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DOING ASIAN

AMERICAN THEOLOGY

A Contextual Framework  
for Faith and Practice



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# CONTEXTUALITY AND PARTICULARITY

*Christian faith is not available as an abstraction. The Word is made flesh in human lives. Theology is historical to its core.*

FUMITAKA MATSUOKA

AT AN ASIAN AMERICAN CONFERENCE, after presenting a survey of current scholarship on Asian American theology, the speaker asked the attendees, mostly Asian American pastors, *Is this helpful? Do we need this?* While the speaker phrased the question as one of usefulness, underlying it was the question of the legitimacy and place of Asian American theology. He was not asking a rhetorical question, but truly wondering whether we need an Asian American theology. His question, a common one, exposes the deep and widespread misunderstanding about the nature of the theological task in general, and the task of Asian American theology in particular.

This chapter is a non-apology for the existence of Asian American theologies. I offer no justification or defense for the existence and the importance of Asian American theologies, no answer to the question of whether Asian American theologies should exist or if they deserve attention, because the basic premise of that question is fundamentally flawed. I will, however, lay out the nature of theology, as it relates to questions about contextuality, normativity, and the dynamic tension between particularity and universality. In understanding the nature of theology, we will be able to understand how the task of Asian American theology fits into the broader global and multiethnic landscape.

### THE COVENANTAL BASIS OF CONTEXTUALITY

The notion of theology being an objective science is faulty because God is a living person and not a dead artifact. This reality that every theology is contextual is not new. Stephen Bevans, for example, points to a number of external sociopolitical and internal theological factors for theology being contextual.<sup>1</sup> While the concept of contextualization first arose out of missiology where the need for translation of the gospel was pressing, the growing global consciousness made it clear that no one was culture free. That realization served as a catalyst for missiologists to rethink the nature of theology.

Unfortunately, the label *contextual* remains in many theological circles and minds as a descriptor separating out non-Western, Majority World theologies or non-White theologies in the US. Theologies bearing this label might be relegated to the hinterlands of missiology or be seen as pertinent only in discussions about global or liberation theology. A common misunderstanding about contextual theology or contextualization is that people often mean a universal kernel of truth or gospel that is simply clothed in various cultures. The problem with this conceptualization of theology is that the White European tradition is often assumed to be this universal core theology, as though it is *accontextual* or *neutral*.

Since all theology is contextual, although some are implicitly while others are explicitly so, we could just drop the contextual label altogether. Instead of *contextual* as a label, I propose that we use the concept of contextuality as a category that applies to all theologies, describing the manner in which every theology is situated and engages their context.

This contextuality could be understood as a human limitation that we must work to move beyond. In that case, we might argue either that we are tragically bound by human limitations of cognition and perception or socio-politically determined to be ideologically disposed. We might also frame contextuality in terms of human need, or practical necessity to make the theology and the Bible relevant to different situations around the world. Instead of cultural and sociopolitical reasoning, I am interested in the theological understanding of contextuality as rooted in the very identity of God.

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<sup>1</sup>Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 5-10.

There are two popular versions of theological contextuality, namely incarnation and Pentecost.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh is too universalistic to serve as theological grounds for contextuality. There is no significance to the differentiation of various flesh, as in particular human embodiments, or even flesh in a general sense, including, for example, animals as well.<sup>3</sup> Also, this is an analogical argument, not a proper theological one because properly speaking there is only one incarnation. If analogically we argue that the “incarnational” dynamic occurs in every culture or context, it is the same eternal Word in every contextual incarnation. This eternal Word in differing flesh is the support for theological contextuality as *translation*; in this case, Asian American bodies, communities, and cultures are merely husks that have no impact on the kernel that is the Word. There is a static superficiality to contextuality in that God is not impacted at all. God says the same thing but in a different language in a sense. Does God say or do something different when interacting within a certain context?

