

GRASS ROOTS IN PARADISE: CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Given the opportunity to listen to preaching in Christian churches in Papua New Guinea (PNG), I often ask: How is the preacher sharing an experience of faith that people in the congregation can identify with? Could this sermon have been delivered equally well in Sydney or Chicago, or is it addressing the specific PNG context? Admittedly, a good sermon can have universal appeal, but if it could be delivered in a modern Western context, with little or no change, then, most likely, it is strong on universal themes, and weak on points for a relevant living theology for PNG. The Sunday sermon is a privileged chance to reflect on people's life experience in the light of the Word. Yet, so often, it is a missed opportunity. There are many in PNG who have studied theology, but not many who are good at doing contextual theology.

Sr Keiti Ann Kanongata'a, referring to the Pacific context, says that when the word of God starts, not from the pulpit, but, rather, from the common streets, over-populated villages, noisy market places, and the like, "then there is hope of us making a connection between heaven and earth. The word preached at the pulpit will then be expounded with the same authority, power, dynamic, and compassion that Jesus had, and made

effective, when He in His time and culture communicated the reign of God.”¹

In PNG, the bird of paradise dwells high in the forests, and flies proudly in the sky as an emblem on the national flag. Yet, for the general populace, at the “grass roots”, the search for security, the effort to find school fees, the strain of meeting community obligations, and the like, seem far removed from any form of “paradise”. Can the gospel bring hope as a gift (grace) that inspires and motivates people in their struggle for life in the face of death-dealing forces? Recently, I went to view a bird of paradise, known to be held at the Botanical Gardens in Port Moresby. On enquiry, I was informed that thieves had stolen the *Raggiana* bird of paradise! Is this not symbolic of the PNG experience? How can Christian faith restore lost dignity?

Helping to establish a connection between daily life and the divine – grass roots’ realities and paradise – is the task of contextual theology. This paper aims to show the importance of a contextual theology for PNG, and to provide practical suggestions for how to go about it.

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Contextual theology takes into account two things: “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”.² The context includes experiences that allow people to experience, or prevent people from experiencing, God in their lives (wonderment, tragedy), cultural realities, social location (male or female, rich or poor, etc.), and social change. Theological reflection, today, needs to take all these factors into account, in order to arrive at a genuine, relevant interpretation of the Good News.

¹ Keiti Ann Kanongata’a, “Why Contextual?”, in *The Pacific Journal of Theology* Series II, 27 (2002), pp. 27-28.

² Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, revd edn, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2002, p. 5.

The opportunity, offered by 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 witnesses 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.

Neil Darragh points out the importance of understanding how the various "sources" of theological reflection interact.³ 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? When it comes to traditional creeds, how is the cultural gap that exists between 4th-century Hellenism and contemporary Melanesian culture to be addressed? Moreover, must theology take the form of lines of words on paper, or can it be expressed in dance, song, or carving? Even if taken in literary form, does it necessarily have to follow scientific method, or can it also be presented in the form of stories or personal witness? The basic issue lies in the way theological reflection engages with present-day PNG experience.

³ Neil Darragh, "Contextual Method in Theology: Learning from the Case of Aotearoa, New Zealand", in *Pacifica* 16 (2003), p. 49.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In the past 30 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 developed that focus on ethnic and cultural dimensions of life on 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”.⁴ Benefiting from the insights of Tongan writer, Epli 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 the needs of Oceania. In responding to the question, “Why contextual?”, Sr Keiti Ann 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”.⁵ Moreover, some nations in Oceania need a theology, which will question social structures that concentrate power in a few on top of a pyramid, giving birth to various forms of oppression, division, discrimination, corruption, and violence.⁶ Too often, theology has been used by those in power in the dominant culture to legitimise their vested interests. A truly contextual theology,

⁴ Ilaitia S. Tuwere, “What is Contextual Theology: A View from Oceania”, in *The Pacific Journal of Theology* Series II, 27 (2002), p. 8.

⁵ Kanongata’a, “Why Contextual?”, p. 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

which listens to common people, would critically penetrate the foundations of unjust social structures.

