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## **Revisiting the Question Concerning (Theological) Contextualization**

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### **Situating Contextualization**

Essentially, contextualization, particularly *theological* contextualization exercised under the sign of Christianity, is concerned with how the Gospel and culture—broadly and contingently conceived—relate to one another across space, time, and place. By definition, as much as in practice, contextualization cannot be extricated from the diversity and plurality of personal, political, historical, and sacred being that marks human experience.

Biblically, theologically, and pastorally, the metaphor for contextualization is not only the Incarnation but also *Kenosis*.

However, if the reader expects to find this essay engaging directly in theological contextualization, he or she will be disappointed. While important, that task is currently beyond my competence or interest. Mine is a more modest goal, at least in this essay: that is, to “re-visit” the *question* concerning contextualization, by which I mean simply identifying those issues with which one ought to be concerned if one wishes to embark on a project of theological contextualization adequate to the present world situation. In fact, the title of this essay is a play on Martin Heidegger’s reflection on technology, in which he explored “the conditions of understanding” under the dispensation of (technological) being. The connection with this essay is suggestive, if not metaphorical, but methodologically congenial: what are the conditions under which theological contextualization is being done today?—hence, the title of this essay, “the question concerning contextualization.”

Stephen Bevans’ four models of contextualization: translation, anthropological, praxis, and synthetic—provide a useful theoretical occasion for revisiting the question concerning contextualization. In fact, Bevans may be read as pointing to at least four underlying, inextricably-related characteristics of contextualization. First, contextualization is always and already an act of interpretation that combines thinking, feeling, and acting—involving speculative and practical forms of reason as well as desire; it is not mere cogitation. Second, contextualization is inextricably related to transformation, the creation and nurture of the

fundamentally new, which is also fundamentally better.<sup>1</sup> Third, contextualization is almost always an event of competence: it has structure, process, and (human) agency. And finally, contextualization, particularly *theological* contextualization, is unavoidably “locational/positional.” Here, “the local” is not so much a question of “origin” or “trajectory” but a “site” of engagement; and “position” is not exclusively “subjective” but comprehensively “discursive” (an apparatus or *dispositif*, if you will)—both always and already intimately related to how one encounters the multistranded diversities and pluralities of space, time, and place—not unlike what Foucault called a “practice.”<sup>2</sup>

In the Asian context, not excluding the Asian Diaspora, contextualization has been a vital part of the theological landscape. Thinkers including Shoki Coe, M.M. Thomas, D.T. Niles, Emerito Nacpil, Kosuke Koyama, and C.S. Song, as well as Virginia Fabella, Marianne Katoppo, and Maryjohn Mananzan, have pioneered what Huang Po Ho has called a “Contextual Theology movement in Asia.” In my own generation, we saw *Minjung* theology from Korea, Homeland theology and Theology of *Chhut Thau Thin* from Taiwan, theologies of struggle from the Philippines, and theologies of religion from India. Institutions like The Commission on Theological Concern of the Christian Conference of Asia, the Program for Theology and

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<sup>1</sup> Manfred Halpern, translated by David Abalos, *Transforming the Personal, Political, Historical and Sacred in Theory and Practice* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Situated in the context of a post-positivist, post-empiricist, post-structuralist tradition, I deploy the term “practice” much in the same way Michel Foucault used the term *dispositif*—“a resolutely heterogeneous assemblage, containing discourses, institutions, architectural buildings, reglementary decisions, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, philanthropic propositions... said as well as non-said...” to signify the delightful and frustrating entanglements between “theory” (speculative reason) and “praxis” (practical reason), and their interplay with the personal, the political, the historical, and the sacred—in the service of transformation. See Michel Foucault, ed., Colin Gordon, “The Confession of the Flesh” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194-228.

Cultures in Asia (PTCA), the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), the Asian Church Women's Conference (ACWC), and, the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA)—all may be understood as part of this vital movement. From the Asian Diaspora one might include the post-positivist, post-empiricist, post-colonial work of Eleazar Fernandez, Kwok Pui Lan, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and R. S. Sugirtharajah.