Pentecost offers another perspective on theological contextuality. Here the outpouring of the Spirit “upon all flesh” (Acts 2:17) could be interpreted in terms of universality; however, the speaking of many tongues leads to a “divinely ordered diversity and pluralism.”<sup>4</sup> Through linguistic diversity, cultural and religious diversities could be taken up as theologically significant as well.<sup>5</sup> Willie Jennings contends that Pentecost should be interpreted as speaking the language of another instead of one’s own, thereby expressing new kinship and intimacy across identities.<sup>6</sup> A possible concern here is that this version of contextuality accentuates foreignness, emphasizing the exoticism of Asian language and culture. While perhaps appropriate for the global context, stressing language and culture tends to Orientalize Asian Americans. What about the particular experiences of Asian Americans that

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<sup>2</sup>Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup>David L. Clough, *On Animals, Volume I: Systematic Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 81-103.

<sup>4</sup>Amos Yong, *The Future of Evangelical Theology: Soundings from the Asian American Diaspora* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 136.

<sup>5</sup>Yong, *Future of Evangelical Theology*, 139.

<sup>6</sup>Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 266.

are not cultural or linguistic, but rather political or sociological, that is, marginality or invisibility?

While accepting the benefits and insights of the incarnation and Pentecost, I propose God's revelation as a covenantal God as the ground of theological contextuality. In proposing God's being as covenantal, I am stating that God sees and interacts with every people and every person in their particularity, for their reconciliation and vocation. Our relationship with this living God is an I-Thou encounter.<sup>7</sup> Jewish philosopher Martin Buber knew the danger of objectifying God, making the eternal Thou into an It. We can so easily reduce our living God into ideas or concepts, whether they be a worldview, law, morality, or even love or grace. More education or knowledge does not necessarily protect us from this danger of theological abstraction. Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns that the first theological question was asked by the serpent, inquiring about God in the third person as an object of our study.<sup>8</sup> It is always tempting to think of God as an idea that we can grasp, rather than a free person that I must attend to. Rather than a universal idea or an abstract concept, our God is "the God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and savants" as Blaise Pascal would confess.<sup>9</sup> Another way of expressing this I-Thou relationality is to confess that our God is a covenantal God. This covenantal God is alive and not dead, actively working and interacting with us and the world. Affirming God's covenantal aliveness means at least three things.

First, the living God encounters us in our particular existence. Our God encounters us as a person. This personal encounter occurs concretely in time and space, within a particular context; it does not happen abstractly. As Pascal notes above, in Scripture God does not reveal himself as a universalizing philosophical idea, but rather as a God of a particular people and definite relationships. God reveals himself personally, stopping people dead in their tracks and sending them forth to a radically different life afterward.

As we encounter the living God, we are called to follow Christ in our particular contexts, in our particular times, in our particular bodies. While all of us are called to follow Christ, where and how the path of discipleship

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<sup>7</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Touchstone, 1970).

<sup>8</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 3, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1-3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy, trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 107.

<sup>9</sup>Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: Penguin, 1966), 285.

takes us is different for all of us and that's because God encounters us concretely. We read Scripture not only to follow in the wake of God's past actions or words. We are also opening ourselves to hearing the living God speak—not just to anyone, but to us in our particularity.<sup>10</sup> As we pray and listen to God, God responds not with generic one-size-fits-all responses, but with specific answers to our particular supplications.

Second, the living God invites our whole selves to be reconciled. Confessing that “God is all, and we are naught” might sound pious, but it is not biblical. Emil Brunner points out how we can distort biblical faith by emphasizing God at the expense of humanity.<sup>11</sup> He poses this covenantal reality of our faith in terms of objectivity and subjectivity, both who God is in and of himself and our experience of God, respectively. Especially when the church feels threatened by various trials and temptations, it can resort to a reactionary exclusivism, embracing objectivity while rejecting notions of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup> There definitely are times when the church needs to recover the otherness of God and critique anthropocentric distortions of faith. However, this kind of correction does not reflect the full picture of our faith and more importantly does not express the covenantal nature of our God, who in divine freedom creates room for our human freedom.

