

*Philip Gibbs SVD\**

### **ENCOUNTERING DIFFERENCE: INTERCULTURALITY AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY**

*The rapidly changing context in the world today calls for a new starting point in theological reflection. Contextual theology responds to this call so that the Good News speaks in a more meaningful way to the local context. Our understanding of culture is also changing with the move from an essentialist understanding of culture to notions of interculturality. Interculturality sees the world as interrelated and interdependent and aims at establishing a genuine dialogue across cultural boundaries based on partnership and reciprocity. Contextual theology works together with intercultural mission revealing fresh perspectives on the Gospel narrative and challenging people to see the world differently.*

#### ***Introduction***

Context may be a relatively new term in theological discourse, but as Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder show in their book *Constants in Context*, different changing contexts exerted a major influence on Christian theological development over two millennia.<sup>1</sup> For example, Greek philosophy aided the formulation of Christology in early Church Councils, and the civilizing mission of the Enlightenment in Europe reinforced attitudes of Western cultural and religious superiority. Whether it is the context of the early church as it expanded eastward outside the Roman Empire or the subsequent growth into Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania, the Church has continued to witness to constants in the Gospel of Jesus. Yet balancing constants and difference has been a constant theme in the spread of the Gospel into new contexts.

---

\* Born in 1947 in Aotearoa/New Zealand, ordination in 1978. He has an MA in Theology with Mission Specialization (CTU–Chicago), Post-Graduate Diploma in Anthropology (University of Sydney), and a Doctorate in Theology (Gregorian University, Rome). At present he serves as research advisor for Caritas Australia in Papua New Guinea, and Secretary of the Commission for Social Concerns of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea/Solomon Islands.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen B. Bevans/Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context. A Theology of Mission for Today*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2004.

Previously historical and geographical factors appeared to take precedence in changing contexts. Today with globalization we face new forms of contextual change. As Robert Schreiter notes, boundaries today are increasingly not boundaries of territory, but boundaries of difference.<sup>2</sup> Rich and poor are found across national boundaries throughout the world. Secondly we experience compression of time with the world of cyberspace. Email, chats, and social networking communicate in real time and there is now a massive increase in people using mobile phones, even in remote areas. Thirdly, the whole concept of “culture” is being debated today. Globalization brings with it hyperculture associated with icons of expansionist commerce such as Coca-Cola, and more people live multiple identities with various degrees of loyalty to different communities: Australian, Catholic, policewoman, mother.... At tourist spots in New Zealand, one can purchase Maori medallions “made in China.” Changing contexts and different understandings of what we mean by culture call us to consider how best to do theology.

This paper begins by noting how the changing context calls for a new starting point in theology. This raises issues of orthodoxy and diversity. I also note that our understanding of culture is changing and how this impacts contextual theology that develops from the dynamic encounter between different cultural elements. The move from an essentialist understanding of culture to notions of interculturality affects our understanding of mission *ad gentes*, and also has implications on how we understand contextual theology today. Besides written sources such as Robert Schreiter’s excellent book *The New Catholicity*, I draw on the experience of life in the Asia-Pacific Zone, particularly Papua New Guinea.

### *Contextual Theology*

Scholastic theology, favoured in the Catholic academy until the Second Vatican Council, relied on two principal theological sources, scripture and tradition, that form “a single sacred deposit of the Word of God” (*Dei Verbum* 10). From these sources theology derived unchanging truths framed in propositional language. Stephen Bevans explains how contextual theology adds another *locus theologicus*: present human experience.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2008.

In recent times we have seen the emergence of liberation theology, feminist theology, black theology, and ecotheology, to name a few. These are all forms of contextual theology that Robert Schreiter calls “global theological flows” or antisystemic global movements.<sup>4</sup> There are other forms of local theologies such as Water buffalo theology, Minjung theology, Moana theology and also many forms of indigenous theology without titles in which people try to take seriously God speaking to every aspect of life.<sup>5</sup> These contextual theologies recognize that if God’s revelation is to really speak to people today, then culture, history and different contemporary thought forms must be considered along with scripture and tradition as sources for theological expression.<sup>6</sup> Historian Andrew Walls points out how “the full-grown humanity of Christ requires all the Christian generations, just as it embodies all the cultural variety that six continents can bring.”<sup>7</sup>

Contextual theology involves more than adding a third *locus theologicus*. It also brings a change from a deductive to an inductive theological method. In Christian contextual theology, human experience and Christian tradition are read together, but the context in all its dimensions is the starting point for theological reflection.<sup>8</sup>

New approaches to theology raise questions about how to recognise the one faith in its different contextual interpretations. Walter Mignolo argues that the “colonial difference” puts the non-Western thinker in a double bind. Either theology all over the world is similar to European theology such that there is no room for a distinctive contribution, or “border thinking” from a local perspective is not recognised as true theology.<sup>9</sup> It is hard to establish a single criterion for orthodoxy, given the diversity of cultures and the complexity of the

<sup>4</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 15-16.