The *Asianist* contribution to the larger work of theological contextualization cannot be underestimated. Indeed, anyone who may be interested in developing both a “general” theory and “specific” practice of contextualization cannot evade having to engage these movements in (geographical) Asia and its Diaspora. As I will argue in this essay, however, one's location and positionality are decisive, not to mention constitutive, not only in the selection of the manner in which one engages with these movements but also in the choices both of conversation partners and substantive, methodological, metathereotical, and political/institutional problems. To put the matter simply, if polemically, being an *Asian-in-Diaspora* by choice, it would be the height of *hubris* to even begin to engage these “Asian” discourses from my current location because of the difficulties of representation implicated in the asymmetries of power, privilege, and access between the global south and the global north, as well as the very real limits of one's capacity to understand or evaluate the competing or even incommensurable claims made by these *Asianist* thinkers. Less important, but by no means inconsequential, is that I am not entirely convinced that the production and reproduction of *new* knowledge where theological contextualization is concerned must necessarily travel the pathways of these pioneering works. A fuller, transdisciplinary, trans-*Asianist* engagement with different, if not wider global contexts, seems to

be an equally important “conditionality” for articulating a more robust understanding of theological contextualization. This is where I intentionally locate myself.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Context of Contextualization**

#### **Location, Positionality, Critique: The Methodological Importance of “Fallibility”**

My own understanding of theological contextualization, first and foremost, is shaped fundamentally by my own context, where my location and positionality require an acknowledgement of the methodological importance of “fallibility” for understanding.

The intellectual production, reproduction, and representation in which I am engaged, as much as it may desire the sublime, is still the discourse of a privileged male *flaneur*, if not *bricoleur*, however personally innocent—and even though I might aspire towards a Gramscian “organic intellectual.” Michel Foucault observes that because *all* intellectual work is a passage through privilege, it is fraught with both dangers and possibilities: dangers because, on the one hand, we are a species marked not only by reason, or by freedom, but also by error; and, on the other hand, possibilities because the history of thought read as a critical philosophy appreciative of “fallibility” can become a “history of trials, an open-ended history of multiple visions and revisions, some more enduring than others.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A more systematic discussion of my perspective can be found in Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Recovering the “Body Politics”: When the Question of “Race” and Power Migrates” in Dietrich Werner, David Esterline, Namsoon Kang, Joshva Raja, eds. *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2010), 85-103.

<sup>4</sup> James D. Faubion, ed., *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology, Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2 (New York: The New Press, 1998), 476.

Contextualization, in fact, is such a form of production, reproduction, and representation. Here, recognition of location, not to mention positionality and maneuver, is not only politically necessary given the radical plurality of human history; it is also methodologically decisive for the production and reproduction of knowledge as a passage to transformation.

The affirmation of self-critical accountability rests in no small measure on an affirmation of the necessity of a kind of contextualization that is constantly challenged by what in my earlier work, following many of Latin American theologians of liberation, I called the “hermeneutical privilege of the poor and oppressed,” but which, I now want to argue, is unavoidably shaped, not to mention *inspired*, by the “hermeneutical *significance* of the victim.”

Jacques Derrida notes that a “victim” is “one who cannot even protest... [who] cannot even identify the victim as victim... [who] cannot even present himself or herself as such. He or she is totally excluded or covered over by language, annihilated by history.”<sup>5</sup> Derrida goes on to note that being a “victim” involves a certain kind of

unreadability that stems from the violence of foreclosure, exclusion, all of history being a conflictual field of forces in which it is a matter of making unreadable, excluding, of positing by excluding, of imposing a dominant force by excluding... not only by marginalizing, by setting aside the victims, but also by doing so in such a way that no trace remains of the victims, so that no one can testify to the fact that they are victims or so that they cannot even testify to it themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Derrida invokes the image of “cinders” which is a “trope that comes to take the place of everything that disappears without leaving an identifiable trace.” The difference between the trace “cinder” and other traces, according to Derrida, is that the body of which cinders is the

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, ed. Elizabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 387-391.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

trace has totally disappeared; it has totally lost its contours, its form, its colors, its natural termination; it can no longer be identified, and forgetting itself is forgotten.<sup>7</sup>

I am convinced that one of the religio-moral dimensions, not to mention challenges, of the *project* of contextualization today is not only the discovery of how contextualization is embodied and/or situated but also the clarification of where the *hope* that animates it lies. It is particularly critical to explore this embodiment and hope in the context of this forgetfulness of victimization—something which Gayatri Spivak very early on explored in her thoughtful piece, “Can the Subaltern speak?” We need not only to find again the power of a transformative philosophy of contextualization but also to articulate the conditions of its possibility as a transformative practice. It is not only important to proclaim the legitimacy of the struggles of the marginalized and excluded against their victimization, but also to nurture and defend their struggles as the expression of their hope, not only for liberation but for *liberative* meaning, significance, and change. At the same time, it is critical to be mindful that while these expressions, at their best, are ruptures in the geographies of tradition that give birth to our own desires for contextualization, our own responses, at their worst, often colonize the struggles and hopes to which the marginalized, the excluded, and the victims aspire. In other words, how “fallibility” becomes methodologically necessary for theological contextualization, is a task to which one must always attend.