In November 2001, Pope John Paul II sent a post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (*Ecclesia in Oceania*) to the Catholic church in Oceania. One might ask to what degree the document reflects a contextual theology for Oceania? What ways does the document speak to the churches in Oceania about how to walk the way of Jesus, tell His truth and live His life? There are pearls to be found in the document, if one digs deeply enough.⁷ However, the frequent references to the Oceanic context in the document do not necessarily make it good contextual reflection. The document's lukewarm reception in Oceania indicates that it may have been fulfilling the need of Roman authorities to produce a document more than the need for the church in Oceania to hear a relevant and inspirational message.

CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY FOR PAPUA NEW GUINEA

It has been noted already that all theology is contextual. Thus, theology, written in 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* 8, *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader*, was a good effort for its time, but what developments have there been in the two decades since that publication? Many articles in the above-mentioned publications make good attempts at entering into a faith-culture dialogue, including those by Caspar ToVaninara, Dick Avi, Br Silas, Arnold Orowae, and Simeon Namunu.⁸ Contributions by Bruno Junalien and Bill Kuglame engage present-day

⁷ Philip Gibbs, "Pearls in the Deep: Enculturation and *Ecclesia in Oceania*", in *Sedos Bulletin* 36-1/2 (2004), pp. 32-40.

⁸ Caspar ToVaninara, "Melanesian Stepping Stones for the Preaching of the Kingdom", in *Living Theology in Melanesia: A Reader, Point* 8, John D'Arcy May, ed., (1985), pp. 132-171; Dick Avi, "Contextualisation in Melanesia", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 4-1 (1988), pp. 7-22; Br Silas, "Solving the Problem of the Pigs", in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 8-1 (1992), pp. 59-64; Arnold Orowae, "Interpretation of a Myth in the Christian Context", in *Catalyst* 23-2 (1993), pp. 8-32; Simeon Namunu "Christian Worship and Melanesian Vision of the Cosmos", in *Catalyst* 26-2 (1996), pp. 79-95.

experience in a form that is closer to contextual theology.⁹ Solomon Islander, Henry Paroi, touches on the contextual theme of “decolonising” theology in a Melanesian context, starting with a renewed theological appreciation of land.¹⁰

A good contextual theology for Papua New Guinea would normally meet the following criteria.¹¹

1. The method is inductive, starting with issues in the contemporary Papua New Guinea 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 (“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.
5. It is not an exercise in theory, oriented merely to understanding, but involves a faith commitment leading to transformation.

⁹ Bruno Junalien, “The Emergence of Class Structure in Papua New Guinea”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 12-2 (1996), pp. 41-52; Bill Kuglame, “Election: Profanation of the Human Power of Choice”, in *Melanesian Journal of Theology* 12-2 (1996), pp. 53-61.

¹⁰ Henry Paroi, “Decolonising Theology: Doing Theology in Melanesian Context”, in *Catalyst* 31-1 (2001), pp. 19-38.

¹¹ Some of these points are found in Joseph Estermann, “Like a Rainbow or a Bunch of Flowers: Contextual theologies in a globalised world”, in *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Series II, 30 (2003), p. 12.

Contextual theology, as outlined above, may be complemented by “enculturation”, 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 marginalisation 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 contextual theology in Papua New Guinea. Other approaches might focus more on oral sources. However, the method set out below is one approach, 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. 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 talkback shows)? What are people talking about on the roadside or in the market place? In 2002, in class at the Catholic Theological Institute (CTI), Bomana, the leading four topics listed were:

- Politics/elections
- HIV/AIDS
- Globalisation, and the economic crisis
- Violence against women

These four topics became the focus for our theological reflection.

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 20 minutes, speaking in Pidgin, Bishop Barnes provides a

¹² Jean-Marc Ela, *My Faith as an African*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1988, p. 173.

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 7.10 on Sunday evening, people asked if the good bishop would pause for a while, so they could listen to Bishop Brian on the radio! The appendix to this paper lists the topics addressed on “Katolik Insight” over the past four years. 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.

Having chosen a topic, 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?

