Intercultural Theology

How “utterly scandalous” it is for students of Western theology to know more about the theology of heretics long dead than they do about the living theology of hundreds of millions of living Africans today.


Introduction: key thoughts

+ Theology grows out of the context of the theologian
+ We are all theologians and we all work out theology based on the interactions within our context as we engage what God has revealed
+ Theology is metaphorical in order to describe the indescribable
+ Theology is created by a dialogue between text and context
**Introduction: key thoughts**

- Contextual theologies can be inappropriate and harmful
- Contextual theologies differ because of the values and questions of the culture
- Theologies reflect the assumptions of the context
- Contextual theologies impact each other
- Christian theology overlaps with non-Christian theology because of common cultural experiences and assumptions

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**Initial Contrasting Examples of Contextual Theologies**

![Image](https://tmblr.co/ZVz2Ix29bSGMY)

**Initial Definitions**

- **Theology** is what we think about God,
- **Revelation** is what God tells us about himself and his relationship to this world.
- **Contextualization**: the act of an **outsider** shaping the gospel for resonance within a particular context.
- **Relevance**: fitting / appropriate for a context.
- **Resonance**: perceived importance within a context.
- **Inculcation** (or self-contextualization): the act of **insiders** expressing the gospel within their context.
- **Enculturation** is the process learning how to live within a cultural context.
- **Intercultural theology**: Theological interaction between two or more cultures.

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- **Intercultural theology**: Theological interaction between two or more cultures.
**Theology is**
- Essential because it seeks truth, reality and wisdom
- True, as long as it reflects God’s revelation
- Always perspectival - shaped by context
- One facet of many - many contexts
- Limited, but gives a true perspective
- A process - never perfect
- Less about facts and more about relationship

Wall’s quote: “the attempt to think in a Christian way”

**Culture is**
- Society is “the system of relationships that enable people to form communities.”
- Culture is “the partially integrated system of ideas, feelings, and values encoded in learned patterns of behavior, signs, products, rituals, beliefs, and worldviews shared by a community of people.” (Hiebert, the Gospel in human contexts, p. 18)

**Culture**

Culture is the way a group of people view, experience and interact with their environment.

Like

**Culture**

People from different cultures view, experience and interact with their environment in different ways.

Like lots of different

**Primary Dilemma**
- Our culture is the grid through which we experience and understand the world
- There are many diverse cultures, each with the distinct identity and values, each with worldviews and orientations
- These orientations clash with each other
- Intercultural theology implies a multiplicity of voices and a multiplicity of perspectives and a multiplicity of definitions, each stemming from the orientation of their cultural context
5 min interaction

“Is not the Christian faith only one, the same for all people, in all places and circumstances? If so, what justification is there for theology arising out of various ethnic perspectives and experiences?” Why even bother with this question of different cultural expressions of faith/theology? Why not just study pure and objective theology based on God’s Word? “God said it and I believe it and that settles it.” Why bother with thinking about culture? Let’s just bypass culture and get to real theology.

Cultural reality

+ The gospel only exists meaningfully for people inside a cultural context
+ Theology and the gospel cannot be understood apart from culture (ie. Supracultural)
+ Theology, God’s revelation and the gospel are the content, but culture is how it exists and is expressed
+ “To mean the same thing in different cultures, our practices may have to change” (Adeney)
+ If we ignore the differences, we silence voices that should be heard and

Cultural Reality

+ Thinking that needs to be challenged doesn’t get challenged
+ Scripture itself gives us variety
+ Multiplicity is to be celebrated and explored
+ One universal theology and one exclusive expression reduces the gospel
+ ALL theology is culturally specific, culturally shaped and perspectival.

Do you agree or disagree with the last statement?

Definitions

+ Intercultural theology is therefore the theology that arises in one context that is read and engaged and interacted with by people (theologians) who have a theology that has emerged from another context
+ Missiological theology (theology related to God’s global mission)
+ Contextual/local theology (focus on the locus of the theology)

Summary so far

+ Theology is the study of God.
+ Contextual theology asks, who is doing the studying and proposes that whoever studies God does so from a particular perspective and within a particular context.
+ Intercultural theology asks how we engage a theology from another culture so that we can learn from each how to live as the people of God

Living (flowing) Water
Primary Thesis

*All theology is human constructed and culturally shaped. This calls us to listen to the theologies emerging in other contexts so that we can hear God speak to us in ways that our contextual theologies have not revealed.*

Types of Theology

**Unchanging universal structure of reality**
- Systematic theology

**The cosmic drama now unfolding**
- Biblical theology

**The application of divine revelation to human contexts**
- Missiological theology
- Human contexts

**Biblical text**

Types of Theology

**Another view - Naylor**

What is God like?

Using the Bible to discover God’s unchanging nature and will

What is God doing?

