

Narrative and Context in a Practical Theology for Papua New Guinea¹

Philip Gibbs SVD

Abstract: *While Practical Theology encompasses both Narrative and Context, the distinctiveness of each form of theology—narrative and contextual—is expounded with particular reference to Papua New Guinea. In story-telling, oral cultures, the potential for developing narrative theology as stories of faith cannot be underestimated. Nonetheless, theological reflection for Papua New Guinea (and beyond) must also use the methods of contextual theology. Four steps in this process are explored: the issue; the faith question; dialogue with Scripture and tradition; Christian commitment and its consequences. Only such an approach will enable the Church in each culture to develop genuinely practical theological reflection appropriate for each place and time.*

Key Words: practical theology – methodology; contextual theology; narrative theology; Papua New Guinea; inculturation

The term “theology” may bring to mind images of large musty books in seminary or university libraries. However, theological reflection – that is, the understanding of the faith – can be far more appealing and relevant than that. In the early centuries theology was mostly a meditation on Scripture. From the twelfth century in Europe theology began to be studied as an intellectual discipline. In recent times we have come to realise that theology can reflect on the presence and action of Christians in the world, sometimes beyond the visible boundaries of the Church.

This paper deals in a practical way with two approaches to doing theology today focusing on the particular situation of life in Papua New Guinea (PNG). These two approaches draw on what are often referred to as Narrative, and Contextual theology. The method in each does not simply apply the Gospel to a particular context. Rather it makes the experience of the situation today the subject of theological reflection. One starts with the contemporary situation or the experience of faith in that situation and reflects on that in the light of faith or of the Gospel. It pursues the question of what God is doing in our situation or in our lives today. This means a novel application of the classic definition of theology (Anselm) as “Faith seeking Understanding” (*Fides quaerens intellectum*). Typically the focus for theological understanding is faith and reason, but with contextual theology, it is faith and life.

I refer to Narrative and Contextual theologies. These are two possible approaches, which share many basic features in their application to doing theology. Narrative theology

¹ A paper containing some ideas included in this paper was published as “Grass Roots in Paradise: Contextual Theology for Papua New Guinea,” *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 21.1 (2005): 37-62.

begins with the narratives – that is stories, myths, proverbs and sayings² (Healy and Sybertz 1996). In this paper examples of the narrative approach will centre on stories of faith using the example of the stories that comprise a chapter in a recent publication from Papua New Guinea -- *Point 30: Alive in Christ*.³ There, writers share about times they have experienced life and death, suffering and peace, and consider these experiences in the light of the Word. Contextual theology differs from Narrative theology in that one takes up a contemporary issue in a particular situation or context and focuses on the significance of that issues for people's lives in that situation. In this paper, the particular focus will be the public issues raised on national radio by Archbishop Brian Barnes of Port Moresby. As I will show – while taking different starting points -- these two approaches converge, as one delves more deeply into issues of faith and life and discovers faith questions that call for a theological response. Both take into account “the faith experience of the past that is recorded in scriptures and kept alive, preserved, defended—and perhaps even neglected or suppressed—in tradition” ... and, “the experience of the present, the context” (Bevans 2002:5).

Narrative Theology as Stories of Faith

Narrative theology is based on people's life experience, told in oral or written form. A number of prominent Papua New Guineans are prolific writers and story tellers, for example the present Governor General Sir Paulus Matane.⁴ However, for the most part people's stories remain in oral form and thus require special effort to record if they are to be shared with a wider audience.

When revelation is understood as the event of God's self-communication, we need to consider how revelation consisting of events in the past (such as Jesus' life, death and resurrection) can be revelation for us in the present, and also how to understand the living event of God's self-communication in our day. How is revelation in history somehow ongoing in our time? The answer given by Vatican II is that: “In revealing himself to his people ... God has spoken in terms of the culture peculiar to different ages” (GS 58). Thus, God's self-manifestation is not confined to any one time or place, but God's saving presence continues today in the light of Christ who is the image of the invisible God (GS 10) and in the Church which is the mystical body of Christ (LG 7). For post-apostolic Christians God's revelation continues in their experience of the divine self-communication in and through Christ.