Just as we can reduce God to an It, it is also possible to not bring our whole selves to this relationship, failing to be an authentic I. Walter Brueggemann talks about this kind of distortion in terms of us becoming mere yes-men or yes-women to God's commands, failing to have a “genuine covenant interaction” with God.<sup>13</sup> With the struggles of White assimilation and being presented with a White version of Christianity that ignores parts of our identity, it is so easy for Asian Americans to become a truncated self, a self that represses parts of ourselves that we deem unrepresentable. In a

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<sup>10</sup>Karl Barth's rejection of casuistry is getting at the very same thing. God is alive and we cannot treat him as though he is dead and has left us a book in his stead. See Daniel D. Lee, “Reading Scripture in our Context: Double Particularity in Karl Barth's Actualistic View of Scripture,” in *The Voice of God in the Text of Scripture: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016).

<sup>11</sup>Even with their infamous rift over natural theology, Karl Barth affirmed this same point later in his career. See Karl Barth, “Humanity of God,” in *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1960), 37-65.

<sup>12</sup>Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 82.

<sup>13</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 102-104.

sense, we can die to ourselves in a misguided way, thinking that our Asian American aspects are the problem.

The failure to bring our whole selves into God's presence means that there are parts of ourselves that are not reconciled to God, missing from God's shalom. In a sense, Christ's reconciliation is not just cosmic, social, and interpersonal, but also *intrapersonal*: it involves all of ourselves, even parts that we do not value or are unaware of. Through the gospel, God transforms us deep below the surface of our lives, healing our hurts and affirming our seemingly unrepresentable aspects.

Third, the living God sends us out with particular callings. Encountering us in our place and station in life and taking ahold of our whole selves, God sends us out to join his mission in the world. God had particular callings for Moses, Daniel, and Esther, as he has for us. We are not just getting a generic call to follow a universal spiritual code. Such a general God, a mechanistic universality that is objective and the same for all, arises from reducing the gospel to a set of objective beliefs or static spiritual concepts. Now, this idea of particular callings can be twisted into an egotistical self-affirmation about our uniqueness and God's way of bringing that to fruition. But even as we recognize the danger of such narcissistic thinking, a covenantal understanding of God's calling cannot be simplified into a set of common laws or plans that everyone follows.<sup>14</sup>

A different way of thinking about this I-Thou dynamic of our living God and our particularity can be drawn from John Calvin. Calvin begins his *Institutes* (I.i.1) with the interrelated nature of the knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.<sup>15</sup> He is not sure which one precedes or follows the other; this theme of double knowledge is one of the fundamental themes that runs through his theology.<sup>16</sup> Here, Calvin displays his deeply covenantal imagination that affirms the place of humanity with God, even as the stress clearly falls on God's work and glory.

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<sup>14</sup>Kierkegaard's "teleological suspension of the ethical" in regarding Abraham's call is getting at this very idea of particular callings. Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 6, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. an trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 54-67.

<sup>15</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 35.

<sup>16</sup>Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.



While for Calvin self-knowledge meant knowing ourselves to be fallen and redeemed in Christ, we might analogically extend his train of thought to include sociopolitical and cultural location. In continuing Calvin's framework in a more hermeneutical vein, our knowledge of God is filtered and impacted by the knowledge of ourselves and vice versa. That includes cultural, ethnic, racial, and sociopolitical particularities. We must be honest with ourselves about the insights and limits of our encounter with God. The knowledge of ourselves guides us into being an authentic "I" and to evaluating critically our particular understanding of God. The knowledge of God revealed in Christ leads us to a living "Thou," who reveals who we are and who we are called to be, which includes both how we can distort our knowledge of God as well as how we are specifically in need of God's grace.