<sup>5</sup> Kosuke Koyama, *Water Buffalo Theology*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1974; Byung Mu Ahn, *Story of the Minjung Theology*, Seoul: Research Center of Korean Theology 1987; Winston Halapua, *Waves of God’s Embrace: Sacred Perspectives from the Ocean*, London: Canterbury Press 2008; Philip Gibbs, *Emerging Indigenous Theologies in Oceania: Concilium* (2010/5) 34-44.

<sup>6</sup> For a comprehensive treatment of Contextual Theologies, see Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1996, xvii.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Gibbs, *Narrative and Context in a Practical Theology for Papua New Guinea: Australian Ejournal of Theology*, March 2007, [http://aejt.com.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/378603/AEJT\\_9.16\\_Gibbs\\_Narrative\\_and\\_Context.pdf](http://aejt.com.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/378603/AEJT_9.16_Gibbs_Narrative_and_Context.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2000.

Christian tradition.<sup>10</sup> However, Robert Schreiter names five helpful criteria for deciding the theological acceptability of different local expressions.<sup>11</sup> First, it should be consistent with the central truths of the Christian faith. It cannot run contrary to the fundamentals of the faith as found in Scripture and tradition. Second, any true expression of contextual theology should be able to be translated into worship. *Lex orandi, lex credendi*—the way we pray indicates the way we believe. Third, orthopraxis reveals orthodoxy. “By their fruits you will know them” (Mt 7:16). Fourth, theological opinion should not be so assured of its own truth that it is not open to dialogue and criticism. Fifth, theology demonstrates true catholicity by encouraging its proponents to contribute positively to dialogue with other contextual theologies and to uncover new areas for theological reflection.

### *Contextual Theology as Intercultural Interpretation*

I will illustrate the above issues in an example from Papua New Guinea. Many of the most important traditional customs in Papua New Guinea are associated with death and funerals. Yet, members of the God Triwan Movement within the Catholic Church in the Enga Province challenge those customs.<sup>12</sup> The actions of Sara Thomas and her husband offer a remarkable illustration of a Christian couple acting counter to Engan custom. Sara’s nine-year-old son died after falling from a tree. After the boy died and people came to mourn, as is their custom, she told them to stop wailing, saying, “If you are really sorry for the boy, then pray for him. Crying won’t raise him up from death. He is dead and if you are sorry then we should pray and think of his life.” People thought she was crazy and told her so. Later she did cry as she prayed to Mary, “Mother Mary, when they killed your son you sat feeling very sad. What you felt, I feel now too, so you must help me to put this boy into your hands along with your son, Jesus Christ. Also give peace to my clanspeople so that they don’t get too angry about the death of the boy.” This was the day before Sara and her husband were due to receive a blessing from the Bishop as a group of seventy-two members of the movement who would go out on

<sup>10</sup> See Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 22ff.

<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 1985, 117-121. This is discussed further in Bevens, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 23-24.

<sup>12</sup> See Philip Gibbs, The God Triwan Movement: Inculturation Enga Style: *Catalyst* 34:1 (2004) 3-23. <http://www.philipgibbs.org/pdfs/God%20Triwan.pdf>. The movement has divided into several factions in recent times, after the death of the founder.

mission to various parts of the diocese. According to Engan custom, it is totally forbidden for anyone in a family to wear colourful body decorations during the mourning period for the death of a family member. Sara and her husband decided to go counter to custom and to wear festive clothing for the ceremony with the Bishop—particularly a brightly coloured yellow cap, with yellow, according to the movement, representing the risen Christ. They then went to the cathedral to receive the Bishop's blessing along with seventy others. Though Sara and her husband went quite contrary to Engan custom, they were consciously taking a stand on their belief that children are a gift from God, and felt that they wanted to celebrate the life of their dead son. Other members of the God Triwan community supported them in this.