In Papua New Guinea, stories are a good way of tapping into that experience. People can tell stories about their lives in the light of faith. This is a form of “faith seeking understanding.” We tried this in a series of writers' workshops in Papua New Guinea during 2005. In five workshops with a total of 152 participants we shared stories about the times we had experienced the Church as truly “alive,” and when we had experienced blocks to that life. Key words emerged from that sharing, and participants selected a topic related to one of the key words and started writing about it, beginning from their own faith experience. Examples of the topics chosen may be seen in *Point 30: Alive in Christ*: HIV and AIDs, the poor, suffering and death, the Bougainville crisis, and beliefs about disabilities -- to name a few.

² Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz., *Towards and African Narrative Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).

³ Philip Gibbs (ed.), *Alive in Christ: Point 30* (Goroka: Melanesian Institute, 2006), 198-298.

⁴ Sir Paulus Matane has published over twenty books, many based on his travels to different parts of the world.

The challenge is to develop stories relating personal experiences into theological reflection.

Contextual Theology as Engaging with Present-Day Realities

The novelty of contextual theology is found in its taking culture, history and human thought forms along with scripture and tradition as valid sources for theological reflection. By contrast, there have been efforts through the ages to consider Scripture as the Word of God in such a direct sense that it does not require interpretation in its original context. Others have claimed a universal or supratemporal theology (*theologia perennis*). However, the four different Gospels are witness of the contextual nature of the Word, and all theology is somehow contextual for there is no text without a context. Claims to universalism often merely conceal that theology's gender, class, denominational or cultural bias. Yet, some fear that if one admits a link between truth and history, then there is danger of falling into relativism in which there are only interpretations of interpretations. The risk of relativism exists, but it should not deter us from facing issues of culture, change and human thought.

Niel Darragh has pointed out the importance of understanding how the various "sources" of theological reflection interact.⁵ For example, in what sense is Scripture normative for Christian theology, and how can Scripture engage with local culture? A literalist approach to Scripture will be more critical of those aspects of culture that appear to conflict with scriptural texts. On the other hand, is it right to pay less attention to issues of globalisation and economic liberalism because they do not seem to have scriptural equivalents? The basic issue lies in taking Scripture or theology developed elsewhere and presenting it in a way that it engages with present-day experience – in this case the experience of life in Papua New Guinea.

Recent Developments

In the past thirty years there have been attempts in various parts of the world to include experience in theological reflection. In Latin America, attention to the social and political struggle from dependence and poverty resulted in a form of theology in which "liberation" became the fundamental hermeneutical key for understanding the Christian message. In the different context of Asia, religious pluralism remains a constant challenge to a contextual theology. In Africa theologies have focused on ethnic and cultural dimensions of life in that continent.

Closer to home, in the Pacific there has been renewed attention to developing a genuine Pacific contextual theology. In 2001 The South Pacific Association of Theological Schools (SPATS) organised a conference in Fiji at which basic questions on contextual theology were addressed. Ilaitia Sevati Tuwere, responding to the question, "What is Contextual Theology?" noted the importance of a relevant living theology that would "grow in the native soil."⁶ Benefiting from the insights of Epeli Hauofa he noted how Oceania is not simply made up of little insignificant islands but is in fact a "Sea of Islands" in which people are learning to work out their own destiny and to be subjects of their own history. This will involve interpreting the gospel and the Christian tradition in relation to

⁵ Neil Darragh, "Contextual Method in Theology: Learnings from the case of Aotearoa New Zealand," *Pacifica* 16 (2003) 49.

⁶ Ilaitia S. Tuwere, "What is Contextual Theology: A View from Oceania," *The Pacific Journal of Theology*, 2.27 (2002): 8.

the needs of Oceania. In responding to the question, "Why Contextual?" Sr Keiti Ann Kanongata'a noted how through the colonial experience, some people in Oceania have been "raped of their cultural honour" so that now there is need for a theology that "will uplift us from our powerlessness to our God-given dignity."⁷ A truly contextual theology that listens to common people would critically penetrate the foundations of unjust social structures.

In New Zealand and Australia also, there is a growing awareness of the importance of the context in theological reflection. For New Zealand there is a broad selection including the work of Albert Moore, Clive Pearson, Henare Tate, Susan Smith and Neil Darragh's "Doing theology in a New Place." From Australia, the names of Eugene Stockton, Gideon Goosen, Frank Fletcher and Gerard Hall come immediately to mind.