The Bible as historical drama of God’s intervening action

How do we view God differently?

The Bible as contextually framed expressions of God’s revelation

- Missiological
- Intercultural
- Local

Types of Theology

**HOW these theologies relate to each other**

All theologies use the same methodology, what is different is the locus or context of that theology

*methodology*

Systematic

**Logic**

Biblical

Contextual

All theology is perspectival

All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in histories and worldviews that shape the way they see things. There are no culture-free and history-free theologies. We all read Scripture from the perspectives of our particular context. This does not mean we can know no truth. It does mean that we must never equate our theology with Scripture, and that we need to work in hermeneutical communities and draw on those who have gone before us to check our personal and cultural biases. - Hiebert p. 42 Gospel
Maintaining Tension

+ Universals (all contexts) vs
+ Particulars (to one context)
  + Access to God through revelation
  + Access is filtered through culture
  + Maintain tension
+ Epistemology
  + Postmodernism
  + Logical Positivism
  + Critical Realism

Tension triangle

Onion Model of Culture

- Environment / Material reality
- Behavior
- Values (moral judgments)
- Beliefs (specific)
- Worldview (framework)

Intercultural Theology

The Third Path

+ Universalism (absolutism)
  + "there is only one truth about the essentials of the human condition, and it holds for all people at all times. If I am right, you are wrong. If what I believe is the truth, then your belief, which differs from mine, must be an error from which you must be converted, cured and saved."
+ Relativism
  + everybody can have their own truth and there is no universal truth
Dichotomist vs Holistic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dichotomous Thinking</th>
<th>Holistic Thinking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice based on right/wrong</td>
<td>Justice based on association/family, caste</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgments black/white, right/wrong</td>
<td>Judgments open-ended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security in being right</td>
<td>Security in relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systems, organizations, patterns</td>
<td>Information and Experiences are &quot;stand alone&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Certainty to Confidence

- Intercultural theology recognizes
  - (1) that there is an Absolute Truth (God)
  - (2) that we do not have a absolute grasp of who God is - we are finite and limited so that all we know is culturally shaped
  - (3) that all cultures are immensely complex and diverse thus giving us different orientations through which we can know God.

From Certainty to Confidence

- The Word that God has spoken
  - OT Revelation
  - The incarnation
    - the incarnation occurs in a local situation
    - gospel only has meaning inside of culture and history
  - NT Revelation
  - The Holy Spirit
  - Confidence in God’s mission
  - Community of faith
  - Covenant between author and reader - communication is possible.

theology is bigger
and more contextual than universal

- Theology is a journey of life, not accumulated knowledge
- It is about knowing on a relational level, not knowing “about” someone.
- It is leveling of the playing field. There are no privileged positions.
- It is a dialogue in which many voices are heard, that creates relationship
- It is a multi-faceted reality that requires many diverse voices.

“mythos” and “logos”

Mythos:
- Primary assumptions
- No a prior basis
- Provides "why"
- Looks back
- Worldview
- Timeless truth
- overarching story that gives facts meaning
- Influences assumptions of reality
- Arts
- Challenge this and there is resistance.

Logos
- Rationale, pragmatic, scientific
- Logic derived from assumptions
- Provides "how"
- Looks forward
- Function in daily tasks of living
- Details of life
- Facts and external realities
- Seeks to control the environment
- Promoted by pragmatic activities
- Challenge this and there is little resistance.
**Intercultural theology**

Intercultural theology is the act of listening to those other voices and considering how they impact our experience and expressions of God in Christ.

**Cultural filters**

‘The time is also past when Western theologians had all the ‘definitive answers.’ Asian theologians now bear the responsibility and willingly accept it. The latter have discovered that Western definitive answers do not automatically fit the Asian situation and often answer questions not asked in Asia” (Schultz in Hiebert 1989,23).

**Heart of Intercultural theology**

A critical realist epistemology differentiates between revelation and theology. The former is God-given truth; the latter is human understandings of that truth and cannot be equated fully with it. Human knowledge is always partial and schematic, and does not correspond one-to-one with reality. Our theology is our understanding of Scripture in our contexts. It may be true, but it is always partial and perspectival. It seeks to answer the questions we raise.

**Heart of Intercultural theology**

This calls for a community-based hermeneutics in which dialogue serves to correct the biases of individuals. On the global scale, this calls for both local and global theologies. Local churches have the right to interpret and apply the gospel in their contexts, but also a responsibility to join the larger church community around the world in seeking to overcome the limited perspectives each brings, and the biases each has that might distort the gospel.