PNG today is an uncertain paradise. 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 As of June, 2003, there had been 7,587 people diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.¹⁴ However the National Consensus Workshop held in January, 2000, estimated a total number of HIV-infected persons in PNG was in the range of 10,000 to 15,000, or even 20,000. In a 2003 report, prepared by Transparency International on perceptions of the level of corruption in countries, 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 Contextual 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 Quarterly Report, June 2003.

STEP TWO: THE FAITH QUESTION

This step, in which one formulates the faith question, is fundamental for contextual theology. 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 contextual theology requires learning to formulate faith questions about contemporary issues. Some church groups, including the PNG Catholic Bishops' Conference, are strong on the social analysis in step one, but often fail to follow through with an insightful theological analysis.¹⁵ After exploring our needs, and the needs of society, it is helpful to 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.”)¹⁶
- 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?
- Where can one find Christ in this situation?
- What is the appropriate Christian response to 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?

¹⁵ For example: the 2001 Catholic Bishops Conference (CBC) statement on corruption: http://www.exkiap.net/articles/miscellaneous/cbc_corruption_statement.htm.

¹⁶ “X” represents a contemporary issue, but not any specific issue.

- 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 take the issue of 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 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: דָּבָר *dābār*). 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 look 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, strangers, and the poor. 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 (Luke 6:24 – sermon on the plain; Luke 14:12-14 – inviting the poor as guests; Luke 18:18-30 – the rich young man). The terms used for the poor, while primarily describing lack of material goods, also suggest dependence and powerlessness.

Reading Scripture “Against the Grain”

The dialogue with scripture in contextual theology 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 (Luke 7:36-50), and, what is more, why she should be identified as a prostitute.¹⁷ Reid goes on to show how the woman pouring out the expensive ointment, because of love, could prefigure Jesus’ pouring out His precious lifeblood on behalf of those He loves (Luke 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 were 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 (Luke 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”.¹⁸

Reading scripture in contextual theology sometimes means reading “against the grain” in order to give space for local communities to reread the text

¹⁷ 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*, Sheffield UK: Sheffield University Press, 2002, pp. 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” (Luke 5:7).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

from their perspective. Ennio Mantovani gives the example from the cure of the ten lepers (Luke 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.¹⁹

In a short but revealing article, Br Silas has tried to make sense of the “problem” of Jesus sending demons into a herd of pigs, which then rushed to their deaths (Mark 5:1-20).²⁰ 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. Br 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 classical biblical scholarship. Yet, this speculative, and highly specific interpretation, “works” in terms of reconciling contradictions, and bringing this 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,

¹⁹ Ennio Mantovani: “Traditional and Present-day Melanesian Values and Ethics”, in *Occasional Papers of the Melanesian Institute* 7, Goroka PNG: Melanesian Institute, 1991, p. 25.

²⁰ Silas, “Solving the Problem of the Pigs”, pp. 59-64.

where rural people tend to have a premodern worldview, historical consciousness differs from the modern scientific viewpoint, and people are less concerned with what God accomplished 2,000 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 in PNG often focus on the word through an “apocalyptic” filter, not unlike some of the early Christian communities of the 1st century AD. 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 modern and postmodern teaching and the premodern apocalyptic stance of people at the grassroots. 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 dialogue leading to contextual theology.

Dialogue with Church Teaching

In addition to the dialogue with scripture, there is also the opportunity to dialogue with the rich tradition of church teaching, from Apostolic times until today. People doing contextual theology in PNG might well benefit from the commentaries of the early church fathers, documents from international gatherings, such as the Second Vatican Council, or meetings of the World Council of Churches, such as the 1983 assembly, devoted to issues of gospel and culture. In particular, there are creative contextual theologies coming from many third-world countries today that could stimulate ideas for people in PNG. Papua New Guinean theologians have yet to make a significant contribution to the work of 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?

Some schools of theology refer to two forms of teaching or “magisteria” – the pastoral magisterium of the bishops, and the academic magisterium of the theologians. In contextual theology, it is helpful to ask how much theological reflection finds a source in the faith experience of the church in grass roots communities – what Aloysius Pieris calls the “third magisterium”.²¹ There, at the grass roots, faith-filled people are writing a “fifth gospel” with their lives.²² 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).²³ 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.