Theological Reflection for Papua New Guinea

All theology is contextual in some way. Thus theology written in a place like PNG is contextual, but whether it is legitimate, relevant and well-done is another matter. Journals such as the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*, *Catalyst*, and *Point* are published regularly. Point Series no.8, *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader* was a good effort for its time, but there have not been many significant developments in published works in the two decades since that publication. Many articles in the above-mentioned publications try entering into a faith-culture dialogue, including those by Caspar ToVaninara, Dick Avi, Bro. Silas, Arnold Orowae, and Simeon Namunu.⁸ Contributions by Bruno Junalien and Bill Kuglame come closer to engaging present-day experience in a form that could be considered Practical Theology.⁹ Solomon Islander Henry Paroi touches on the contextual theme of "decolonizing" theology in a Melanesian context, starting with a renewed theological appreciation of land.¹⁰ I believe that the recent issue of *Point 30: Alive in Christ*, with short reflections in the form of Narrative Theology marks a significant step in the development of published theological reflection in Papua New Guinea.

A good Practical Contextual theology would normally meet the following criteria.¹¹

- (1) The method is inductive, starting with experiences or issues in the contemporary context and the implications for people in that context;
- (2) Those doing theological reflection are firstly the people of God in communities. Trained theologians can help systematise the ideas raised in the community;
- (3) The principal locus or source for theological reflection is life experience. The life experience of the marginalised and dependent at the "bottom" of society

⁷ Keiti Ann Kanongata'a, "Why Contextual?" *The Pacific Journal of Theology*, 2.27 (2002): 25.

⁸ Caspar ToVaninara, "Melanesian Stepping Stones for the Preaching of the Kingdom," *Point Series 8, Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, ed. John D'Arcy May (1985), 132-171; Dick Avi, "Contextualization in Melanesia," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 4.1 (1988): 7-22; Bro. Silas, "Solving the Problem of the Pigs," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8.1 (1992): 59-64; Arnold Orowae, "Interpretation of a Myth in the Christian Context," *Catalyst* 23.2 (1993): 8-32; Simeon Namunu, "Christian Worship and Melanesian Vision of the Cosmos," *Catalyst* 26.2 (1996): 79-95.

⁹ Bruno Junalien, "The Emergence of Class Structure in Papua New Guinea," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 12.2 (1996): 41-52; Bill Kuglame, "Election: Profanation of the Human Power of Choice," *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 12.2 (1996): 53-61.

¹⁰ Henry Paroi, "Decolonizing Theology: Doing Theology in Melanesian Context," *Catalyst* 31.1 (2001): 19-38.

¹¹ Some of these points are found in Joseph Estermann, "Like a Rainbow or a Bunch of Flowers: Contextual theologies in a globalized world," *The Pacific Journal of Theology*, 2.30 (2003): 12.

(“grass-roots”) is an important viewpoint for some forms of contextual theology;

(4) The explicit theological dimension emerges in addressing issues from the perspective of Christian faith, including the faith witness found in the Bible and Church teaching; and

(5) It is not an exercise in theory, oriented merely to understanding, but involves a faith commitment leading to transformation.

The theological approach outlined above may be complemented by “inculturation,” though the latter tends to focus more on traditional culture and issues of cultural identity than contemporary life experience. We might learn from the words of African theologian Jean-Marc Ela, “How is it possible to study the people’s culture without becoming uneasy about the marginalization of those masses whose folkways have become the object of anthropological research? ...We cannot be satisfied with reflection on faith and culture that is limited to the study of beliefs and rites.”¹²

In the following sections I will explain four steps for a method of doing Practical Contextual theology today. Examples taken will be from Papua New Guinea. There are four steps, with two possible entry points for the first step. Once one arrives at the second step one method may be used in steps 2 to 4. These approaches to theological reflection are practical steps which the writer has found to stimulate reflection and to produce texts that can be shared and critiqued by a wider readership.

Step One: The Issue

The first step is to settle on a relevant issue. There are two ways to do this.

A. As outlined above one may talk about life experiences and select a topic to write a personal reflection on one’s experience in that field. It might be the experience of working with people suffering from AIDs, or a time when one was confronted by life and death issues, or the experience of raising a family. Whatever the issue chosen, in the first step the person reflects on his or her experience of that issue and writes about it. Topics may be purely “secular” and the reflection does not need to be overtly theological at this stage. The most important thing is that the person feels that this is a significant issue in his or her life.

B. If one takes a more contextual approach to present day realities, the possibilities are boundless. One might ask: What appears in the newspapers, particularly editorials and feature articles? What is aired in the news on TV and the radio (especially radio talk-back shows)? What are people talking about on the roadside or in the market-place?

