Theology does not exist in an esoteric community which lives detached from man in society. Theology and theologizing are part and parcel of human society.

Our context is characterized by several features. The first is secularization, which, after a period of preparation during the 17th century — in which natural religion rooted in nature and reason came into existence, via the critique on religion of Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach — manifested itself in the critique of Karl Marx as a critique of heaven and a critique of earth. From it developed in the 19th and 20th century a critique on religion which spread amongst millions of people in all the realms of Western civilization.

Another aspect of our society is the meeting of civilizations during the last 150 years. It has happened to such an extent that Western society is shaken. Western society became involved in other civilizations, other religions, and other political entities via the process of colonialisation and imperialism and its subsequent destruction in the 20th century; also in the mission enterprise of churches and missionary societies of private christians, and further, in international political coherence and interdependence as it is realized in the UNO and its organizations, and the migration of millions of people — especially during the last 35 years — bringing millions of guestlabourers from Africa and Asia to Europe.

There has not only been an encounter of civilizations, but also a meeting of the churches, during our century. Ecumenical movements of confessional, regional and world-character, in and outside the World Council of Churches, have influenced the attitude of many church people. They have changed confessional and theological convictions, and given the churches a new view of their calling and task in this world. They have also caused changes in the Roman Catholic Church. Australia, as a part of Western civilization, participates in this development. Its character however, is influenced by several factors which make this continent different from other continents. I mention just a few.

A destruction of Aboriginal society has taken place, which puts the Aborigines in the position of foreigners in their own country. It gives some (or many) white Australians a feeling of guilt.

Further, Australian society, both in its Christian and non-Christian aspects, cannot be understood apart from its Anglo-Saxon heritage. This affects the ecclesiastical and theological scene in Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Methodism and Congregationalism.

A third factor is the non-Anglo-Saxon migration after the second World War. People from European countries with their own culture, language and church-life came to Australia. They formed their own communities or blended with the Anglo-Saxon community. Eastern orthodox Christianity and theology form a part of Australia today, although it is limited to ethnic groups.

Lastly, there is the continuation of Humanistic secularization in a Liberal, Socialistic and Marxist setting.

5. The contextual task of Theology Today

I want now to sketch the contextualization of theology today in a few statements.

A Christian theologian has to take into account that he stands in the context of the 20th century as a *human being*. His theological existence is only one of the many aspects of his humanness. It includes the context of the communication and confrontation of his own civilization with other civilizations.

As a *theologian* he stands in the context of a scholarly world with a specific character, and with specific limitations. His activity is characterized by a theoretical approach.

As a *Christian* theologian he stands in the context of the authority of the Word of God recorded in Scripture. In this context he is not higher qualified nor less rewarded than his fellow Christians, who stand in the same context and under the same authority.

Further, we have to keep in mind that Scripture itself stands in the context of a Semitic culture and of the history of the Middle East in a period of 2000-3000 years ago. The Word of God received its inscripturation in a specific historical context. This should be recognized.

Our approach has practical implications for theologizing activity in Western civilization. It means that theology has to be *biblical*. A systematic theologian has to work in the community of believers, who respond in faith to the Word of God given in Scripture. He has to wholeheartedly accept the support of biblical scholarship, which assists in helping to understand Scripture with all the means available today.

A further implication is that a theologian should recognize that the last theoretical answers concerning theology are not given by theology itself. They are of a philosophical nature. Theology or pistology reflects, in a theoretical sense, on the faith aspect of reality. It is one of the tasks of a philosopher to reflect theoretically on the nature of theology and all its branches. Philosophical answers influence theology, as the history of theology shows us. If we are not aware of this state of affairs or deny it, as Karl Barth has done, we will encounter great difficulties.

Further, biblical orientation of theology makes it impossible to automatically refer to the confessional standards, which have an ecclesiastical

background and character. These confessions have to be reconsidered and valued anew in the light of Scripture. They do not repeat the content of Scripture, but are the result of a struggle in which philosophical, theological, ecclesiastical, political and biblical motives played their part. If we are not aware of this situation we have frozen the dogmatic development, put Scripture in the straightjacket of human formulations and eternalized the confessional answers of imperfect and sinful human beings.

We also have to keep in mind that theology cannot be an ecclesiastically limited endeavour, in which only a small part of a church or of a group of churches is involved. Theology should be ecumenical, practised together with all the believers who have a theological calling. The playground of theology is the world and not the fenced backyard of only one church.

This brings us to the next issue. Theology not only has to function in the context of the Christian community with its broad variety, disagreements, conflicts and antagonisms, but also in the context of Western society at large. The fulfilling of its task is only possible in interaction with this society. A few examples may clarify this. Theology, as a theoretical reflection on the aspect of faith in our temporal reality, has to execute its mandate in conversation and confrontation with Marxism. If theologians desire to speak about the structure of human faith and its content directed toward God in Jesus Christ, they have to render an account of their endeavour in an encounter with the Marxist critique of heaven and of earth, and do so without any hesitation. This is not possible without a dialogue with Ludwig Feuerbach, whose thesis that theology is anthropology should be subjected to a serious discussion, centering on the predicament of man. Theologians — and not only they — should become more and more aware of the antithetical alternative which the Marxist movement offers, and has realized, all over the world.

Theological thinking in Western society, and in Australia especially, should also take notice of the faiths of minority groups, and not only those within the Christian community. A theoretical reflection on the religions of the Aborigines, with all its implications, is a necessary part of theology today.

On the other hand, Australia's place is in the South East Asian world. There are contacts with China and Japan. The nearest neighbour, Indonesia, has a population of which the majority is Muslim. Great minority groups in Indonesia are Hindu-believers or followers of tribal religions. Buddhism and Confucianism are a part of the Indonesian scene too. If theology in Australia is to be contextual, it cannot ignore these religions or avoid a dialogue with the adherents of these living faiths.

There is a need for communication and confrontation. The content of the Christian faith, and the dogmatic reflection on this content, are challenged by Islam. Over against Scripture, which according to Muslims has been falsified by Jews and Christians, stands the Qur'an, the true and last word of God, which reveals God's goodness and God's will to man. In distinction from what has been written in Scripture about the history of God's covenant with man, Islam proclaims the history of God's revelation via a continuous line of prophets from Adam to the prophet Muhammed.

In this history Jesus finds his place as the nabi Isa, a prophet on the same level as other prophets, a man who escaped the suffering of the cross, a man of God who could not suffer and die, for this would mean that God was not with him. Any Christian dogmatic reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ, in the history of God's redemption, has to confront this biblical message with the teachings of the Qur'an.

We have to understand man in his religious life in Africa and Asia. Although it is true that Christians in Africa and Asia are responsible for their task in the field of theology in their continents, it is also true that the Body of Christ is one. Christians such as Kosuke Koyama, Kitamori, M. M. Thomas, Abineno, Fridolin Ukur, Harun Hadiwiyono and many others have to find the open ears and open hearts of their fellow brethren in Christ in order to fulfil their task in the world of the living faiths of men.