

TRUTH IN EARTHEN VESSELS

CATHOLIC REFLECTIONS ON CONTEXTUALIZATION

INGEBORG GABRIEL*

The questions of contextuality and contextualization constitute central themes in Christian theology. In Catholic theology, they have recently been treated mainly in connection with the issue of cultural plurality and in missiology.¹ The topic, however, is much broader philosophically as well as theologically. In this article I will start out with some general philosophical and theological reflections on contextuality and then give an overview of the history of contextualization in Western theology up to Vatican II. My concluding remarks will reflect on the theological task of the contextualization of the Christian faith in a globalized world.

ON CONTEXTUALITY: PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REMARKS

The Contextuality of Human Existence from a Hermeneutical Perspective

During the time of the Enlightenment, the natural sciences with their claim to universality became the paradigm for all other forms of systematic human insight. From that time onward philosophy, theology and the liberal arts in general were methodologically always in a difficult situation vis-à-vis the dominating natural sciences, which were often simply called “the sciences”. This constituted and indeed still does constitute a big challenge for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, which in English philosophy were also called moral

* University of Vienna.

¹ After Vatican II, contextualization became an issue mainly with regard to non-European contexts, primarily in connection with Latin American, Asian and African liberation theologies, see Thomas Schreijäck, Knut Wenzel, eds. *Kontextualität und Universalität: Die Vielfalt der Glaubenskontexte und der Universalitätsanspruch des Evangeliums: 25 Jahre 'Theologie interkulturell'* (Stuttgart, 2012).

sciences² and led to a whole range of methodological questions. The most important one was how to reconcile transcendent human reason with history and, thus, tradition. The inherent a-historicity of the Enlightenment thinking was complemented by its underlying assumption of an inherent progress toward the better in history. However, this premise led to new problems for all those academic disciplines and studies that have their foundations in the past since progressivism by definition devalues the past as compared to the present and future. How, then, can the “ugly moat” between the past and the present, as Gotthold E. Lessing put it, be overcome? This is a vital question for the liberal arts but even more so for Christian theology (and that of other religions) based on sacred writings that carry normative meaning for the whole religious edifice. If truth can be won independently from a historical standpoint, and if the past is to be overcome in a never-ending process of progress, how then can the normative value of texts written at a certain time and in a specific place, that is, in a particular context, be asserted?³

The most important contribution to this question came from the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Building on the work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, in his hermeneutical philosophy, Gadamer argues for a rediscovery of an individual as well as cultural standpoint that take into account the simple fact that humans lead their lives embedded in historical, cultural and social environments. This also means anthropologically that they are finite beings whose reason is finite and whose insights therefore necessarily remain fragmentary at any point in history. In the beginning of his hermeneutics Gadamer formulates a viable criticism of an ahistorical Enlightenment philosophy as well as of the various forms of anti-Enlightenment philosophy, mainly romanticism and historicism, which reject its claims without being able to solve its intellectual *aporia*. Romanticism’s restorative – one may say reactionary – stance rather mirrors the positions it

² Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 6th revised, unmodified ed. (Tübingen, 1990), p. 2, referring to the term used by John St. Mill. (The English version online: <http://de.scribd.com/doc/15280211/HansGeorg-Gadamer-Truth-and-Method-082647697X-2005>).

³ This question is the starting point of Gadamer’s hermeneutics under the title, *Truth and Method*, see Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*.

set out to criticize and overcome.⁴ In its culturalism it rejects universalism stressing the importance of culture and community over the individual; in its anti-rationalism it emphasizes emotions over ‘cold reason’. In its authoritarianism it values authority over freedom, and in its traditionalism it stresses the superiority of the past over the present. This way it reverses the assumptions of Enlightenment philosophy without, however, solving its inherent problems. Thereby, the most important question remains unanswered, which is: How can human existence as well as human activities be understood within their inevitable cultural and historical contextuality and with it in their finiteness without falling into the trap of historicism and with it relativism?