Sir Brian Barnes, Catholic Archbishop of Port Moresby, may be heard on the Karai National Radio service most Sunday evenings in “Katolik Insight.” In just twenty minutes, speaking in Pidgin, Bishop Barnes provides a faith perspective on relevant issues of the day. The program reaches a wide audience. There is a story told of another bishop visiting people in his diocese. When it came to 7.10pm Sunday evening, people asked if the good bishop would pause for a while, so they could listen to Archbishop Brian on the radio!

Topics addressed on “Katolik Insight” in 2005 and until June 2006 are listed below. They might not be topics to be found in the index of a theological dictionary. Moreover, because they are contextual, some topics will be meaningless for people unfamiliar with PNG. Yet they are important issues of the day, and surely relevant topics for contextualised theological reflection.

¹² Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 173.

Topics addressed in Katolik Insight (2005 – June 2006)

2005	2006
John Paul II/Benedict XVI	Nurses strike
Outlaw guns	New Year/ Sir William Skate
Homily: Benedict XVI	Teachers' Leave Fares
Unity	Rape: Leader jailed
Australian/ECP: PNG Constitution	Nightclub
Autonomous B'ville Govt. elections	Common Roll
Catechetical Renewal	Health Services
Shortage of medicines	Highway Looting
Bible Sunday	Home-Brew/ Drugs
Stolen Property	Leadership
Leadership Tribunal: Immunity?	Women's Day
Police	Inter-Faith Dialogue
Independence: 30 years	Sport: Commonwealth Games
Street Vendors	Compensation: Rape
Slush Funds	Corporal Punishment
Women	Easter Message
Teaching	Easter Message (cont'd)
Compensation	CBC: Marriage & Family Life
Earthquake: South Asia	Electoral Boundaries
Pacific Islands Forum	Family
Graffiti: Keeping our place Clean	Teachers' Strike
Corruption	Ombudsman Commission
Fijians in Bougainville	Death Penalty
Violence against Women & Children	
HIV/AIDS	
Free Education?	
Settlements	
Christmas	

Having chosen a topic, such as one of the above, it is necessary to take a critical stance. How is one to sift the unfounded gossip from factual data? Are there reliable statistics available for comparison? Could the person or organisation providing the data have a conscious or unconscious bias? What is not being said about the issue and why?

Life today in the land of the expected unexpected is not easy. Life expectancy at birth in PNG is only 54 (lowest in Oceania). The infant mortality ratio is 73 per 1000 live births (highest in Oceania). The maternal mortality ratio is 370 per 100,000 births (highest in Oceania after Solomon Islands).¹³ By the end of 2005 there had been 14,164 people reported as diagnosed HIV positive.¹⁴ In a 2003 report on Corruption Perceptions by Transparency International, PNG was ranked 118/133 alongside Libya and Kyrgyzstan. Such facts and figures would appear to be more relevant to Sociology than Theology, but those doing Practical Theology cannot base their work on rumour. It requires interdisciplinary skills and attention to factual data.

¹³ Papua New Guinea National Health Plan 2001-2010, vol. 1.

¹⁴ PNG National AIDS Council Secretariat and Department of Health, HIV & AIDS 2005 Annual Surveillance Report.

Step Two: The Faith Question

The step in which one formulates the faith question is fundamental for developing an account of a personal experience (A), or the analysis of the social situation (B), into theological reflection. It has been said that if I am hungry, that is a practical question or an issue of justice, but if my brother or sister is hungry, that is a faith issue. Doing theology today requires learning to formulate faith questions about contemporary issues and experiences. Some church groups, including the PNG/SI Catholic Bishops' Conference are strong on the social analysis in step one, but often fail to follow through with an insightful theological analysis. After exploring our needs and the needs of society it is helpful to then enquire about them from a faith perspective. Faith questions include the following:

- Where is God in this situation?
- How can the Christian message challenge this situation?
- Is X life-giving or death dealing? ("I have come that you might have life...") [X represents a contemporary issue – but not any specified issue]
- Does X build up or destroy human dignity (...made in the image and likeness of God...)
- What personal, social or structural sin must be confronted for X to reflect God's grace?
- What has X to do with the gospel/good news?
- What does X tell us about divine mercy or goodness?
- What is the appropriate Christian response to this situation?
- Where/how can one find Christ in this situation?
- How can one present the gospel in a meaningful way in this situation?
- How could this situation contribute more effectively to establishing the kingdom of God?
- Does X contribute to the integrity of creation?
- What is X doing to the community (the body of Christ...)?
- What is the quality of relationship with God, other people, and the rest of created reality?
- Does X somehow reflect the paschal mystery of life and death?
- Does this situation tell us something of what God is doing in our history?
- What Christian values would help transform this situation for the better?
- What might be God's will/plan/design for this situation?