²¹ Aloysius Pieris, “An Asian paradigm: interreligious dialogue and theology of religions”, in *The Month* (April 1993), p. 130.

²² The expression “Fifth gospel” is used by Joseph G. Healey in “Our Stories as Fifth Gospels”, in *AFER* 30 (1988), pp. 151-166.

²³ Pieris, “An Asian paradigm”, p. 131.

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 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.²⁴

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 laeyokenge*" (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. Biblical commentaries would not be concerned about how

²⁴ From typed notes by Political Awareness Team Member, Philip Maso.

many times Yahweh breathed life into humans. However, the Enga team's linking of one breath of life to one vote was both imaginative, and most probably convincing to their listeners.

The above arguments would hardly pass in a public meeting in Sydney or Wellington. However, the examples given illustrate how PNG people often integrate faith and experience, such as political realities, at a grass roots level. This linking of God's story and their own provides a window of opportunity for developing 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. The oral medium supports the point at the beginning of this paper – that perhaps the most common form of contextual theology in PNG today will be found in Christian preaching.

STEP FOUR: CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Contextual 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 primary subject of this form of theology is the community in which people can inspire and correct one another. Thus, people in grass roots communities are not just the object of theology, but – more importantly – the ones who discover God as their source of life. This is happening in many of the dynamic, faith-filled Christian communities in PNG, but it still needs to be well documented, hence the following example from Tonga. Sr Keiti Ann tells the story of a group of 58 Tongan women wanting to theologise about whether to allow a casino to be established in Tonga or not. She describes the process:

As we worked along discovering more and more about the possible good and evil effects of having a casino in Tonga, the women started to feel excited, emotional, worried, and finally “fired up” about the issue. For two weeks, the women put their heart and soul into the project. They prayed a daily novena. They met to collect facts, to reflect, and to discuss the pros and cons, to discern the reality of the issue – its possible impact on our society, especially the families, the

socio-economic, and cultural situation. The final stage of the process was the ultimate question. “Where is God in all this?” Using the process learned at the “Theologising Course”, the women searched the Bible and traditions and practices of the church for theological responses to the question. The formulation of statements was a moment of wonder for the women. To synthesise all their work and findings to one-page statements was, in itself, a fantastic achievement. It became obvious to the women that the casino would be more a cause of evil than a source of income for Tonga. The women then took a decision to make the assignment real, and have it presented to the Parliament as a petition not to have a law passed to allow the casino to be established in Tonga.²⁵

Their action resulted in the casino being dropped from the agenda of the Parliament of Tonga. The above example illustrates well the praxis method being proposed here. Praxis is reflection, plus practice. Reflection on a faith question calls for a faith response. The women in Tonga were responding to the faith question, “Where is God in all this?” Their result was not only “knowing” the truth, but also following through “doing” the truth. PNG theologians could contribute greatly to contextual theology, through documenting ways committed individuals and communities at the grass roots are “doing” the truth and helping to transform their society.

CONCLUSION

Contextualisation is necessary and desirable if we are to narrow the gap between faith and life. The alternative is an irrelevant, or meaningless, theology. However, there are also risks in trying to do contextual theology. One must find a fitting balance between the local and the global, lest the local community become isolated from the wider body of Christ. One has to avoid any overemphasis 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.

²⁵ Kanongata’a, “Why Contextual?”, pp. 34-35.

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

1. Grass roots Christian communities are part of the wider church community, and should value ecclesial and doctrinal unity (not uniformity), keeping in mind that true catholicity is found in openness to the diversity of particular situations.
2. We must never forget that the scriptures, and church teaching, remain as a standard by which to compare attempts at doing contextual 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”.²⁶ This principle is based on the belief in the Holy Spirit working through the faith community.

Birds of paradise have a varied feather fashion, ranging from radiant colours to drab browns. They put on displays high in the trees, but also on the ground. Before demonstrating their colourful plumage, males of the *Magnificent* bird of paradise come to the ground to ritually clear twigs from the forest floor, using their beaks. They also remove leaves from overhanging branches so that the sunlight can shine on their iridescent feathers. The appearance and behaviour of the bird of paradise are symbolic of the diversity of life in Papua New Guinea. Contextual theology seeks to engage that diversity, which has been concealed long enough in the forest cover of theology from elsewhere. It is time to clear space for the light of the gospel, to allow committed Christians in PNG to show their true colours.