The example helps illustrate issues associated with contextual theology raised above. The couple's response takes the form of intracultural mission involving a counter-cultural performance that is meaningful to an indigenous worldview. It appears to meet the five criteria for theological acceptability. It highlights a fundamental tenet of Christian faith and it calls on the community to pray at a funeral prior to going to attend a missioning ceremony with the local Bishop. At that time the leader of the God Triwan Community showed his openness by asking the Bishop for guidance as to how best the movement could serve the local church and in so doing they helped enrich the common catholicity of the Church.

The couple's action involved a Christian interpretation of human experience across cultural boundaries. They infringed cultural codes associated with death, but did so intentionally for the purpose of proclaiming the Christian message of life. They were not foreign missionaries, but evangelists who shared the same cultural understanding as their neighbours, so their prophetic statement is intracultural, but it was also intercultural as it had links with cultural elements not indigenous to Enga such as the Christ story, the text on the seventy-two disciples (Lk 10:1-23), and Church structures under the Bishop. Enga is a "high-context" culture in which the historical background and the ethos of the community are important for understanding.<sup>13</sup> Through symbols such as the colours they wore in that context, the couple was communicating non-verbally how they understood the powerful central message of Christianity about the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Outsiders might not realise the counter-cultural symbolism, but their neighbours did understand

---

<sup>13</sup> For discussion on low and high context cultures, see Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 37.

and those who were not members of the God Triwan movement surely found the message confronting. However, Sara and her husband were part of a group of seventy-two local evangelists challenging people to see the world differently. Meaning emerges out of interaction, and the message was experienced in the difference, or liminal space, emerging from the interaction of the couple's testimony and the social judgement of the community.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Schreiter notes that the focus of the Christian message is not a proposition, but a narrative.<sup>15</sup> Propositions can be set down in black and white and then translated. Narratives are shared and reconstructed in new environments. Contextual theology that searches for truth embedded in the narratives of local communities is a form of interpretation. As such it is the art of finding new meaning in the encounter between the Gospel and different forms of human experience. This approach should not run contrary to doctrinal theology. The catechism is an excellent resource for responding to a question such as "How do we understand this tenet of faith?" However, for contextual theology the question is rather, "What is faith/the Gospel/God saying to us in this context?"

### *Culture and Interculturality*

Anthropologists have developed theories of culture that stress difference and cultural plurality.<sup>16</sup> Meaning, truth, performance and material items are each viewed as relative to their respective culture. This has led to an integrated concept of culture in relatively self-enclosed and self-sufficient traditional societies. In recent times, particularly with the influence of post-modernist and post-colonial theory, there has been a move away from such essentialist interpretations of culture.<sup>17</sup>

In his opening speech to the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII made a distinction between the form and content of dogmatic formulations ("The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of

---

<sup>14</sup> On the liminality of intercultural communication, see Fumitaka Matsuo-ka, A Reflection on "Teaching Theology from an Intercultural Perspective": *Theological Education* 26.1 (1989) 37-38.

<sup>15</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 131.

<sup>16</sup> This is true for much of modern anthropology, but particularly that of the Structural Functionalist school, such as E. E. Evans-Pritchard and A. Radcliffe-Brown and their followers.

<sup>17</sup> James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1986.

faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another”).<sup>18</sup> However, this gives the impression that there is a supra-cultural message that can be separated from the language and culture in which it is presented—a notion that has been criticised in modern hermeneutical theory.<sup>19</sup> The official Church shows little sign of changing its understanding of culture and appears to be losing the social sciences as a conversation partner.<sup>20</sup>

The first generation of contextual theologies used integrated concepts of culture in which cultural difference was closely related to different contexts, which was therefore a reason for distinctive contextual theologies. However, in recent times, contextual theologies have taken notice of the emergence of globalized concepts of culture, and more attention is being given to culture change, pluralism and multiple identities.<sup>21</sup> Thus contextual theology is now based less on the difference between distinct, bounded, unified concepts of culture, and more on the asymmetries associated with social change. The world today is increasingly pluricultural and as a consequence contextual theologies are developing as a discourse on difference from the perspective of those in the margins.

Robert Schreiter argues that neither the global, homogenizing forces, nor local forms of accommodation and resistance can of themselves explain what happens in intercultural encounter and that “it is precisely in their interaction that one comes to understand what is happening.”<sup>22</sup> This intercultural interaction provides a locus for theological reflection.