For example, if one would be reflecting on the personal experience of death, one might raise faith questions about where this fits into God's design, or what figures in the Scriptures may have had similar experiences (Job? Mary?).

If one would follow the contextual approach and take, for example, the issue the economy one might raise faith questions about the need for a common vision if the economy is to serve all people more fairly. What sort of moral vision will lead to economic justice in PNG? If one would be dealing with the issue of violence, relevant faith questions would include: What does it mean for this situation if *shalom* ultimately is a gift from God? Does the statement in John 10:10, "I have come that you might have life..." refer to a peace that we can achieve by ourselves? Are there hidden non-physical forms of violence that run contrary to the Christian love ethic? What resources do the churches in PNG have for peacemaking, the pursuit of justice, and the prospects of reconciliation? In the area of politics, faith questions might include: What are the implications of the servant model of leadership shown by Jesus? Is the Spirit of God present in government decisions that are made in the interests of the common good of the people?

For those of us sharing a common faith in a world redeemed by Christ, there is no end to the questions one can pose about seemingly very "worldly" issues. Some questions will demand openness and courage, for they may upset those who prefer to feel secure in their faith. Church members may come to realise that they are in fact participating in structures inherited from a colonial or ecclesial past, which are now oppressive, or at best

dysfunctional. Nonetheless, the depth and honesty of the faith question(s) posed are crucial for the theological reflection to follow.

Step Three: Dialogue with Scripture and Church Teaching

Faith experiences of the past have been recorded in scriptures and passed on through the apostolic and church tradition. There are different ways of introducing Scripture at this point depending on how one understands Scripture as the word of God. For some Christians the word of God is found exclusively and literally in the Bible. For others the Word is God's general message to humanity. Other meanings include the Word in the person of Jesus, or the spoken message of divine emissaries, particularly prophets. It can also refer to the events of salvific history (Hebrew *dabar*). Despite the plurality of meanings, most theologians agree that Scripture needs to be interpreted in the sense that we must try through exegesis to retrieve the meaning of the scriptural text in its original context so as to bridge the geographical, temporal and cultural distance and find how the text can be meaningful in new contexts in the life of the Christian community today. The fundamental question is: How can Scripture engage with life and culture in any given setting?

Dialogue with Scripture

A concordance may help at this point, but it brings with it the danger of parallelism - employing a translation model - in which words are compared at a superficial level. Sound scripture study with the aid of Biblical commentaries will yield more helpful results because we are dealing with deeper meanings such as values or theological themes that elude shallow comparisons. For example, consider the issue of poverty. Rather than just looking for texts about poverty and riches in the Bible, one could achieve a better understanding by noting that men and women, made in God's image are the summit of creation. As such every human being possesses an inalienable dignity that stamps human existence prior to any division into races or nations and prior to human labour and human achievement. The laws of God's covenant with humanity show a special concern for the vulnerable members of the community: widows, orphans, the poor and strangers. When people forgot the covenant and began to serve idols, God sent prophets to call people back to a just life. There are many other relevant sections in the Bible, including the challenge of discipleship presented in the Gospels. Particularly in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus takes the side of the poor and warns of the dangers of wealth (Lk 6:24 - Sermon on the Plain; Lk 14:12-14 - Inviting the poor as guests; Lk 18:18-30 - Rich Young Man.) The terms used for poor, while primarily describing lack of material goods, also suggest dependence and powerlessness.

Reading Scripture "Against the Grain"

The dialogue with scripture in theology for today often requires us to read Biblical texts in ways that look beyond the layers of culturally and historically conditioned interpretations found in biblical tradition. For example, Barbara Reid asks why commentators focus on the sinfulness of the woman who showed great love in anointing Jesus' feet (Lk 7:36-50), and what is more, why she should be identified as a prostitute.¹⁵ Reid goes on to show how

¹⁵ Barbara Reid, "Do You See This Woman? A Liberative Look at Luke 7:36-50 and Strategies for Reading Other Lukan Stories Against the Grain," in Amy-Jill Levine (ed.) *A Feminist Companion to Luke* (New York: Sheffield, 2002), 106-120. Reid notes how commentators do not discuss what might be the type of sins Simon Peter has committed when he says he is a 'sinful man' (Lk 5:7).