Moreover, part of what is at stake is finding new and better languages for struggle and hope (which is part of the discursive strategies of contextualization) which give birth to new and

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

better understandings and practices of contextualization. Both the context of and challenge for contextualization is to move towards the cultivation of what Foucault long ago called the “(insurrection of) subjugated knowledges”—discursive strategies and formations that have been conceptually, historically, philosophically, and institutionally excluded or eclipsed from theorizing heretofore—in the hope that they will contribute to both new knowledge, practice and discursive proximity.<sup>8</sup> Here, genealogy yields to cartography, by which I mean the strategic deployment of local knowledges, the goal of which is to illumine, if not understand, alternative pathways to biblical, theological, and pastoral practice.

### **Diaspora, Global Capital (or Empire), and Strangeness**

Second, my understanding of theological contextualization is shaped fundamentally by my historical experience of Diaspora, global capital, or empire as the formative grounds for strangeness, which is a condition of possibility for contextualization.

In his analysis of modern international politics and global capitalism, Michael Dillon notes that states as regimes of sovereignty and governmentality together with transnational capitalism and the environmental degradation of the planet have not only rendered millions of people radically endangered strangers in their own homes, but have criminalized or anathemized them in the places to which they have been forced to seek refuge. The modern international state system, in fact, is a *panopticon* of manufactured estrangement.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Dillon, “Sovereignty and Governmentality: From the Problematics of the ‘New World Order’ to the Ethical Problematic of the World Order” *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance* 20/3 (Spring 1995), 323-368.



In the Philippine context, this estrangement is clearly demonstrated by the migration of Filipinos, today numbering over ten million, to other parts of the planet. Such migration is characterized not only by dispersal, displacement, and dislocation,<sup>10</sup> but also of what Nikos Papastergiadis has innovatively and insightfully called, turbulence, suggesting by its use not mere motion, activity, or movement, but disruptive, unpredictable, volatile speed.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, the experience of “Diaspora” is not only about the dispersal, displacement, and dislocation of those “outside” the homeland. In fact, Diaspora dissolves not only the geopolitical, geostrategic, and territorial boundaries of “inside” and “outside,” but also their epistemological and ontological foundations. The Filipino Diaspora today is emblematic of a more comprehensively human condition that has produced new forms of belonging and identity as well as novel understandings of contemporary politics and culture. Diaspora evokes and provokes images of “border crossings” as well as invasions, of estrangements as well as of hybridities. It reveals global de-territorializing trajectories as well as local re-territorializing surges or insurgencies, especially under the conditions of transnational capital.<sup>12</sup> Diaspora

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<sup>10</sup> Epiphonio San Juan, “Fragments from a Filipino Exile’s Journal,” *Amerasia Journal* 23/2 (Winter 1997): 1-25. See also Jonathan Okamura, *Imagining the Filipino American Diaspora: Transnational Relations, Identities, and Communities* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998); Oscar Campomanes, “The New Empire’s Forgetful and Forgotten Citizens: Unrepresentability and Unassimilability in Filipino-American Postcolonialities,” *Critical Mass* 2: 2 (Winter 1995): 145-200. Cf. Epiphonio San Juan, Jr., “Configuring the Filipino Diaspora in the United States,” *Diaspora* 3/2 (Winter 1994): 117-133; Epiphonio San Juan, *From Exile to Diaspora: Versions of the Filipino Experience in the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization, and Hybridity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 3-21. See Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

underscores contradictions and antagonisms, while intensifying the asymmetries of political, economic, and cultural structures and processes.”<sup>13</sup>

The reality of “Diaspora” also raises a question not only about subjecthood, but also about subjectivity. This is the question of “the Subject:” not only who the subject is, but also what being a subject entails.<sup>14</sup> The contested plurality of subjects and subjectivities pre-supposed by a “Diaspora” directs us not only to the question “What is to be done?” but also to the questions of “Who we are, what we hope for, and where we go?” In short, “What does it mean to be a people under the conditions of turbulent, volatile dispersal, displacement, and dislocation?” Posing the issue as a question of community places theological contextualization at the heart of the struggles for transformation and in the context of the “hermeneutical significance of the victim.”