²⁶ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, p. 12.

APPENDIX

Topics addressed in “Katolik Insight”

Year 2000

New Year
Peace
Poker machines
Lent/Tarangu Appeal
Lent/Repentance
Public service
National day for women
Violence
Easter message
Crime: *bikhet pasin*
Abortion
New resolve for a new PNG
Sharing responsibility for state of the nation
Respecting life
Firearms
Street vendors
Self-help: roads
Drug and Alcohol Abuse Centre
Decriminalising prostitution?
Independence: PNG
Hand-out mentality
Environment: beach clean-ups
Muslim mosque
Murders in Port Moresby
Privatisation
School subsidies
Settlements
Integrity of political parties
National Provident Fund
Youth development centres/raskals
AIDS
Rights of the child
Public service
Christmas message
Domestic violence/holy family/New Year

Year 2001

Land compensation
Infrastructure: roads
Mt Lamington: 50-year anniversary
Schools
Unity
Corruption
Pay cut for politicians
HIV/AIDS
Lent/Tarangu Appeal
West Papua
Disciplinary forces
Bougainville: peace
Settlements and crime
Health services
Easter message
Wages for leaders
Youth
Domestic violence
Corruption
AIDS
Family
“No” to violence
Violence in sport
Poker machines
Student protest: UPNG
Blessed Peter ToRot
Privatisation
Tsunami anniversary: Aitape
Bougainville: centenary of Catholic church
Fr Fabian Thom OFM
Problems: caused by men
Commitment
New bishop for Alotau
Independence day
Terrorist attack in USA
Asylum seekers
Burning of schools
Raping women
Free education?

Advent
Leaders' wages
Elections
Christmas
Peace

Year 2002

Firearms
West Papuan border crossers
Schools: free education?
Elections: electoral roll
Shortage of medicine
Priests in politics
Leadership tribunals
Qualities of leaders
Elections: guns
Federation of Catholic Bishops' Conferences of Oceania
Catholic men: fathers, leaders
HIV/AIDS
New government
Review of 2002 elections
Burning down of schools
Southern Highlands Province
Pay cuts for parliamentarians
Independence day
Poker machines
Public Accounts Committee
Keeping Port Moresby/PNG clean
Likely closure of schools
Bali bombing
AIDS
Violence
Freedom of religion
Diabetes
Agriculture: strength of PNG
Cutting allowances of politicians
Advent
Firearms
Settlements
Christmas

Year 2003

New Year: peace

Paying school fees

General Assembly of Catholic church in PNG

Corruption in Public Service

Repair of roads

Iraq

Employment and training

Schools

West Papuan border crossers

Freedom of speech

Care of the sick

Lent

Women and schools

Control of the media

Easter

Port Moresby fun park

Highlands Highway

Media freedom

Priests

Goals

Horse-racing machines

Water: necessary for life

Launching of General Assembly of Catholic church

Killing of sorcerers

Pay-back

Raping of women

Urbanisation

Joint declaration (by Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans [in PNG]) revalidation of each other's baptism

One gender "marriages"

Moral recovery

Independence Day

WHP: leading the way (re: roads)

Decriminalise prostitution?

Agriculture: a priority

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II

Discipline in schools

Corruption

The police

Freedom of media
Budget 2004-05-18 Advent
Prostitution: decriminalise?
Christmas
Peace

Year 2004

Madang evictions
Teachers' leave fares
School fees
Training priests
Commissioning of teachers/dedication of public servants
Taxes
Roads
Posin, sanguma (sorcery)
Lent/Tarangu Appeal
Enhanced Cooperation Program: Australia/PNG
Generation system: national high schools
Charging prostitutes?/AIDS
Water and disasters
Palm (Passion) Sunday
Easter
Election of Governor-general
Sir Anthony Siaguru
Vote of no confidence
Mothers' Day

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