- Hiebert, Gospel in Human Contexts p. 29

**Theological translatability**

- Lamen Sanneh
- mission by diffusion
  - religion has a cultural identity and to maintain integrity it transplants that cultural base
- mission by translation
  - The nature of the receptor culture is NOT rejected but considered to the locus of the expression of the faith

**Intercultural Theology**

- We are located in a context and our theology reflects that
- this is not a problem but part of what God intends
- Our theology is both a reflection of God’s revelation and a limitation
- We can benefit from other local theologies, both historically and geographically
- Our theology is a product of other theologies as we work out God’s revelation in our own context.
Perspectives of God in the Sindh

- Religious Orientation
  - Orthodox Islam
- Primary Paradigm
  - Master-Servant
- Key Word
  - Obedience
- God is...
  - Distant

Perspectives of God in the Sindh

- Religious Orientation
  - Sufism
- Primary Paradigm
  - God is to be experienced
- Key Word
  - Mysticism
- God is...
  - Distant

Perspectives of God in the Sindh

- Religious Orientation
  - Folk Islam
- Primary Paradigm
  - God provides blessings
- Key Word
  - Mediation
- God is...
  - Distant

Perspectives of God in the Sindh

- Religious Orientation
  - Christianity
- Primary Paradigm
  - Father - Child
- Key Word
  - Relationship
- God is...
  - With us (Emmanuel)

Evaluating Legitimacy

According to an intercultural orientation, we do not have access to a superior supracultural, acultural or ahistorical theology that we can use to critique other theologies because all theologies are contextual.

If all theologies are contextual, including our own, how do we evaluate legitimacy?

Evaluating Legitimacy

We have confidence that it is possible through faith
- In God’s revelation
- In the Holy Spirit
- In the way of the cross
- In God’s mission
- In God’s people as they too seek to follow Jesus
- Historical theologies
- God’s people working out their own theology
Evaluating Legitimacy

* Evaluation is not a rubric or template but a process of dialogue between theologies.
* Actively listen with respect in order to understand
  - context and questions / concerns (context)
  - how Bible is being used (text)
  - the reasoning behind the application (faith)
* Respond with respect (ABC)
  - Agree
  - Build
  - Contrast

Theological Method
for developing contextual theology

Hermeneutics is to interpretation what metatheology is to theology. Hermeneutics explores how we interpret Scripture, metatheology considers the methodology we use to develop our theology.

* Metatheology
* Contextual Hermeneutics
* Intercultural Hermeneutics

Theological Method
for developing contextual theology

Key aspects (from de Wit 2004)

* Bring the contextualization of biblical stories in one culture into relationship with their contextualization in another context
* Describe interpretation of Bible within the framework of intercultural dialogue
* Analyze how we have read the text
* The story emits a power that inspires, changes, liberates, and evangelizes

Summary (from de Wit 2004)

1. Analyze the interaction between culture and interpretation of Scripture
2. Communicate the meaning of biblical texts across cultural boundaries
3. Press questions of liberation [ie gospel salvation] and of truth across cultural boundaries

5 Min Interaction

“Taking plurality seriously is intercultural hermeneutics' essential characteristic; it lives on interactive diversity. It subscribes to the notion that the interpretation of scripture involves a rich, never-ending process, a continuous interaction.” (Hans de Wit 2004:490)

OR

“If the meaning makes good sense seek no other sense.”

Contextual hermeneutics

* Contextual hermeneutics recognizes that interpretation is complex and relational.
  - Love letter / facets, more than facts
  - Bible translation - Gen 10:8-9
  - Not TO us but FOR us (interpretive process)
Contextual hermeneutics

- Contextual hermeneutics recognizes that interpretation is complex and relational.
- Love letter / facets, more than facts
- Bible translation - Gen 10:8-9
- Not TO us but FOR us
- Hermeneutical cycle

Erickson: Christian Theology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Doctrine</th>
<th>Theology</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Significance / enjoyment of music</td>
<td>Significance / enjoyment of God</td>
<td>Awareness of being “in Christ”</td>
<td>Desire for goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Play piano</td>
<td>Live out faith (= values, beliefs and practices)</td>
<td>Act according to a specific faith stance</td>
<td>Praise God for his goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td>Practice piano</td>
<td>Reflect on faith</td>
<td>Articulate that faith stance</td>
<td>Articulate God’s goodness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematization</td>
<td>Theorize about music</td>
<td>Organize / systematize faith</td>
<td>Relate that faith stance to other articles of faith</td>
<td>Consider how God’s goodness relates to salvation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

20 Min Interaction

How can these theologians of a different context who were very influenced by the idea of "communion with God" speak to Canadian evangelical churches? How do they speak to you? How does their orientation resonate with contextual realities that shape Canadian evangelical theology today? How do they challenge Canadian evangelical theology?

20 Min Interaction

Why is intercultural theology important?