The reality of “Diaspora” also identifies the locus of struggle and hope at the intersection of self, other, and world. Of no small methodological and political significance, locating the question at the nexus of a peoples’ cultural practices—defined broadly as those concrete, sensuous realities embodied in rhetorical forms, gestures, procedures, modes, shapes, genres of everyday life: discursive formations and/or strategies, if you will, which are radically contingent arenas of imagination, strategy, and creative maneuver<sup>15</sup>—not only challenges the narrow confines of conventional understandings of struggle and hope, but also foregrounds their most

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<sup>13</sup> Nevzat Soguk, *States and Strangers: Refugees and Displacements of Statecraft* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

<sup>14</sup> Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jan-Luc Nancy, eds., *Who Comes after the Subject?* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Michael Ryan, *Politics and Culture: Working Hypotheses for a Post Revolutionary Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).

comprehensive point of departure: a peoples' pluralistic, and therefore always and already contradictory, antagonistic and agonistic histories, which are expressed in their stories, songs, poetry, and arts; embodied in their political struggles; and articulated in their economic institutions. Another way of stating the point is to suggest that "Diaspora" ruptures the pretensions of modernity's appetite for intellectual idealism as the unitary foundation for human thought and action and re-positions them as articulations of the "interstitial."<sup>16</sup>

It is here that the "nativist" temptation is most forcefully raised. The work of scholars like Kwok Pui Lan and Tat-Siong Benny Liew, in fact, may be interpreted as suggesting that contextualization needs to move through its *Asianist*, if not *Asian-centric* pre-occupations, to engage with a radically-extended notion of "Asian" which goes beyond a homogenous or unitary notion arising not only out of its multistranded contexts, but also will have multiple, intersectional accounts: biological, cultural, psychic, and political.<sup>17</sup> This abbreviated, admittedly oversimplified, summary of the "nativist" temptation that assumes a somewhat geographically-essentialist understanding of "the Asian" describes the fundamental divide between the proponents of "Asian as social construction" and the proponents of "Asian as biology" that continues to cast its long, if epistemologically-flawed, shadow on present-day discourses on contextualization. Moreover, it suggests that the discussion on contextualization cannot be extricated from socio-historical and physicalist/geographical considerations of "the Asian,"

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<sup>16</sup> See Avta Brah and Ann Phoenix, "Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality" *Journal of International Women's Studies* 5:3 (2004): 75-86.

<sup>17</sup> As Brah and Phoenix note, the concept of intersectionality signifies "the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis [sic] of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts." Diaspora is such a reality. Brah and Phoenix, *Ibid.*, 76.

precisely because the perspectives noted previously rely on *Asianist* (read racialized) physical, morphological, and geographical traits assumed to be “ontologically-different.” It also points to ongoing discussions, as in the work of Kwok, Liew, and Fernandez, that the notion of “Asian” not only continues to change over time, but also that contextualization (in the Asian context) may be more productively understood by the “effects” of this “contingent Asian” rather than by its already established conceptually-dominant definitions—hence, the methodological importance of “Diaspora.”

If “Diaspora” is the geographic/strategic condition of contextualization, then the strangeness that it creates is its methodological occasionality, alongside the Stranger—the Other—who embodies such strangeness, which is its methodological and religio-moral challenge. For indeed, “Diaspora,” as a creature of both modernity and postmodernity,<sup>18</sup> methodologically radicalizes the experience of the Stranger or of Otherness in our time, and the existence of the Stranger in our midst raises for us the problems, prospects, and possibilities of both fundamentally new and better forms of knowledge and being, as well as of their interpretations. Similarly, strangeness, not to mention marginalization, it seems, is a condition of possibility both for community and interpretation: it is its constitutive outside. At the same time, if the Stranger is the constitutive *outside*, then its constitutive *inside* is hospitality. Because hospitality—the inclusion of the Stranger into a community not originally his or her own—is that which “arrives

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<sup>18</sup> The modern-postmodern divide is a profoundly contested one. By placing them in proximity, as I do in this essay, I want to suggest that these structures of meaning are best understood in both their continuities and discontinuities of method, cultural form, and political practice. Thus, I understand modernity and postmodernity less as periodizations and more as “conditions,” “sensibilities,” and “practices.” My own orientation, sensibility, and location are probably more congenial with the theory and practice of postcoloniality than with modernity or postmodernity. See, for example, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

at the borders, in the initial surprise of contact with an other, a stranger, a foreigner”<sup>19</sup> it ruptures the boundaries that seek to contain migration and immigration in the name of state sovereignty, if not national integrity. It asks of us how we treat the stranger in our midst; and in that question, our identities begin to be articulated.