### *Interculturality in Different Contexts*

The concept of interculturality is at cross-purposes with both globalization and self-enclosed notions of culture. It sees the world as inter-

<sup>18</sup> Pope John XIII, “Opening Speech to the Council,” in W. M. Abbott (ed.) *The Documents of Vatican II*, London: Geoffrey Chapman 1967, 715 (AAS 54 [1962] 792).

<sup>19</sup> A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons. New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1980, 81.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Rynkiewich, Do We Need a Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postcolonial World?: *Mission Studies* 28 (2011) 152.

<sup>21</sup> I develop this point in: The Context of God’s Mission in Papua New Guinea: Intercultural Relations and an SVD Tradition: *Verbum SVD* 53 (2012) 69-84. See also Michael Rynkiewich, Do We Need a Postmodern Anthropology, 151-169.

<sup>22</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 12.

related and interdependent and it aims at establishing a genuine dialogue across cultural boundaries based on partnership and reciprocity.<sup>23</sup> I will consider three aspects of interculturality. It is multicultural, reciprocal, and it facilitates dialogue. All three aspects present new possibilities not only for missiology, but for doing theology in a way that appreciates difference.

First, despite trends towards uniformity connected with globalization, we are also becoming more aware of the multicultural reality of our world. Global trade relations and migration are just two of the many multicultural stimuli that we witness daily through modern media. Consider the example of young people spending free time in modern shopping malls. There they encounter much the same technoculture of globalization whether they are in Manila, Lagos, Port Moresby or Sydney, but when they go out into the street and return home they will enter into the distinct cultural setting that contributes to their unique cultural identity. Whether personally or as a group they are immersed in the encounter between the global and the local.

Since Vatican II the Catholic Church too has theoretically become more open to being a more multicultural world church with special regional Synods (held in Rome) and papal visits to various parts of the globe. However, recent trends to the contrary such as the imposition of new translations of the Order of Mass following *Liturgiam Authenticam* betray a tendency towards a restoration of uniformity. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger considers faith itself a culture and he is particularly concerned that mission promotes Christian universalism.<sup>24</sup>

As Divine Word Missionaries we witness to the universality of the Church with centralised offices such as the Generalate in Rome and VIVAT International in New York. However the congregation is increasingly relying more on zonal structures (PANAM, Europe, AFRAM, ASPAC), and VIVAT is starting national branches. These decentralized structures are designed to place less focus on the centre

---

<sup>23</sup> Franz Xaver Scheuerer, *Interculturality—A Challenge for the Mission of the Church*, Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation 2001, 232. The term “interculturality” was coined by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in an address to the presidents of the Asian bishops’ conferences in Hong Kong during March 2-5, 1993. Ratzinger proposes this term as an alternative to “inculturation” because he thinks that inculturation presumes that a faith stripped of culture is transplanted into a religiously indifferent culture. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, “Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures,” <http://www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM>

<sup>24</sup> Ratzinger, *Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures*, 6, 9.



and give more opportunity to the cultural and theological diversity found at the periphery.

Second, interculturality calls for reciprocity that transcends ethnic, cultural and social differences. Interculturality sees the world as interrelated and interdependent and aims at establishing relationships between people based on mutuality and partnership.<sup>25</sup> In a truly multicultural society no one is totally independent and there is reciprocity among the various parts. Ideally reciprocity fosters an exchange of different ideas (*inter-gentes*) in the field of theology, church structures and ministries.

In intercultural life and mission, reciprocity might be seen in the way our confreres become deeply inserted into the life of the people. The language, way of life and manner of relating of the host country is adopted as the ideal for the community, influencing everyday matters, such as eating habits, ways of greeting, praying, and celebrating feasts. Having established that foundation, members add to the cultural diversity with the contribution from their different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural life values their unique cultural contributions but not in an ethnocentric way. The reciprocity of genuine inculturation means living the universal in the particular context while not absolutizing particular aspects of that context.<sup>26</sup>

Third, interculturality presumes a dynamic model of culture that opens the way for mutuality, partnership and dialogue. Franz Xaver Scheuerer notes how, "Encounter is the new word of mission."<sup>27</sup> This implies a prophetic dimension because it helps us to be open to dialogue with people from other religions and cultural backgrounds, including those that take the transformation of society seriously. Theologically it relies less on external ecclesial structures and more on a common commitment to the values of the reign of God.<sup>28</sup> Intercultural community life requires a radical openness and readiness to question one's own basic assumptions and to be prepared to become a bridge-builder between differences in encounter with others.