Incarnation, Pentecost, and covenantal relationality are all important for theological contextuality. However, they can all become theoretical abstractions untethered from the biblical witness unless we recover God's election of Israel. It matters that Word became flesh in a Jewish body, that different languages were spoken by Spirit-filled diasporic Jews, and that the divine self-revelation of God occurred in the covenantal election of Israel as God's people. Because this election of Israel is the basis and the core of theological contextuality, the next chapter will address why all theology must be post-supersessionist. In recovering the Jewishness of Jesus, we affirm the significance of our own particular Gentileness. While covenant serves as a formal foundation of contextuality, its material basis is this particular Gentileness that exists as a foil to the election of Israel.

### HIDDEN NORMATIVITIES

The importance of having a clear notion of theological contextuality is not just about multicultural and global hospitality, making room for non-Western theologies. Lacking a deep awareness of our own situatedness exposes us to contextual captivities and distortions of the gospel. Lesslie Newbigin, and missional theologians thinking after him, have made this point clear. When Newbigin returned to the UK after his long missionary work in India, he found that Western Christianity was hopelessly captive to modernism and pluralism and yet was unaware of this bondage.<sup>17</sup> In a sense, the

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<sup>17</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

so-called West has been sending missionaries to the Majority World without realizing that they come bearing their own context as well. Many Western countries thought, because of their long historical engagement with Christianity, that they and their context had been thoroughly converted. However, Darrell Guder points out that without a continual conversion we will find ourselves with a gospel reduction, because gospel-culture interaction requires continual vigilance.<sup>18</sup> This conversion is not a once-and-for-all kind of affair, but rather an again-and-again reality. Only by continually being aware of where we are situated and how that impacts our theology can we avoid cultural captivities of the gospel.

If contextuality is an inescapable human phenomenon that is also vital for our faithfulness, why do we keep thinking that some theologies are not contextual, that some are above the cultural sociopolitical fray? The culprit for this blindness is the “exnomination” of White Eurocentric normativity. Exnomination is a concept developed by Roland Barthes that describes how a pervasive aspect of culture can be accepted as normative, as “a given,” by remaining unnamed.<sup>19</sup> It is a way of describing how one particular perspective becomes a universal norm by staying invisible.

The contextuality of many White male theologians remains invisible because, through the process of exnomination, we do not see their works as perspectival. This is analogous to how *American* is often assumed to mean *White American*, whereas every other race feels that they must label or hyphenate themselves as Asian Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, and so on. Because this normativity is unnamed, we cannot see its distinctiveness. At Fuller, I have met many well-meaning White students from the Midwest who express their excitement about being exposed to so many different cultures because they feel that they themselves are cultureless or neutral, sort of like a blank whiteboard or vanilla ice cream. This illusion of universal neutrality is what exnomination does to White normativity.

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<sup>18</sup>Darrell L. Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 98.

<sup>19</sup>Roland Barthes, “Mythology Today,” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 250-52. Spencer applies Barthes’s concept of exnomination to the dynamics of racial realities and politics of representation. Stephen Spencer, *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2014), xxiv, 294.

Being blind to our own contextuality makes us vulnerable to contextual captivities. Like Newbigin, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon have noted in *Resident Aliens* how American culture can be confused for Christianity.<sup>20</sup> In our contextual sloth, the American church has confused ideas of individual freedom, political privilege, and intellectual assent for the gospel. In a similar manner, Soong-Chan Rah has described a White captivity of evangelicalism with unnamed racism, individualism, and consumerism hijacking our faith.<sup>21</sup> The issue is not that American Christianity is in danger of becoming captive to cultural forces, but rather that, because of the exnomination of White normativity, invisible and unrecognized cultural forces have already taken over. Cultural captivity of the gospel is a universal and continual danger for everyone, no matter where you may be in the world. This danger can arise out of misunderstanding your theological context, making the context into an idol and judge of the gospel, or by being oblivious to your context, thinking that you work in a contextless manner when in fact your context is invisibly limiting, guiding, distorting, and co-opting your faith.