Of course, danger lies in the fact that both the Stranger and the giver of hospitality are not immune to the desire or temptation for “sameness” or uniformity—or even coercion and domination—even as the long experience of the condition of strangeness and hospitality often breeds certain fetishes for such strangeness and hospitality, including desires for the exotic. Moreover, hospitality does not always aspire towards genuine compassion or unconditional plenitude. Hospitality itself, when implicated in the perpetuation of power and privilege, tends to cast its long shadow on the struggle for a “genuine” hospitality that seeks to offer both the Stranger and the giver of hospitality the opportunity to live well together in the context of their shared differences. Indeed, the very structure of hospitality often must posit the existence of strangers “in need of hospitality,” requiring therefore, the legitimation of structures and processes that exclude before they include. Such exclusionary logics, for example of race, gender, and class, migrate on to the structures of “hospitality” without being overcome or transformed. Put differently, one must be open to the possibility that strangeness and hospitality (i.e., “Diaspora”) are necessary though insufficient conditions for the creation and nurture of radically inclusive communities of struggle and hope. Hence, writing from the perspective of the religio-moral, contextualization requires that we gesture toward resistance and solidarity. At the same time,

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<sup>19</sup> This I take to be the philosophical significance of Jacques Derrida’s January 1996 Paris lectures on “Foreigner Question” and “Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality,” published in Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

since the religio-moral cannot be extricated from the methodological, the fundamental question for contextualization is: how can it be rendered methodologically (read “structurally”) hospitable? What may be said of the Stranger and of hospitality are equally true for theological contextualization.

Elsewhere I have argued that Diaspora is not a stranger to global capital and empire. Here, let me note only in passing, its importance as a context for contextualization.

Global capital cannot be reduced to “empire,” but neither can “empire” be extricated from transnational capital.<sup>20</sup> Both, whatever their *raison d’être*, are fundamentally articulations of power. In fact, both transnational capital and “empire” are implicated in a narrative of modernity that in turn reproduces global capital and “empire.” By “modernity” I mean, following Richard K. Ashley’s lead, the “multifaceted historical narrative rooted in the Enlightenment, dominant in Western society, expressed in rationalist theory, and centering on the progressive unfolding of universalizing reason and social harmony via science, technology, law, and the state.”<sup>21</sup> Where Ashley assists us in identifying the *philosophical* contours of this multifaceted historical narrative, Anthony Giddens provides a useful *institutional* cartography of modernity, arguing in *The Consequences of Modernity* that there are four institutional dimensions of modernity: capitalism, i.e., capital accumulation in the context of competitive labor and product

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<sup>20</sup>Charles Amjad-Ali and Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, “Betrayed by a Kiss: Evangelicals and US Empire,” in Bruce Ellis Benson and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Evangelicals and Empire: Christian Alternatives to the Political Status Quo* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 54-66. The academic literature on this is extensive. See for example, Michael Mann, *Incoherent Empire* (London: Verso, 2003), David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003), Gopal Balakrishnan and Stanley Aronowitz, eds., *Debating Empire* (London: Verso, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> Richard Ashley, "The Geopolitics of Geopolitical Space: Toward a Critical Social Theory of International Politics," *Alternatives: Social Transformation and Humane Governance* 2: 4 (1987), 403-434.

markets; industrialism, i.e., the transformation of nature or the development of the ‘created environment’; surveillance, i.e., the control of information and social supervision; and, military power, i.e., the control of the means of violence in the context of the industrialization of war.<sup>22</sup>

What is important to understand about the narrative of modernity is its logocentric disposition, the tendency to regard all thought, feeling, and action as grounded in some fundamental identity, principle of interpretation, or necessary thinking substance which is itself regarded as unproblematic, nonhistorical, and hence, in no need of critical accounting. This principle of interpretation and practice is conceived as existing in itself as a foundation or origin of history’s making, not a contingent effect of political practices within history. Such a disposition has become a principle of articulation, if not a ground for domination that creates and re-creates human life in its own image.