---

<sup>25</sup> Scheuerer, *Interculturality*, 232.

<sup>26</sup> Scheuerer, *Interculturality*, 158.

<sup>27</sup> Scheuerer, *Interculturality*, 183.

<sup>28</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would disagree with this feature of interculturality. From his perspective intercultural encounter must include liberating truth and love, but kingdom-centredness promotes relativism leading to alienation from truth. Ratzinger references Jacques Dupuis at this point. Ratzinger, *Christ, Faith and the Challenge of Cultures*, 9. Dupuis's defence may be found in William R. Burrows, *Jacques Dupuis Faces the Inquisition: Two Essays by Jacques Dupuis on Dominus Iesus and the Roman Investigation of His Work*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2012.

The multicultural, reciprocal and dialogical aspects of interculturality have close links with contextual theology. Both begin with the dynamic encounter of multicultural elements in a changing world. Where interculturality faces issues of dialogue across different multicultural boundaries, contextual theology involves a Christian interpretation of human experience across different cultural boundaries. Together they function at the interaction of sameness and difference; interculturality in different views of the world, and theology in interpreting the meaning of the encounter of the Gospel and diverse human experience.

### ***Missio ad gentes and missio inter gentes***

When I first came to Papua New Guinea in 1973, I was thinking to participate in mission *ad gentes*. I left my home to help spread the Gospel in a foreign land. The difference in life in the mission was fascinating and at times shocking. Like most missionaries I had to deal with culture stress and culture shock impacting my own sense of identity, and to gradually become accustomed to a new way of life. Mission *ad gentes* is like that.

Theologically I was influenced by insights from the Second Vatican Council that qualified an exclusive attitude, teaching that the Church rejects nothing that is “true and holy” in other religions (*Nostra aetate* 2). The Council even went so far as to admit that the Holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in the paschal mystery in a manner known to God (*Ad gentes* 22). Just what might be true and holy in other religions and just how the Holy Spirit works through them was not well defined and has since been a matter of debate. Even if it might recognise the prior presence and activity of God in the world, mission *ad gentes* tends to be a one-way mission radiating out from the centre to mission-receiving nations on the periphery. My home, Aotearoa New Zealand, is hardly the centre in a geographical sense, but I was coming with a “modern” Western experience of faith with strong ties to the European cultural and faith tradition.

Like many missionaries, through enculturation, particularly through language learning, what had at first seemed so different became familiar and “they” became “we.” I gave my heart to the mission and gradually formed strong emotive ties with the country and the people. In retrospect I now realise that there was a stage when I over-romanticised life in my new home, but I see that as part of the process of interculturality as I learned to negotiate cultural difference in a rapidly changing context.

My own journey reflects a passage in the SVD understanding of mission with its new emphasis on mission *inter gentes*—a mission strategy geared not to (*ad*) the peoples, but rather among (*inter*) peoples: in essence, a *missio inter gentes*.<sup>29</sup> Former SVD superior general, Antonio Pernia, has noted how *missio ad gentes* can no longer be identified exclusively with *missio ad extra*. “For the ‘gentes’ are no longer only those who are out there ... Often the ‘gentes’ are also here among us and around us.”<sup>30</sup> The “gentes” may be the family next door, the one beside me in the bus, the person who comes to fix my television, the woman in the market who I buy vegetables from.<sup>31</sup> The vision of Pernia raises questions for those involved in mission in the contemporary PNG context. Who are the family next door if for security reasons we live in a mission compound protected by a security guard and dogs? Who is the person beside me in the bus when I normally travel with my own car? How often do I actually go to the market? If *missio inter gentes* places great value on the way we encounter others and the way we communicate with others, then it raises questions about the manner and quality of that encounter and what it is that we communicate.

If intercultural mission has multicultural, reciprocal and dialogical dimensions, then mission is more than simply feeling at home or relatively in harmony with the context as some sort of “mission *sans frontières*.” Mission is found in the “inter”—that is the space between what is familiar and different, between unity and diversity, and between the global and the local. Through the incarnation the Word came to dwell among us. But the Word came with the message that “God is with us, to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death, and to raise us up to eternal life” (*Dei verbum* 4). In that space between sameness and difference we are called to witness to deliverance from the darkness of sin and death, and there lies an important aspect of the prophetic dimension of *missio inter gentes* where at times we are called to take a stand that is not only different from but decidedly contrary to the status quo.