Gadamer tries to answer this fundamental question first and foremost by referring to texts. He starts out with a principle found in classical rhetoric, which demands that all particular statements of a text, because of their inter-relatedness, have to be understood from their *contextus* and with it its overall sense, the so-called *scopus*.⁵ This traditional theory of text interpretation or applied hermeneutics has been important for various disciplines, among them theology, before modernity. Gadamer uses it as a starting point to lay the philosophical foundations for answering the question of how the “ugly moat” between the past and the present can be bridged and how we can understand texts as being normative for us. This is his basis for understanding texts, but also for an interpretation of human existence as a whole and with it human rationality in the light of traditions, which are always those of a particular time and place. This means, of course, also that they necessarily remain fragmentary and can never represent the truth in a complete way. If this is true for philosophical insights, it is also true for theological ones.⁶ As St. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: we always see only fragments as through a mirror (see Rom 13:12) and we will recognize the

⁴ “Die Umkehrung der Voraussetzung der Aufklärung hat die paradoxe Tendenz der Restauration zur Folge, d. h. die Tendenz zur Wiederherstellung des Alten, weil es das Alte ist... Durch diese romantische Umkehrung des Wertmaßstabes der Aufklärung wird aber die Voraussetzung der Aufklärung, der abstrakte Gegensatz von Mythos und Vernunft, gerade verewigt...” (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 278).

⁵ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 181.

⁶ This has to be stressed against all positivistic tendencies in modern Western theology that are also a reflection of similar tendencies of modernity.

fullness of truth only at the end of times. And: as humans we always carry this truth in “earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7), that is, our finiteness does not allow us to express the infinite in its completion.

This fact, that texts are inserted into a time as well as into a place, that is, their contextuality, does not make the truth and insights contained in them *per se* relative. This is so because texts stand in chains of tradition(s). The truth that texts contain has to be extracted from them through the interpretation and reinterpretation undertaken by each generation anew. Hermeneutics thus constitute an ongoing process in history with the aim to better understand the meaning of the text for us. According to Gadamer this holds not only true for texts but for the whole of human existence, the contextuality of which he calls *Lebenswelt* (life-world, i.e., cultural surroundings). The term has been coined by Husserl to denote “the whole, which we live in as historical beings”.⁷ This means, as he adds, that we are also social beings and that human existence cannot be understood without taking into account this fundamental sociality of individuals. Only through reflecting on the contexts they live in, that is, their historic and cultural *Lebenswelt*, are humans able to develop their intellectual insight and – as may be added – ethical freedom.⁸

Gadamer’s reintroduction of the time dimension, and with it tradition, obviously is of great importance for the liberal arts, as for Christian theology – and that of all religions – based on Sacred Texts.⁹ Hermeneutics, thereby, also reassert the worth of tradition(s) against all forms of ahistorical reason, showing that historical continuity is essential for human life and thought.¹⁰ This way it overcomes the false dichotomy between the individual and the community, since individuals necessarily belong to communities, as Gadamer demonstrates in his phenomenology of language.¹¹ This shows that questions of contextuality are also closely interwoven with those of plurality,

⁷ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 251.

⁸ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, p. 265.

⁹ There is currently a fierce intellectual debate in Islam on questions of hermeneutics, see Andreas Bsteh, Seyed A. Mirdamadi, eds., *Hermeneutik: Thema der 4. Iranisch-Österreichischen Konferenz. Referate – Anfragen – Gesprächsbeiträge* (Mödling, 2010).

¹⁰ With regard to theology cf. also the classical essay of Yves Congar, *La tradition et les traditions* (Paris, 1960).

¹¹ Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 387-494.

as the plurality of languages demonstrates, which through their very particularity influence the modes of human understanding and insight in a particular context. The notion of unity handed down in classical philosophy has not been helpful to understand this positive dimension of plurality and with it that of cultures and cultural insights, since they are regarded as accidental and derivative compared to the essential and universal.¹²

It was this philosophical heritage that made it difficult to accept contexts and cultures as being of positive value and in theology affirming that plurality of Christian forms in thought and life is legitimate. This comes as a surprise since the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that is, the foundational documents of the Christian faith, show a great deal of plurality, which therefore should not be neglected from a theological point of view.