the woman pouring out the expensive ointment because of love could prefigure Jesus' pouring out his precious life-blood on behalf of those he loves (Lk 22:20), and points to a number of thematic connections to the death of Jesus. To understand the story this way is to read Luke "against the grain". If the person in the story is seen as a prostitute, then most Christian women would find it hard to identify with her. But if the woman at Jesus' feet is perceived as being in the stance of a servant – the stance which Jesus instructs his disciples to take at the last supper (Lk 22:26-27), then the story conveys a very different message. Reid asks "whether corrective lenses are needed in looking at the text in order to release its full potential for conveying the liberating word of God."¹⁶

Reading scripture in doing theology today sometimes means reading "against the grain" in order to give space for local communities to reread the text from their perspective. Ennio Mantovani gives the example from the cure of the ten lepers (Lk 17:12-19). In PNG where gratitude is expressed primarily through a visible gift rather than mere words, one might expect Jesus to condemn the lack of true gratitude in the leper who came back simply to say thanks instead of looking for a gift to give him in the future.¹⁷

In a short but revealing article, Brother Silas has tried to make sense of the "problem" of Jesus sending demons into a herd of pigs which then rushed to their deaths (Mk 5:1-20).¹⁸ In PNG where the pig is highly valued, the story has been used by some to show that pigs and therefore traditional cultural values are fundamentally corrupt. However, common sense compels one to ask what is wrong with this interpretation. Bro Silas tells the story of a local man who solved the problem by speculating that perhaps there was an old type of pig which Jesus had sent to their deaths, and that Jesus had introduced a new kind of pig which eventually became the mainstay of Highland village life. The interpretation has wider implications, for it suggests that pigs are not only good to eat but may even be the first-born of the "new creation." If so, before missionaries arrived Jesus had begun to transform village life replacing sin with a new redeemed creation. Thus the Christian should seek to live faithfully at the heart of the community confident that at its heart God's healing and redemption are to be found. Surely the gospel writers did not intend the text to be read against the grain in this way, nor does the exegesis fit the norms of Biblical scholarship. Yet, the speculative and highly specific interpretation "works" in terms of reconciling contradictions and bringing the man into a deeper understanding of his relationship to the community and to God.

Different Ways of Interpreting Scripture

The academic contextual theologian could ask what hermeneutic people in their communities use in interpreting scripture. For example, in PNG there where rural people tend have a pre-modern worldview, historical consciousness differs from the modern scientific viewpoint, and people are less concerned with what God accomplished two thousand years ago in Jesus, and more interested in what God is doing in our day, or what God will do, particularly in reference to the Book of Revelation. People often focus on the Word through an "apocalyptic" filter. How does this fit with the manner of looking at the Word in modern Church teaching, seen more in terms of personalist theology, where God's Word incarnated in Jesus, creates a new life-giving relationship between God and humankind? We have to look for meeting points between the personalist approach of

¹⁶ Reid, "Do You See This Woman?," 119.

¹⁷ Ennio Mantovani: "Traditional and Present Day Melanesian Values and Ethics, (Goroka, PNG: Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute 7) 25.

¹⁸ Silas, "Solving the Problem of the Pigs," 59-64.

modern and post-modern teaching and the pre-modern apocalyptic stance of people at the grass-roots. Talking with older women in the Highlands, several spoke of how they anticipated that Jesus would soon appear, and that they were looking forward to this because then they could “marry” Jesus. Such sentiments go against the grain of mainstream theology, but open up new possibilities for the dialogue leading to contextual theology.

Dialogue with Church Teaching

Until now this step has focused on the dialogue with Scripture, but there is also the opportunity to dialogue with the rich tradition of church teaching from Apostolic times until today. People doing practical theology might well benefit from the commentaries of the Early Church Fathers, documents from international gatherings such as the Second Vatican Council or studies by the World Council of Churches and other international church bodies. In particular there are creative contextual theologies coming from many Third World countries today that could stimulate ideas. Papua New Guinean theologians have yet to make a significant contribution in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). There are also sources within PNG itself, including the combined resources of the many theological colleges and Bible schools, and pastoral documents from Bishops’ Conferences. However, these resources are also a cause for concern. To what degree are the courses in the theological schools taking theology developed elsewhere and applying it to PNG without critical engagement with the PNG experience? How does PNG life and history play a part in the interpretation of scripture? What is the effect of having to still deal with the legacy of early mission attitudes? Perhaps the most important question to ask is how much theological reflection in PNG finds a source in the faith experience of the church in grass-roots communities – what Aloysius Pieris calls the “third magisterium.”¹⁹ There, at the grass roots, faith-filled people are writing a fifth gospel with their lives.²⁰ Their spirituality usually reflects their needs: something to live on (food), something to live by (work), something to live in (shelter), something to live for (human dignity).²¹ Contextual theology will emerge, not through attempts to adapt theology to their needs, but by asking how people’s needs can provide the basis for telling God’s story together with their own.