Hence, William Connolly rightly notes that the West at its imperial best, the US being a clear example, arrogates to itself the power and privilege of the interrogator, consistently negating or demeaning the role of other peoples in civilizational, socio-cultural, political and economic history, while claiming the same history as an exclusively Western possession.<sup>23</sup> At the same time the West is very quick to hyperbolize and render pathological the imperial powers,

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<sup>22</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). Cf. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 61. See generally Paul A. Passavant and Jodi Dean, eds., *Empire’s New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri* (New York: Routledge, 2004). See especially Ernesto Laclau, “Can Immanence Explain Empire?” in Passavant and Dean, *Empire’s New Clothes*, 21-30. Cf. Mark Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post 9/11 Powers in American Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005); and Sharon Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

practices and ambitions of others: All that is good, it is argued, is of Western origin and all that is wrong is part of the larger tragic human condition which is external to the West.

Thus, any project of contextualization cannot avoid addressing the dangers of being absorbed into this US-led western project.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, it is no longer sufficient, empirically if not analytically or philosophically, to explain “the world” in terms of US-led “empire.” There is enough evidence to suggest that the very states that have historically challenged US hegemony, for example, China, India, and even the EEU, are themselves engaged in their own versions of “empire-building,” albeit within the larger frame of global capital. This multi-polar view of the world is enough to suggest that the fundamental *problematique* to which theological contextualization needs to attend are the dynamics of power and privilege that accompany these multiple realities of empire-building, and not only the dominant historical form that they take.

### **Challenges to Contextualization**

The future of theological contextualization as a discursive formation and strategy may require at least three tasks. First, contextualization needs to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different ways of producing and reproducing knowledge (epistemology): here, not only is this about situated knowledges and partial perspectives, but also of subjugated and insurrectionary knowledges and agents of knowledges, and the ways in which they are related. Even more important, however, is the need to consistently focus, among other things, on the

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<sup>24</sup> Catherine Keller, et al, eds. *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004).



fundamental situatedness and partial character of our ways of organizing thinking, feeling and acting, and on the necessity, if not desirability, of rethinking the relationship between reason and desire, and knowledge and politics, in the construction of interpretive frameworks for theological contextualization that demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relationship between them.<sup>25</sup> Here it will be important to pay very close attention to the epistemological implications of, say Giorgio Agamben's work on "apparatus" (and certainly of Foucault on genealogy), particularly as they frame the realities of "situated knowledges and partial perspectives."<sup>26</sup>

Second, theological contextualization needs to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different modes of being (ontology). Here discourses on the "body" are useful guides to understand what is at stake. For example, not only is this about thinking, feeling, and acting as relational practices, but also about "volatile bodies," i.e., of re-figuring and re-inscribing bodies, of moving through and beyond the conventional divide of gender as socially-constructed, on the one hand, and of sex as biologically-given, on the other hand, to "our bodies our selves."<sup>27</sup> Feminists have suggested that the "male (or female) body can no longer be regarded as a fixed,

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<sup>25</sup> Allison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology" in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. *Feminisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Cf. Fernando Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds. *Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Publishers, 1995).

<sup>26</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonard's, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994). Cf. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, "Recovering the Body: When Race and Power Migrate," in Werner, et al, *Handbook of Theological Education in World Christianity: Theological Perspectives, Ecumenical Trends, Regional Surveys*, 85-103.

concrete substance, a pre-cultural given. It has a determinate form only by being socially inscribed... as a socio-historical 'object'." They continue,

The body can no longer be confined to biological determinants, to an immanent 'factitious', or unchanging social status. It is a political object par excellence; its forms, capacities, behaviours, gestures, movements, potential are primary objects of political contestation. As a political object, the body is not inert or fixed. It is pliable and plastic material, which is capable of being formed and organized.<sup>28</sup>

One may ask, therefore, "How does one contextualize concrete, sensuous bodies?" But perhaps more important, we will need to ask what, how, and where are the *embodied* forms of theological contextualization?

Third, theological contextualization needs to continue to recognize, affirm, and articulate different empowering practices (politics). Not only is this about the importance and power of self-definition, self-valuation, nor of self-reliance and autonomy, but also about transformation and transgression, of finding safe places and voices in the midst of difference, and of making the connections. Chandra Talpade Mohanty summarizes this point quite well. She notes,

...third world women's writings on feminism have consistently focused on (1) the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism; (2) the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles; (3) the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency; and (4) the differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal to third world women's

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<sup>28</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, "Notes towards a corporeal feminism," *Australian Feminist Studies* 5 (1987): 2. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Random House, 1984), 83. See also Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977). Cf. Judith P. Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

organizations and communities. In addition, they have insisted on the complex interrelationships between feminist, antiracist, and nationalist struggles...<sup>29</sup>