Remarks on Contextuality from a Theological Perspective

For Christianity, history carries a fundamental meaning, the biblical God revealing Himself first and foremost in the events of history. This biblical view differs considerably from that of ancient and Enlightenment philosophy. History is not seen as a sort of addition to a timeless human nature. Rather, it constitutes the very medium through which the people of God experience His actions and care for humanity. History also is the arena in which Christians through their faith and actions have to stand the test of their lives. The God of the Bible is not a deistic Divine being situated outside of time, as Aristotle's "unmoved mover". He is the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", as Blaise Pascal, the great mathematician and philosopher of the early Enlightenment, put it at the occasion of his conversion. The God of the Bible is actively engaged in the history of mankind through His ongoing creativity. This includes that it is always at a specific time and in a specific place that God and men or women interrelate in freedom. The covenants of the Old and the New Testaments that stress this mutuality are a profound expression of this belief.

The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are thereby regarded as the centre of time, leading to a distinction of two phases in history. Firstly, the

¹² See Emerich Coreth, ed., *Wahrheit in Einheit und Vielheit* (Düsseldorf, 1987), p. 26.

time of the promises given to Israel in the Old Covenant and through her to other peoples and the whole of humanity. This first phase of salvation history culminates in the incarnation of the Word of God, in whom all human realities are assumed and sanctified. The dogma of the Incarnation, therefore, stands in the centre of all theological reflections on contextualization. The second phase of salvation history, which may be called the “time of the Church”,¹³ is the epoch when all social realities are to be transformed into the reality of the Kingdom of God. The way this is to happen is, as the great Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan understood it, through the conversion of those who believe in Him,¹⁴ which therefore is the starting point of any theology linking the time of the first coming to that of the second. The New Covenant can thereby be seen as a way through history, a pilgrimage, from God’s promise to its ultimate completion at the end of times. In this way the people of God is intimately linked with humanity “by the deepest of bonds” (*Gaudium et spes* 1).¹⁵ History constitutes the frame in which human existence, individual as well as collective, is to unfold toward its ultimate aim, the Kingdom of God. In this process all cultural forms are to be transformed gradually so that, the Word, which was before time, renews the whole of creation (John 1:1-5).

CONTEXTUALIZATION IN THE *TIME OF THE CHURCH*

The Change of Terminologies and Perceptions: Adaptation – Inculturation – Contextualization

All humans belong to cultural and social contexts that from the very beginning of their lives to its very end shape their world views, convictions and their ways of acting. This is part of the universal *conditio humana*. At the same time these beliefs and actions also transcend the contexts humans live

¹³ Heinrich Schlier, *Zeit der Kirche: Exegetische Aufsätze und Vorträge*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1958).

¹⁴ On conversion as the first principle of theology, see Bernard Lonergan, ‘Pluralism and Conversion’, in *Philosophical and Theological Papers 1965-1980*, eds. Robert C. Croken and Robert M. Doran, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto, Buffalo and London, 2004), pp. 86-88.

¹⁵ See online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

in. That they are free means that their choices and actions are not completely predetermined by their cultural and social contexts, which they may freely affirm or reject. Individuals can say Yes or No to the way things are, and their decisions also influence the contexts to which they belong.

For a missionary religion like Christianity, this has still another dimension: contexts and cultures are to be actively transformed through the proclamation of the Gospel, that is, the communication of the revelation and the ethics contained in it. This process is commonly called contextualization or inculturation, both terms being used synonymously in Catholic theology since about the 1970s. This terminology thereby replaces older concepts of “adaptation” or “accommodation”.¹⁶ The change in names also signifies a shift in theological understanding. The basic idea is no longer that the Christian message is extrinsic to cultures, so that these must adapt to it. Rather, the process of inculturation is viewed as initiating a fundamental transformation of the culture itself, which also in a way changes the Christian message.¹⁷ Different cultures, as do the different languages spoken in them, thus bring forward new variants of Christian self-understanding and styles of life. At the same time the Gospel, passed on from one people to another creates an organic unity between their cultures based on the common belief in the Scriptures and the traditions emanating from them.¹⁸ This is the reason for the social and spiritual interrelatedness of all those baptized in the name of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-18; Gal 3:27f). It is this unity that was foreshadowed at Pentecost, when each person heard the apostles speak in his or her own tongue (Acts 2:3-4). In analogy to the metaphor of St. Paul for whom the heathens are grafted onto the olive tree of Israel (Rom 11:17ff), each local church is grafted onto another church from whom it received the Gospel.

¹⁶ Ary A. Roest Crolius, ‘What is so New About Inculturation? A Concept and its Implications’, *Gregoriana*, 59 (1978), pp. 722-737.