Third Magisterium: Election Awareness

Anticipating that the 2002 PNG national elections would be marred by irregularities including bribery and multiple voting, the Catholic Church in the Enga Province formed a Diocesan Political Awareness Team to go around the province with a Christian message on electoral politics. Analysis of their presentations shows that the team customarily combined political education with Christian values, and Enga symbolism.

For example, on the topic of the value of one’s vote, they argued as follows,

Your vote is very precious. Your vote is your life, which includes; your house, garden, animals, land, water, trees, bush, services, religion, your family, your children’s future and everything that you need when you are alive.... A river does not flow from nowhere. No! A small creek comes from a mountain and flows through many stones to develop into a river. The mountain and the stones are the sources of the river. Likewise, God is

¹⁹ Aloysius Pieris, “An Asian Paradigm: Inter-Religious Dialogue and Theology of Religions,” *The Month* (April 1993), 130. The other two *magisteria* are the academic magisterium of the theologians, and the pastoral magisterium of the bishops.

²⁰ The expression “Fifth Gospel” is used by Joseph G. Healey in “Our Stories as Fifth Gospels,” *AFER* 30 (1988): 151-166.

²¹ Pieris, “An Asian Paradigm,” 131.

the source of the power of your vote. In the first chapter of Genesis we read how God created man and woman and gave them power. They were given the power to identify and name everything. They were told to be fertile, multiply, live all over the earth and bring it under their control. From this reference we now know that our vote or power comes directly from God. No one on earth has given that power to you. Our decision must be according to God's will for God gave us that power to look after ourselves and everything around us.²²

One sees in the above argument a transition from the necessities of life to the familiar image of a mountain stream, and then to a biblical image from Genesis. There is little necessary connection between the creation account and the power of one's vote. However, by using inductive reasoning, and in particular, moving from a familiar natural image to the well-known biblical passage, the team was able to provide religious support, giving credibility to their argument that one's vote is important.

Again, on the topic of multiple voting they started their argument with the Enga saying, "*Akali kumalamo yuu mendai lokenge*" – A man dies only once. Then they continued, saying,

You don't have a spare life. Your one and only life represents one vote and thus you cast your vote once. When God created us, God did not breathe into us several times, so that we might do something many times using the same power. No. God breathed into us only once. That means you have only one life and therefore you vote only once.

In this argument we see the progression from a well-known Enga saying, to the ultimate value of life, supported by an argument from the creation story that legitimates their principal point that people should refrain from multiple voting. No biblical commentary would entertain the thought of the genesis of human life as some form of primordial mouth-to-nose resuscitation. However, the linking of one breath of life to one vote was both imaginative and possibly convincing to their listeners.

The above arguments would hardly pass in a public meeting in Sydney or Wellington. However, the two examples given illustrate how PNG people often integrate faith and experience, such as political realities, at a grassroots level. This linking of God's story and their own provides a window of opportunity for developing narrative or contextual theology. It is worth noting that the examples are of oral discourse which has been transcribed only for the purpose of sharing the ideas with a wider audience. Perhaps the most common form of practical contextual theology in PNG today will be found in the discourse of Christian preaching.

Step Four: Christian Commitment and Its Consequences

Theology, done well, requires creativity, intellectual capacity and also faith commitment. Reflection calls for a response. While the academically trained theologian may assist in locating scriptural or theological resources, the leader for this form of theology must be the community in which people can inspire and correct one another. Thus people in communities are not just the object of theology but more importantly the ones who discover God as their source of life.

Sister Rosemary Lavarabin MSC tells the story of how she and her religious community in East New Britain had to deal with a situation involving escaped prisoners.²³ One of the escapees left a letter near the sister's house of formation. "We thought it contained *marila* (love magic) so we sprinkled it with holy water before opening it." It

²² From typed notes by Political Awareness Team Member, Philip Maso.

²³ Sister Rosemary Lavarabin MSC, personal communication.

turned out to be a letter from an escapee asking to meet and talk. The sisters were concerned because a previous parish priest had been caring for escapees without informing the police. When they found out, the police were so angry they came and confronted the priests and one ended up in hospital.