Along with exnomination, Barthes describes how modern myths function through the deprivation of history.<sup>22</sup> Within the conservative evangelical tradition, I was nurtured with a very clear historical sensibility of one continuous, storied Western tradition. From this perspective, what I am calling “White Eurocentric theology” was perceived as the historically-rooted theology that can be traced all the way back to the apostles. From this perspective, non-White, non-Western faith communities can and should make appropriate cultural accommodations and applications based on this universal tradition, but they are not allowed to develop their own ethnic or racial theologies deviating or revising it.

While this view of tradition sounds appealing, the truth is that there is no such single continuous monolithic Christian tradition. Andrew Walls argues that the transmission of Christianity is more “serial” through various contexts and different times than “progressive” as one continual tradition

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<sup>20</sup>Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 30-36.

<sup>21</sup>Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 18-23.

<sup>22</sup>Barthes, *Mythologies*, 264.

spreading from a single center (for example, the “Western” context).<sup>23</sup> This idea limits how much the church fathers should be considered as “older and more experienced elders,” since this older wisdom might not apply across the board in other contexts. While helpful to relativize and contextualize all of church history, we should note that this idea of serial transmission, when positing Israel as only one context among many, is problematic as we will see in the next chapter.

Now given that, in order to make sure that our talk of contextuality does not devolve into some sort of postmodern subjective relativism, we must now clarify the relationship between particularity and universality, and the place of a global tradition.

### PARTICULARITY AND UNIVERSALITY

The dynamics of contextuality can be understood in this double statement: *Universality must be mediated by particularity; particularity must be in service of universality.*<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Andrew Walls proposes two concepts that highlight how the gospel lives in tension with the host culture.<sup>25</sup> The *indigenous principle* states the need for contextualization, for the gospel to feel at home in a particular context. The *pilgrim principle*, on the contrary, points to the constant reforming dimension that counters the indigenous principle and connects each embodiment of the gospel to the universal faith community.

The first statement, *universality must be mediated by particularity*, means that God chooses to communicate God’s universal message through the mediation of a particular manifestation, first and foremost, through Israel and the Jewish Christ. There is no pure, acultural, unadulterated gospel. All Christianity is mediated through a culture, and all theology is contextual theology.

The second statement, *particularity must be in service of universality*, means that no contextual theology can have a privileged position over others. No contextual theology can have a specific claim on God. All contextual expressions of the gospel must in the end serve the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic

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<sup>23</sup>Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 145.

<sup>24</sup>Daniel D. Lee, *Double Particularity: Karl Barth, Contextuality, and Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 82.

<sup>25</sup>Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 7-9.

church. Theological contextuality must not lead to a tribal theology that is self-serving to the ethnocentric exclusion of others, such as the German Christianity of the Third Reich. Newbigin relates particular cultures with the universal community and its universal mission and points out that this dialectical process leads to a deeper understanding of the gospel itself:

The Christian community, the universal Church, embracing more and more fully all the cultural traditions of humankind, is called to be that community in which a tradition of rational discourse is developed which leads to a true understanding of reality, because it takes as its starting point and as its permanent criterion of truth the self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ.<sup>26</sup>

To understand how this works, cartography can serve as an analogy of how the global theological tradition develops as all the particular theological expressions work together in service of the one gospel, one church, and one God. Imagine a vast world where each community explores and maps out the geography of their own lands. After years of familiarity and study, each community will have mapped out their own lands to every road and side street, while lands distant from them will be represented with vague sketches. Now, if the map that a particular community developed was used for all, the people who live in other lands will have only meager outlines for understanding their own lands. Jonathan Bonk introduces the term “ecclesiastical cartography” in describing how church sees the world. He bemoans how some parts of this map remain *terra incognita*, with no names or labels.<sup>27</sup> Beyond thinking of this cartography in a geographic sense as Bonk does, I mean for us to imagine the landscape of theological and contextual concerns, questions, and concepts.