¹⁷ In this sense, the Final Document of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops from 1985 states: “Inculturation is different from a simple external adaptation, because it means the intimate transformation of the authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and through the taking root of Christianity in various human cultures”, cited in Roest Crolius, ‘What is so New About Inculturation’, in: Ary A. Roest Crolius, Paul Surlis, and Thomas Langan, *Creative Inculturation and the Unity of Faith*, Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures, 8 (Rome, 1986), p. 3.

¹⁸ See the reflections on translation and language in Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 387-593 et passim as a key to developing this insight further.

All churches together form the *communio ecclesiarum*, the one Church as the sacrament of unity among the peoples of the earth (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium* 1). In this vision cultural plurality in time and space is no longer opposed to unity, but rather its representation. It is in this plurality that the Church can testify to the unfathomable truth of Christ in His ever inexhaustible fullness.

Contextualization as a theological endeavour to create an intimate relationship between faith and a particular culture is as old as Christian faith itself. The letters of the New Testament as well as of Acts testify to the efforts of early Christian communities to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ, crucified and resurrected, in different cultural settings, thereby using the terminology of time and place.

*From St. Paul to Vatican II*¹⁹

The following rather sketchy overview is to show three phases of contextualization in the Christian history of the West. The most fundamental contextualization and with it cultural transformation of Christian faith took place already in the first decades of Christian history, when coming from the culturally rather marginal Semitic culture it was inculturated into the Hellenistic world. This process has been described in New Testament writings in fairly great detail. It is, thus, of paradigmatic and normative character for Christian theology. Its main promotor was St. Paul, a Pharisee faithful to the law, who knew himself to be called by God to put this first radical contextualization into effect (see Phil 3:2-11). His letters as well as his deeds as described in the book of Acts show the difficulties that meant for him personally as well as the conflicts the detachment from the Jewish law and culture provoked in the early Christian-Jewish communities, which rightly claimed that Jesus Himself had been faithful to the law (cf. Gal 4:4). Paul's bold *kenosis* in giving up the law, which was an act of missionary faith in obedience to the Holy Spirit, however, opened the door for the wider acceptance of Christianity in the Hellenistic world (1 Cor 9:21f.). To this end, he also related the Christian message to this religious context as formulated in

¹⁹ See Ingeborg Gabriel, 'Kirche und Kultur: Überlegungen zum Thema Inkulturation', in *Die Einheit der Kulturethik in vielen Ethosformen*, eds. Werner Freistetter and Rudolf Weiler (Berlin, 1993), pp. 128-144.

the Acts: “What therefore you unknowingly worship I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:29). At the same time he made it clear that the Christian message transcends the expectations of Greeks as well as of Jews (1 Cor 1:22f.), bringing radically new insights and values. Contextualization thus demands a kenotic attitude and respect with regard to other intellectual and religious cultures. However, it also asks for the readiness to lead these cultures and those living in them into a crisis, that is, an unending process of transformation that is to subject it in all its dimensions to new Christian standards and norms.

The patristic theology of the Greek and Latin Fathers continues the contextualization begun by St. Paul. They inculturated the biblical message into Greek-Roman culture with its high regard for reason. They were ready to be challenged by its speculative depth and highly developed philosophical ethics. The theological boldness of these efforts that took place over centuries is as stunning as the creativeness of this process adapting non-biblical, philosophical categories and Greek mythology to express contents of Christian theology.²⁰ However, it also brought major shifts in emphasis as compared to Jewish culture. To mention but one: the concern for the law, that is, for ethics and with it human behaviour and action, was replaced by a speculative theology reflecting on ontology and being. Still, it was this struggle for a valid synthesis of the Hellenistic and Jewish cultures that laid the foundations for the Christian culture in Europe and beyond.²¹ It also led, as is well known, to deep theological tensions and many (heretic) meanders.

After centuries of turmoil and tribal conflicts following the fall of Rome in 410 AD, the period from the 12th century onward may be regarded as a third phase of active theological contextualization in the West, after that of St. Paul and the Church fathers. Inspired by the re-discovery of Aristotle, scholastic theology reinterpreted the biblical and patristic heritage for a new era.²² Two main characteristics of this inculturation are to be named. Firstly,

²⁰ See with regard to antique Christian cultures Alois Grillmeier, *Jesus, der Christus im Glauben der Kirche*, 5 volumes (Freiburg im Breisgau and Wien, 1979 – 2002); Hugo Rahner, *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung* (Zürich, 1957); Idem, *Symbole der Kirche: Die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg, 1964).