---

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Tan claims that the neologism “*missio inter gentes*” was first proposed by William Burrows in his response to Michael Amaladoss. See William R. Burrows, A Response to Michael Amaladoss: *Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) Proceedings* 56, 15-20. See Jonathan Tan, *Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a new Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC)*: *Mission Studies* 21 (2004) 83.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Pernia, *Missio Inter Gentes: Arnoldus Nota*, November 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Antonio Pernia, *Cross-Cultural Mission Revisited: Arnoldus Nota*, November 2010.

### *Interculturality and Contextual Theology*

The theological dimension of interculturality is found in human cultural encounter and what Schreiter refers to as the “theological significance of difference.” He asks, “Are we to understand difference in God’s creation as merely decorative or is it somehow revelatory?”<sup>32</sup> Following Schreiter I too look for how associating Scripture and Tradition with the sameness and difference of human experience in the PNG context can yield new interpretations of the Good News. I illustrate with another example from PNG.

Throughout PNG there are traditions of exchange whereby tribal relationships are maintained and enhanced through the giving and receiving of valuables such as shells or animals such as pigs. In the Central Highlands the system is called “moka.”<sup>33</sup> Garry Roche SVD has found the moka exchange helpful for illustrating how God invites us into a partnership, working for the salvific transformation of the world.<sup>34</sup> I see new interpretations of the Good News emerging from the intercultural merging of sameness and difference between *moka* and modern-day Christian processions. In recent times there have been many occasions when Christian communities have gone in procession with a cross, a statue of Mary or a specially decorated Bible, and the key moment is in the hand-over to the next community or tribe, for them to resume the procession so as to continue the exchange with yet another tribe. These processions can last for months, involving tens of thousands of people over hundreds of kilometres.<sup>35</sup> Apart from the strong devotional aspect with prayer, song and dance, there is theological significance in the way people value the “handing over” and “reception” of the religious item, such as the Bible. The form and tenor of the exchange recalls the now abandoned traditional *moka* exchange. However, there is a difference. The traditional *moka* had a strong reciprocal element. It had to be returned—with interest. But the contemporary Christian *moka* is given freely without expectations of a return. People are beginning to appreciate a novel sense of “grace.” The Good News has come to us as a sign of God’s grace and the ideal is to give freely and gratuitously what we have received from God. We saw an echo of this gratuitousness in the example of Sara and her husband at the funeral of their son mentioned earlier in

<sup>32</sup> Schreiter, *New Catholicity*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Strathern, *The Rope of Moka*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971.

<sup>34</sup> Garry Roche, Moka and Covenant: *Catalyst* 19 (1989) 163-181.

<sup>35</sup> Philip Gibbs, Bokis Kontrak: An Engan Ark of the Covenant: *Catalyst* 27 (1997) 147-164.

this paper. Such theological insights provide a firm foundation for a contextual theology emerging from the intercultural relationship between the *moka* tradition and the handing over and reception of the Good News. Meaning emerges from both similarities and differences between the two. But the most important theological insight comes from an appreciation of the difference between the reciprocity of the *moka* tradition and the gratuitousness of God's gift. Anthony Pernia makes a similar point when he notes how with recent theological reflection on *Missio Dei*, "Divine love did not remain within the divinity. It passed on to what was different from it. This passing over to another realm, this border-crossing, is a manifestation of the gratuitousness of God's love."<sup>36</sup>

Returning to the double bind mentioned earlier in this paper: Either theology all over the world is similar to a global theology such that there is no room for a distinctive contribution, or insights from a local perspective are not recognised as true theology. If one acknowledges the multiculturalism of society today and the rapidly changing contexts of that multiculturalism, then contextual theology emerging from interculturality not only makes sense but also is an imperative today.<sup>37</sup>

However, I note several conditions. Every culture should be able to receive the Gospel in an intelligible way, even if it might run contrary to some aspects of that culture. So it would be unfortunate and theologically problematical for people to think that they cannot be totally Australian and Christian or totally Papua New Guinean and Christian. Moreover, discerning the meaning of the Christian message requires both insight and also courage. Referring to intra-cultural mission, Neil Darragh points out how even if missionaries can critique their own culture, the cost to their existing relationships of acting upon this critique may be considered too high. Moreover they may unintentionally develop a theology little different from the dominant ideology of their own culture in which they are so immersed.<sup>38</sup> In this light, Maori scholar Jenny Te Paa questions androcentric tribalism that reinforces the male tribal warrior ideology in Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>39</sup> The contextual theologian must be aware that a critical appre-

<sup>36</sup> Pernia, Cross-Cultural Mission Revisited.