It is important to clarify that I am not here talking about superficial and easily packaged “cultural gifts” such as family orientation, communalism, or hospitality. Rather, I am imagining those Asian American theological contributions that come about as we ask theological questions about our contextual struggles. I once heard an Asian American speaker, who is very active in multicultural ministry circles, bemoan the fact that while African American churches have their spirituals and gospel choir, and Hispanic

<sup>26</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 87-88.

<sup>27</sup>Jonathan J. Bonk, “Ecclesiastical Cartography and the Invisible Continent,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 4 (October 2004): 153-58.

ministries have their celebratory worship in Spanish, Asian Americans do not really have “distinct gifts” to share with others. But rather than fretting about what we are or are not bringing to the table, our primary concern should be identifying and taking up our pressing theological questions because in attending to that task we find our contribution to the world. The particular Asian American gift to the global church arises out of our spiritual struggle with God, seeking and responding to God in our specific place of discipleship and mission. For example, the distinct gift of the Asian American church is not just cultural collectivism but the theological reflections and spiritual practices about brokenness, sin, transformation, and redemption around cultural collectivism in a racialized world.

Using this rough analogy of cartography, we can imagine how each of the communities might raise questions and develop theology as they experience God in their own situation. Specific questions will be asked in one context, whereas those in another context might pursue different inquiries. For example, within the European context, with its long history of Christendom, the question of church and state has been a pivotal question leading to various proposals for what faithfulness might mean, whether it be the Lutheran two kingdoms approach, the Anabaptist free church, or a Dutch Reformed Christian political party as Abraham Kuyper proposes. This question is storied, with each approach developed with historic depth.

However, what if the pressing question is not only church and state, but church and family as well, as it is for many Asian Americans? Of course, the issue of church and state is relevant for Asian Americans living in the United States. However, the relationship between church and family, which is not commonly recognized as a theological problem but rather simply a spirituality or ministry problem, plagues the lives of many Asian Americans. In a sense, this is a different area of the theological map that is not well-developed, it is *terra incognita*.

Within the Western Protestant tradition, with its Enlightenment-influenced individualism, family is not a significant theological locus. Thus, it is not only possible, but quite probable, to graduate from seminary without ever dealing with family as a theological category. And yet, it is a burning question for many Asian Americans. The resources that developed Western theological traditions are inadequate not only because they come from a

different cultural background, but also because they do not pursue this issue with the requisite level of depth and nuance. They are just not pursuing these kinds of questions. Of course, the fact that family has been so ignored as a theological locus does not mean that this development was not needed for the broader White American situation either. In asking their burning questions about the relationship between church and family, Asian Americans here would expand theological insights toward uncharted frontiers that not only would benefit their community but serve the global theological tradition as well.

That is just one example, but the larger point is that, only as we work together can the global theological map be developed to sufficient detail and distinctions. And just like any real map of our world, we need to continually work on this map as our world continues to change all the time.

In continuing this cartography analogy, a factoid I learned recently in my hobby of backpacking might help illustrate how having one interpretation of Scripture as our theological norm still does not lead to uniformity of perspectives. Most of us grow up thinking that the compass always points north. However, that's only half true. What the compass points to is called the "magnetic north," and it differs from "true north." The difference in degrees between magnetic and true north is called the "declination." These magnetic declinations vary significantly from place to place and even change over time.<sup>28</sup> When in the backcountry, in order to navigate correctly you must first learn the current declination at your location, then account for this deviation before referring to your map. Otherwise, you can end up miles away from where you intend to go.