### **Contextualization as World-Forming Practices: Dialogue, Diversity, and the Creation of “One World, Many Worlds”**

I suggested at the beginning of this essay that contextualization is fundamentally a hermeneutical event, an act of understanding, which arises in the “fusion of horizons” (*Horizontverschmelzung*)—or of bringing that which is “strange” into proximity with that which is “not-strange”—which is a relationship that is constituted both by the reality of history and of historical understanding. Hans-Georg Gadamer called this “effective historical consciousness” (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*), where the “reality of history” presents itself “so much in terms of our own selves that there is no longer a question of self and other.”<sup>30</sup> It is within this hermeneutical *practice* that contextualization must be articulated. What elements are required for such a re-articulation?

My intuition returns to the ancient notion of dialogue (*dia-logos*)<sup>31</sup> or moving together through multiple universes of meaning—understood as the “transformation of play into

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<sup>29</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Anna Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 10. Cf. Judith P. Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer writes, “Understanding is not to be thought of so much as an action of one's subjectivity, but as the placing of oneself within a process of tradition, in which past and present are constantly fused.” Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 258. Cf. pages 267ff. See also Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Text and Interpretation” in Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard Palmer, eds., *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 21-51.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Professor Charles Amjad-Ali of Luther Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota for drawing my attention to dialogue as more than a “conversation” between two individuals.

structure.”<sup>32</sup> Here dialogue has a four-fold process that moves from the evanescent immediacy of proximal engagement (“the encounter”), to the narrative of biography (“my story”), then to history (“our people’s story”), and finally to cosmology (“the story of the universe”). To be sure, this is not an inexorable teleological unfolding of some Hegelian *Geist*, but rather the “play of differences” where dialogical ruptures often result in unexpected historical repetitions or sometimes profound Nietzschean-like repudiations of hallowed traditions, but where the encounter with the “totally-transpersonal-other-than-me” is always mediated through the engagement with what Emmanuel Levinas describes as the Other, and where the way through the *Logos* (or *logoi*) cannot evade fallibility, and therefore, must affirm the self-critical accountability of those engaged in theological contextualization.

I am almost convinced that the practice of contextualization will work only if there is a genuine identification with particular “communities of transformation” where the play of differences is affirmed as constitutive of being-in-a-community-of-shared-difference, and where this “shared difference,” understood as “conviviality,” reaches not only for diversity but for “radical inclusion,” where persons see all of humankind (and, possibly all of creation) as *possible* fellow sojourners towards a world of meaning and significance who realize that their destinies are inextricably-woven to their capacities to learn how to live together on the one planet that is our common heritage (the ethical demand), and who intentionally move towards a common and abiding refusal to understand self, other, and world as being constitutively dependent on the gaze of a subject-of-the-world (the philosophical demand). For while the human condition arises out

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<sup>32</sup> See Gadamer, 102ff., fn 30.

of “difference” and returns to difference, its normative, if not necessary challenge, is not how the difference can be overcome, but rather how and under what conditions is it possible for us not only to live together, but to live together well *finally*.<sup>33</sup>

Put differently, contextualization is not an end in itself; it is a passage through difference into *living well* differently. Here, difference and “limits” embrace, not unlike life and death, *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Thus, I am more than convinced that theological contextualization, which by its very structure is a fallible, if not fumbling (i.e., contingent), Gadamerian “conversation,” requires a commitment to some minimal form of “mutuality” or reciprocity and self-criticality that intentionally and purposively reaches from the ground of humility for the “fundamentally new which is also fundamentally better.”

Moreover, contextualization is not only a contingent conversation that aspires to the ethical and the philosophical. In fact, it is a creative act of *forming* a world. Gadamer brings the “transformation of play into structure” and the “fusion of horizons” into discursive proximity—both of which constitute our (human) “being-in-the-world.” It is here where the significance of forming a world arises for “contextualization.” Not only do these acts of interpretation cast suspicions on construals of grand theories of contextualization as “totality grasped as [an indistinct] whole,” but more important, they also force such theorizing into a process of differentiation and formation that “maintains a crucial reference to the world’s horizon as a space

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<sup>33</sup> This is how I read Jacques Derrida’s *The Last Interview: Learning to Live Finally*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (Hoboken: Melville House Press, 2007), where one’s death, when understood as the quintessential *aporia* which is both limit and rupture (Spivak), presents the possibility of being thrown back on to life not as mere existence but as living fully well.

of human relations... of meaning held in common... of signification or possible signification”<sup>34</sup>  
that no longer conceives of theological contextualization as merely an object of representation.