- We are affected by historical theological shifts that have occurred in other countries and cultures
Current global realities

+ proliferation of Asian, African and Latin American theologies
+ Globalization = barriers broken down
+ increase of interdisciplinary interactions
+ Diaspora reality

“Current global realities

“The typical Christian is no longer an affluent, white, British, Anglican male about forty-five years old, but a poor, black, African, Pentecostal woman about twenty-five years old.” (Tennent 2007:17)

“no Western response to other faiths can show Christian integrity if it by implication cuts itself off from the Christian believers of the non-Western world.” (Wall 1996:147)

Importance of Intercultural Theology

+ Humility
+ Caution about being overconfident
+ A posture of learning
+ Facets of truth, like a diamond
+ Graciousness towards those who differ
+ Western theology is part of the dialogue
+ Reveals needed shifts for us to make
Majority World Theology

5 Trends
+ These believers accept the authority of Scripture and tend to be conservative, orthodox, and traditional.
+ Majority World Christians are more likely to be morally and ethically conservative.
+ More likely to be sensitive to the Christian responsibility to address issues related to poverty and social justice.
+ Experienced at articulating the uniqueness of the gospel in the midst of religious pluralism.
+ More likely to grasp the corporate (not just individualistic) dimensions of the teachings of the New Testament.

Donovan, Christianity Rediscovered, p. 62

“Church-planting and church-establishing have often been used as descriptions of a missionary’s task. But such descriptions can be misleading since they necessarily imply a kind of fixed and predetermined outcome to the preaching of the gospel. Because a missionary comes from another already existing church, that is the image of church he will have in mind, and if his job is to establish a church, that is the church he will establish. I think, rather, the missionary’s job is to preach not the church, but Christ. If he preaches Christ and the message of Christianity, the church may well result, may well appear, but it might not be the church he had in mind.”

The Vital Question

What would this context look like if Jesus was Lord?

Possible social structures in the Sindhi culture for an emerging church

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious / Social structure</th>
<th>Mosque</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Structured, Doctrine, Tradition, Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Fellowship, Spiritual Vitality, Internal Conviction, Daily Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus / Response</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>C5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Majority World Theology

+ Ecclesiology
  + C1 - language / culture foreign
  + C2 - culture foreign
  + C3 - cultural forms - Islam rejected
  + C4 - biblically accepted Islamic forms
  + C5 - Muslim follower of Jesus
  + C6 - Private follower of Jesus
**Possible social structures in the Sindhi culture for an emerging church**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Spiritual Life, Fellowship, Identity, Poetry / stories</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Doctrine, Structure, disconnect with daily life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus / Response</td>
<td>Spiritual need</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example</td>
<td>E. Stanley Jones’ Ashrams</td>
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<thead>
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<th>Household</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary foundation of society, Enculturation, Gender mix, generational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusive, Christian / nonChristian mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathaniel’s vision</td>
</tr>
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**Majority World Theology**

**Contributions**

Theological insights from diverse cultural orientations

+ Holistic vs dichotomist
+ all of life, not just a spiritual expression
+ Liberation theology
+ Communal vs individual
+ sin
+ Excluded middle
+ Identity and ownership of theology
+ Success

---

**How do I integrate intercultural theology in my ministry?**

3 approaches of doing theology interculturally:

1. Globalization - “here is what we have to offer”
   + Positive: clarity about belief
   + Dangers: Colonization, dominant pressure, lack of listening, lack of sensitivity to cultural shaping, lack of taking on the responsibility for bridging to the culture

2. Dialogue - “Let’s compare what we have to offer”
   + Positive: Openness to listening, cultural sensitivity
   + Dangers: Complacency, lack of transformation and impact, downplaying of God’s revelation to the level of “our belief”

3. Contextualization - “How do you understand the gospel?”
   + Positive: Openness to listening, cultural sensitivity, evangelistic responsibility of bridging the gap
   + Dangers: Syncretism and dual systems
How do I integrate intercultural theology in my ministry?

inadequate contextualization => dual systems
compromised contextualization => syncretism

5 min interaction
What are examples of dual systems and syncretism in your context?

How do I integrate intercultural theology in my ministry?

+ Articulate YOUR theology
+ Read intercultural theology
+ Differ with grace
+ Generating theology from others

Mapping theological trajectories

Biblical Expressions

+ Ruth 3
+ Gen 22
+ Lev 15
+ Uriah and David 2 Sa 11
+ Mt 12:1-8
+ 1 Co

Historical perspective

A person living in each setting will see Christian faith and the Bible and theology in a particular culturally shaped way and tend to see it as the normative Christian life. However, when we step back and look at the history, we do not see one Christian culture or civilization developing through history, but a series of expressions. There are important connections and identity, but there are important distinctions that grow out of the context.

IDI Continuum

Cultural Tool for Intercultural Theology Development