When I first encountered this idea of magnetic north, it did not register in my head because I couldn't understand how the compass could be "wrong" or, more accurately, relative over time and space. Moving beyond the shock, I was baffled that I had not known about this, and that so many people still have no idea that the compass does not point us to true north. Analogously, I offer that while God's revelation is the "true north" that Scripture points us to, our readings of Scripture are more like the "magnetic north" of biblical interpretation, which vary based on time and space. In a sense, how we read Scripture and even what we see as pressing or relevant varies over time and

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<sup>28</sup>To see what these magnetic declinations look like over time and location, refer to [www.noaa.gov/maps/historical\\_declination/](http://www.noaa.gov/maps/historical_declination/). Accessed on August 9, 2017.

space. Moreover, unlike having the benefit of GPS technology and satellite maps for traversing geography, we must depend on historical and ecumenical wisdom for our theological bearings, and even more importantly on God's spirit to discern the changing contextual declinations.

Through this rather crude analogy, I am pointing to our epistemological limitations and how theology is not God, but rather a witness to God. To bring all these ideas together, missiologist Paul Hiebert's concept of epistemological shifts provides an interpretative paradigm to comprehend this dynamic between particularity and universality.<sup>29</sup>

Hiebert describes the epistemology of modernity to be positivism, which holds that our knowledge "corresponds one-to-one with reality."<sup>30</sup> With the supreme optimism of the Enlightenment, scientific knowledge, for example, was understood to be purely objective. The impact of this epistemology on theology was that theology and the gospel were equated with one another. Taking this understanding of their theology, Western missionaries sought to share an "acultural and ahistorical" gospel to other nations.<sup>31</sup>

With the demise of modernity, human optimism gave way to the skepticism of postmodernity, or pessimism in the form of an instrumental epistemology. Within this view, our knowledge is so tainted with our presuppositions and our interests that imposing it on others is always a form of oppression. From this perspective, theology is just a subjective expression of the gospel in one's own context and worldview with no claim to any sort of objectivity. Therefore, it is more accurate to "speak of theologies, not Theology, for there are as many theologies as there are human points of view."<sup>32</sup>

However, Hiebert suggests that we have matured to a critical realistic view of theology, holding that "reason and empiricism are not sufficient to discern the truth, but they are useful guides we can draw upon. . . . It recognizes that as humans we see through a glass darkly, but that we do see."<sup>33</sup> This humble view of human knowledge shows that "none can claim sole authority

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<sup>29</sup>Paul G. Hiebert, "Anthropology, Missions, and Epistemological Shifts," in *Paradigm Shifts in Christian Witness: Insights from Anthropology, Communication, Spiritual Power*, ed. Charles E. Van Engen, Darrell Whiteman, and J. Dudley Woodberry (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 13-22.

<sup>30</sup>Hiebert, "Anthropology," 13.

<sup>31</sup>Hiebert, "Anthropology," 14.

<sup>32</sup>Hiebert, "Anthropology," 17.

<sup>33</sup>Hiebert, "Anthropology," 19.



to judge the others.”<sup>34</sup> All human theology is culturally and historically biased, yet it still points to the gospel that saves us. Theology is not the gospel itself, but it still bears useful witness to the gospel.

This critical realistic perspective on theology is “based on community hermeneutic” because no one person can see the whole picture in detail, but rather requires others to compare and sharpen their view.<sup>35</sup> The *critical* element reminds us that other theologians are sinners just like us; the *realist* element states that, even as sinners, their insights can still help us as we struggle with Scripture in our context to discern God’s work and presence.

In my long theological journey, the above reflections are what have led me to not try to justify Asian American theology, but to see it within the backdrop of what theology is in general. When I was writing my dissertation on Karl Barth, I kept wanting to go beyond the edges of where Barth could take me. I had been attracted to Barth because of his radical Christocentricity and grace-centeredness. I just needed to find a way to apply Barth’s wisdom to the Asian American context, I thought. However, despite my urgent questions, I found that Barth either refused to go down the line of questioning I found necessary or provided superficial responses lacking the nuance I sought. As a good student at the foot of a modern-day church father, I remained subservient, thinking that the fault laid with me.<sup>36</sup> Gradually, however, I overcame this sense of mute prostration before theological greatness, and began to realize that Barth himself, even as he took up certain questions, avoided pursuing others. As I studied the dynamics of his own contextuality, his fight to move beyond the ghost of Friedrich Schleiermacher, exposing the idolatry of German racist Christianity, or jousting with the existentialism of Rudolf Bultmann, I discovered that Barth was taking up the burning questions of his situation while ignoring others. Even with the sheer volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth’s theological project was not exhaustive in a universal sense, nor was that his intent. Many of his

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<sup>34</sup>Hiebert, “Anthropology,” 20.