Sister reflected on the situation.

“It was during the General Assembly with the theme ‘We are Church Alive in Christ.’ We reflected as a community and thought that this is a message that the Lord is telling us that we have to do something. I was really conscious also of our young women in formation. How am I going to express my faith in this situation now as a role model for these young women? When the missionaries came they saw the need for schools and hospitals. Now the Lord is not telling us to build hospitals and he is not telling us to build schools. He is telling us to build human beings and to uphold their dignity as human persons. We Missionaries of the Sacred Heart talk about the “spirituality of the heart.” Your heart is holy and if you are talking about spreading the love of Christ to all the people and the heart of Christ is really crying in the heart of these escapees, that’s why they are coming to us. So I said to them, the Lord is telling us something here, but what is it? We have to pray now.”

As it turned out they were able to meet with the first escapee, talk with him, and arrange for him to turn himself in to a policeman who would guarantee his safety. They bought him small things like toiletries and visited him in jail. Later other escapees came to the sisters and through them and a priest and a brother, surrendered also.

“We were scared, but the Lord is telling us something. We have to read signs of the times. It is one thing to minister to young people in our schools, but it is people like these prisoners and rascals who need us now.”

The example above illustrates well the praxis method being proposed here. Praxis is practice plus reflection. Reflection on a faith question calls for a faith response. The sisters with their tradition of the spirituality of the heart were responding to the faith question that arose from their daily life experience, “Is Christ crying in the heart of these escapees?” After reflection and prayer, and applying their own congregational spirituality they realised that God had a life-giving message for them in this experience. The result was not only knowing what is right and just, but realising what they had to commit themselves to do also. Reflection on social realities, with a faith response resulting in compassionate commitment is much needed in PNG today.

Conclusion

Attention to people’s experience in a particular situation or context is necessary and desirable if we are to narrow the gap between faith and life. The alternative is to risk doing an irrelevant or meaningless theology. However there are also risks in trying to do theology in this way. The theologian must find a proper balance between personal reminiscence and theological reflection (A) or social analysis and theological reflection (B). Personal narrative or critical analysis without adequate reference to divine revelation can hardly be called theology. One must also find a fitting balance between the local and the global lest the local community become isolated from the wider body of Christ. One also has to avoid any over-emphasis on “culture” and “cultural values,” which would leave little opening for the challenge of the Gospel. There is also the danger of an unhealthy syncretism where the Christian message loses its identity. This is a matter to be faced realistically, aware of the fact that Christianity has a long history of absorbing elements from various cultures.

To avoid problems we might well keep in mind the following guidelines:

- (1) True catholicity is found in openness to the diversity of particular situations. Nevertheless grassroots Christian communities are part of the wider Church community and should value ecclesial and doctrinal unity.
- (2) We must never forget that the Scriptures and Church teaching remain as a standard by which to judge attempts at doing theology, keeping in mind that all theological statements require some degree of interpretation.
- (3) We should keep in mind the importance of the consensus fidelium in which "God's people, from the bishops to the last believing lay person, express their universal agreement in matters of faith and morals."²⁴ This principle is based on belief in the Holy Spirit working through the faith community.

Papua New Guinea has relied long enough on theology from elsewhere. This paper illustrates a method with two starting points, whereby theological reflection can establish a connection between daily life and the divine life as revealed in the Word. The method is interdisciplinary in that it calls for critical social analysis, but it does not rest there. Having studied the situation the person or community engaged in contextual theology formulates a relevant faith question and responds to that question drawing on scripture and church teaching. Finally, since participation in the historical context is an essential part of theological reflection, it follows that those engaged in theological reflection using this approach will also somehow be part of the transformation of the life-situation into one that is more life-giving in terms of the Reign of God. PNG cannot leave it all to Archbishop Barnes. We wait for genuine practical theological reflection on a wider scale in our communities and our theological schools that will help us see social realities anew through the eyes of faith.

Author: *Dr Philip Gibbs, a New Zealand Divine Word missionary priest, works in Papua New Guinea where he is currently on the faculty of the Melanesian Institute, Goroka. He recently facilitated Theological Writers' Workshops throughout Papua New Guinea. He holds degrees in the social sciences, anthropology and theology.*

Email: pjgibbs@online.net.pg

²⁴ International Theological Commission, "On the Interpretation of Dogmas" C.II.4, *Origins* 20 (17 May 1990): 7.