²¹ Church-state relations from the 4th century onward also furthered what may be termed ‘exculturation’ due to power politics, which had grave consequences for Christianity as a whole.

²² See the prominent studies on this period by Marie-Dominique Chenu, *La Théologie comme science au XIIIe Siècle*, 3rd ed., Bibliothèque thomiste, 33 (Paris, 1957); Idem, *La Théologie au Douzième Siècle*, 2nd ed., Études de philosophie médiévale, 45 (Paris, 1966).

following Aristotle's empiric approach, the greater emphasis is placed on the study of earthly realities as part of theological studies. This new focus was based on the theological assumption that God manifests Himself not only through words, but also through the created world, the book of nature.²³ And it was closely related to the development of the natural sciences. Secondly, this third phase was characterized by a renewed emphasis on ethics, stressing the importance of right action of human beings as responsible agents. This may also have been a consequence of the new interest in worldly realities in the late Middle Ages, which authors like Chenu have called the phase of pre-modernity, which demanded a new view of human behaviour that at all times decided over eternal salvation.

This creative theological phase of contextualization came to a fairly abrupt end when the theological conflicts with the nascent churches of the Reformation started.²⁴ In the centuries that followed, theological reflection in the West became thoroughly apologetic and was – often in an obsessive manner – directed against the Other so as to prove him wrong. This way, however, it was no longer able to reflect the inner reality of faith in its fullness. It became distorted in motivation as well as in content with the disastrous consequence of widespread petrification. The ascension of the natural sciences and the beginnings of the Enlightenment in the late 17th century enhanced these trends because new counter positions questioning Christianity emerged. Bernard Lonergan wrote about these times: “Contrary to the creative adaptation and assimilation in the Middle Ages from the 15th century onwards, the intention was a-historic absoluteness”.²⁵ This so-called dogmatic theology or positivistic scholasticism prominent in the Catholic Church well into the 20th century was no longer a dialogue between intellectual

²³ Congar, *La Tradition et les traditions*, p. 77: “Dieu ne se manifeste et ne se communique pas seulement dans des mots, donc finalement des idées, mais dans des réalités”.

²⁴ See Thomas Prügl, ‘Bibeltheologie und Kirchenreform: die Errichtung der Wiener Fakultät und ihre theologische Positionierung im Spätmittelalter’, in *Vorwärtserinnerungen: 625 Jahre Katholisch-Theologische Fakultät der Universität Wien*, eds. Johann Reikerstorfer and Martin Jäggle (Göttingen, 2009), pp. 377-398 on the vibrant age of theology at the Faculty of Theology in Vienna in the 14th century, that abruptly came to an end with the Reformation.

²⁵ See Bernard Lonergan, ‘Die Theologie in ihrem neuen Kontext’, in *Theologie im Pluralismus der Kulturen*, ed. Giovanni B. Sala, *Quaestiones disputatae*, 67 (Freiburg, 1975), pp. 34-46, here 21.

partners. The medieval *quaestio* that was based on a real problem, was largely replaced by a rationalistic presentation of a faith that did not answer the questions posed by the surrounding context and the intellectual debates of the time. Thus, the often dramatic developments of the Reformation, the Renaissance and Enlightenment remained largely unreflected, the function of theology having become to stabilize faith, which it did, albeit at the expense of vitality. This lack of sensitivity to what Vatican II called the “signs of the time” (*Gaudium et spes* 4) was, of course, worsened by the imposition of an integral system of faith by the State as well as ecclesial authorities over centuries. Under these restrictions the challenges of Enlightenment rationalism could hardly be met. This led to what may be called a de-contextualization, which is one of the reasons for the gradual de-Christianization and secularization of Europe in these centuries.²⁶ This standardized theology, the main aim of which was to contradict modernity, again tended to produce false dichotomies: it furthered an emphasis on the spiritual as opposed to the physical (a sort of Neo-Platonism), it favoured the past as compared to the future (traditionalism), and it stressed authority as opposed to individual freedom (authoritarianism). Based on these anti-modern reflexes theology was not able to make serious contributions to ongoing intellectual debates from biblical as well as other traditional (patristic and scholastic) sources and thus influence the contexts of modernity.²⁷