When articulated against this multi-stranded background, dialogue and diversity as conditions of possibility press towards a non-representational *practice* that is simultaneously critical interpretation, effective performance, purposive formation, and transformative contextualization.<sup>35</sup> Here dialogue, diversity, and the formation of “one world, many worlds,” as well as of “the play of differences,” conviviality, the dialogical non-binary commitment to unconditional and principled openness and reciprocity, the goal of transformation or the “creation of the fundamentally new which is also fundamentally better”—all provide the fundamental elements for theological contextualization.

### **Conclusion: Contextualization as Transformation**

I want to conclude by returning to the fundamental and necessary challenge that gives rise to the question of “contextualization” with which I began this essay: the need for biblical, theological, and pastoral contextualization resting on the metaphors of both Incarnation and Kenosis. The need is as simple as it is profound. The human condition under the sign of “Diaspora” is essentially about the familiar becoming strangely unfamiliar with uneven consequences depending on one’s location and positionality. This “strangeness” which some

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<sup>34</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy’s path breaking distinction between globalization and *mondialisation* illustrates the methodological move I am making. See especially, Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, translated by Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany: State University of New York, 2007), 2ff. See also, R.B.J. Walker, *After the Globe: Before the World* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> The terminology of this four-fold practice is adapted from Charles Foster, et al, *Educating Clergy: Teaching Practices and Pastoral Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006).

would prefer to call “estrangement” requires both interpretation and transformation if one wants not only to live but to *live well*. Unfortunately, what is becoming clear to me is that the assertion of the desirability or normative character of “theological contextualization” is almost always accompanied by a fundamental subterranean epistemological temptation to “represent” the world as an act of a “subject of history.” The conditions of our world—even this postcolonial world—so powerfully captured in Martin Heidegger’s image of the “the age of the world as picture,” conspire to preserve this temptation. Reality is surrendered to the determination of a subject, particularly of a “possessive individual.”<sup>36</sup> Such representation is not only the quintessential repetition of the Cartesian aspiration for that *fundamentum inconcussum* that guarantees knowledge, but also its consequences have become fundamentally flawed, if unsustainable, in a postmodern, postcolonial world where both incommensurability and the *possibility* of understanding cannot be evaded, and the asymmetry of power and privilege resists transformation.

My wager, at least at the intuitive and philosophical level, is that by bringing contextualization into discursive proximity with transformation as “the creation of the fundamentally new that is also fundamentally better,” understood as a particular kind of practice, the inherently *ontotheological* or representational character of our inherited notions of contextualization might be greatly reduced to a place where the locations and positionalities of

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<sup>36</sup> C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: From Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

critique become questions not of epistemology, but of (ontological) worldliness.<sup>37</sup> Here contextualization is not only an “impossible possibility,” it becomes a necessary strategy for the survival of the world.

Such ontotheological assertions betray a fundamental subterranean epistemological dichotomy between “church” and “world” (theology and human science) which functions as a “Trojan Horse” for the privileging of the former in theological contextualization. This is the quintessential repetition of that heresy around the Incarnation with which the Christian churches have wrestled throughout its almost 2000-year history. I want to suggest that for as long as the dichotomy is maintained, “contextualization” will simply be a principle that regulates Christian thought and practice, a creature of incremental change that undermines the possibility of fundamental change itself. For Christians, this bringing into proximity can only be achieved by moving from their onto-*theological* assertions to their “worldly” locations and positionalities.

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer who started me on my theological journey towards a *non-representational* contextualization when he declared in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, dated July 21, 1944, the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. It may be that Christians today must aspire to this *Diesseitigkeit des Christentums* not as an assertion of the eternal relevance of the mission of Christianity and therefore, the imperative for contextualization, but rather, as Christian faith’s unavoidable and necessary *arche* and *telos*—where the practice of contextualization is one of the key strategic conditions for becoming finally “fully human” in a

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<sup>37</sup> This is the burden of Martin Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” and “The Age of the World Picture.” Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). Gadamer addresses similar concerns about the ontotheological character of modern philosophy in terms of his notions of “effective historical consciousness,” “the fusion of horizons,” and, “transformation of play into structure.”



non-representational “one world, many worlds.” This may prove to be Christianity’s greatest challenge yet.