<sup>35</sup>Hiebert, “Anthropology.”

<sup>36</sup>Torrance describes Karl Barth as “the great Church Father of Evangelical Christendom, the one genuine Doctor of the universal Church the modern era has known. . . . Only Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin have performed comparable service.” T. F. Torrance, editor’s preface to *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4, part 4, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, by Karl Barth (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), vi.

Barthian admirers, including myself at one point, fail to see it, but I now see that Barth knew, or at least came to understand, the limits of his own contextuality. That is why Barth encouraged others not to merely copy or repeat his thoughts in their own context, to not be Barthians, but to do theology for themselves.<sup>37</sup>

Looking through the venerated theologians of the broader tradition, I found that every single one struggled with the burning questions of their time and place. Seeing this, I conclude that I, just like Barth, Bonhoeffer, Calvin, Luther, and Augustine, as well as James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Kwak Pui-lan, and others, need to take up the burning questions of my situation. I am an Asian American, and my church's house is on fire. When many Asian Americans read works of their favorite prominent White male theologians or pastors, they are also reading a particular and limited perspective. As Asian Americans, we share certain aspects of their context, and hence can benefit from reading these works. But what we must also realize is that there are other questions that these writers do not know about or do not take up, questions that are particular to us as Asian Americans.

For me, realizing this hidden normativity of White theology, especially in the Reformed tradition, was a long journey. I understood intellectually that theologies existed in context. However, with a firm conviction about the universality of the gospel, and the primacy of spiritual identity over human distinctions, I believed that being a follower of Christ meant that our cultural, ethnic, and racial identities are theologically irrelevant. To focus on these creaturely particularities seemed like distractions at best, and idolatries at worst, in comparison to the all-consuming calling to seek and love God who breaks down all walls of division and hostilities. However, I have come to understand that the idea of contextual theologies came with the assumption that "normative" theology and tradition do not address particular situations and perspectives. While true in some sense, this way of labeling left untouched the hidden supposedly universal and objective assumptions of the tradition and of theologies free of any descriptors. And through the process of exnomination these descriptor-less theologies asserted their normative ideologies along with their theological ideas.

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<sup>37</sup>Karl Barth, "No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (1969): 3-5.

There are more theologians now who would accept the reality of such a thing as the social location of the theologian, but a flippant acceptance matters little if it is not methodologically substantive. Moving forward we have two options. On the one hand, we label nothing because labeling is being used to marginalize. Thus, all are just theologies with the assumption that all are perspectival and all are only contributions. While theoretically possible, this option wouldn't work given that the seemingly universal, objective theologies would continue business as usual. Alternatively, we label everything and expose all the hidden assumptions. Locate yourself as a theologian and your theological work explicitly. This labeling is your theological and ethical responsibility. In this sense, Asian American theology is just theology, aware of its particular context, the place in which we ask theological questions.

We should stop using the word *contextual* for only certain theologies and not others. That selective usage itself is problematic and confusing. Rather, we need to discuss the contextuality of every single theology. In all this, we must especially make explicit a theology's relationship with historical and structural normativities. This is one of the main reasons we are talking about all this in the first place, to understand the relationship between knowledge and power.

Given its importance, our efforts should be directed toward developing the concept of theological contextuality. That is exactly what the next chapter does in identifying the importance of Israel for contextuality and supersessionism as the chief problem that we must address. While not a commonly made connection, this link between contextuality and the election of Israel, I argue, is *the* proper foundation of this concept.

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