<sup>37</sup> See Bevans, *Models*, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Neil Darragh, Hazardous Missions and Shifting Frameworks: *Missiology* 38 (2010) 274.

<sup>39</sup> Jenny Te Paa, Context, Controversy, and Contradiction in Contemporary Theological Education: Who Bene "fits" and Who Just Simply Doesn't Fit?, in: Stephen B. Bevans/Katalina Tahaafe-Williams (eds.), *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications 2011, 69-86.

ciation of the context may call for a counter-cultural response. For example, a major issue for critique at the moment in PNG is sorcery and witchcraft—which may be a concern in other parts of the world also.

### *Conclusion*

Missionaries witness to the universal dimension of the Church and also remind a local church of its missionary calling. In a rapidly changing world with globalizing universal trends, intercultural mission or *missio inter gentes* is a call to appreciate diversity and to find ways for greater engagement between groups that are different. The concept of interculturality sees the world as interrelated and interdependent and it aims at establishing a genuine dialogue across cultural boundaries based on partnership and reciprocity. The value of interculturality is not found primarily in the cultural elements themselves, but rather in their interaction, which also provides a locus for theological reflection.

Contextual theology is a theological response to the challenge of globalization and amounts to a theological appreciation of diversity. It does not simply tolerate difference but engages it in a way that the Good News speaks to the local context. It builds on intercultural interpretation and uncovers new meaning in the encounter between the Gospel and different forms of human experience. Contextual theology works together with intercultural mission revealing fresh perspectives on the Gospel narrative and challenging people to see the world differently.

### ABSTRACTS

Unsere sich rasant verändernde Welt braucht einen neuen Ausgangspunkt für die theologische Reflektion. Eine Antwort darauf ist die kontextuelle Theologie, die es ermöglicht, die Frohe Botschaft sinnvoller im lokalen Kontext zu verkünden. Auch unser Kulturbegriff verändert sich von einem essentialistischen Verständnis hin zu Interkulturalität. Diese sieht die Welt als aufeinander bezogen und voneinander abhängig und möchte über kulturelle Grenzen hinweg einen Dialog in Gang setzen, der auf Partnerschaft und Gegenseitigkeit basiert. Kontextuelle Theologie im Zusammenspiel mit interkultureller Mission zeigt neue Perspektiven für das Evangelium auf und fordert die Menschen heraus, die Welt anders zu sehen.

Nuestro mundo en rápida transformación clama por un punto de partida nuevo en su reflexión teológica. La teología contextual responde a este llamado ya que permite que la Buena Nueva se dirija de una manera más significativa a un contexto local. Nuestra comprensión de la cultura también está

cambiando al moverse de un concepto más esencialista hacia nociones de interculturalidad. La interculturalidad mira el mundo como interrelacionado e interdependiente y busca establecer un diálogo genuino a través de las fronteras culturales, basándose en colaboración y reciprocidad. La teología contextual trabaja en conjunto con la misión intercultural, descubre nuevas perspectivas para la narrativa del Evangelio y desafía a la gente a mirar al mundo de una manera diferente.

Le contexte mondial actuel en rapide évolution requiert un nouveau point de départ pour la réflexion théologique. La théologie contextuelle répond à cet appel et fait que la Bonne Nouvelle parle de façon plus signifiante dans chaque contexte local. Notre façon de comprendre la culture change aussi alors que nous passons d'une interprétation essentialiste de la culture à la notion d'interculturalité. L'interculturalité voit le monde en interrelation et en interdépendance et cherche, en traversant les frontières culturelles, à établir un dialogue en vérité, fondé sur le partenariat et la réciprocité. La théologie interculturelle travaille avec la mission interculturelle révélant ainsi des perspectives nouvelles sur les récits évangéliques et encourageant chacun à regarder le monde autrement.