The history of theology in the Western context and here again in the Catholic Church is thus a rather sobering one. The inculturation of the Christian message in the context of modernity, which is – one may say – *sui generi*, since modernity has its roots in Christianity, started far too late. At the same time it became clear that the refusal to inculturate the Gospel into this particular context also deformed theology itself. Not to contextualize the Christian message is not a valid option. This insight was there already at the beginning of the 19th century in the so-called School of Tübingen and

²⁶ Cf. Peter L. Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europa: A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot, 2008).

²⁷ Karl Rahner, ‘Das Christentum und der ‘Neue Mensch’: Christlicher Glaube und innerweltliche Zukunftsutopien’, in *Schriften zur Theologie V* (Einsiedeln, 1962), pp. 159-179. As Karl Löwith has shown, the modern idea of progress constitutes a secularized (and linear) version of Christian eschatology, cf. Karl Löwith, *Heilsgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart, 1953) [original English version: *Meaning in history*, 2nd ed. (Chicago/IL, 1950)].

later in the work of Henry Newman. It gained momentum during the 20th century in the French and Belgian *nouvelle théologie* based on patristic (Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, et al.) or medieval, that is, mainly Thomistic, studies (Marie-Dominique Chenu, et al.) and in German theology based on modern German philosophy (Karl Rahner, Hans Küng, et al.). The aim of these exceptionally creative pre-Vatican II theological movements – whatever their point of departure – was the renewal of theology from the sources so as to give valid Christian answers to the questions posed by modernity and thus “modern men and women”.²⁸

This theological work bore ecclesial fruits at the Second Vatican Council, which was announced by Pope John XXIII on the feast of the conversion of St. Paul on 25 January 1959 at the end of the week of prayer for Christian unity. The date showed its two main aims: The first was a contextualization of the Gospel in the modern world following the footsteps of St. Paul. As he had left behind the Jewish law, so the Catholic Church was to leave behind the Constantinian era of a too close cooperation between Church and State, the Tridentine epoch with its strongly anti-Protestant apologetics, as well as a principled anti-modernism, and link up with the realities and intellectual currents of the age. This was the idea of the so-called *aggiornamento*, a term originally meaning to bring the books up to date. The second aim was to overcome the also theologically deforming inner-Christian conflicts of the past.²⁹ Before the Church could effectively become “a sacrament, i.e., a sign and instrument, for unity with God and mankind”³⁰ she first had to realize unity and reconciliation in her own life. Thereby the religious and the human, that is, the ethical, dimensions are inextricably intertwined.³¹

²⁸ How much Vatican II relied on this work is indirectly shown by a remark of Congar in his diary, where he writes that the theological points that were most fiercely disputed at and after Vatican II were those to which pro-Vatican theology had not worked out valid answers, cf. Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council* (Collegeville/MN, 2012), p. 4 [French edition: Paris, 2002].

²⁹ See Ingeborg Gabriel, ‘Christianity in an Age of Uncertainty: A Catholic Perspective’, in *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Grand Rapids/MI, 2010), pp. 124-151.

³⁰ See The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* 1.

³¹ See *Gaudium et spes* 11: “the People of God and the human race in whose midst it lives render service to each other. Thus the mission of the Church will show its religious, and by that very fact, its supremely human character”.

This insight constitutes the background of the concept of the “signs of the time” central for Vatican II. It obliges the Church to interpret earthly realities in the light of the Gospel,³² sociological analysis serving an ethical and ultimately theological aim so as to “decipher the authentic signs of God’s presence and purpose” in the present age (*Gaudium et spes* 11). The question to be asked is: Which trends have the potential to make the world a better and more humane place and thus are in accordance with God’s purpose? The hermeneutics of recognition³³ of the Council are rooted deeply in the spiritual attitude that is able to discern the seeds of the world to come in present realities. This does not imply an uncritical stance vis-à-vis the modern world. Rather the recognition of its positive elements constitutes the basis for a sensible and intelligent criticism of its deformations. The eschatological promise of faith that the universe will be completed at the end of time in “a new heaven and a new earth, in which justice reigns” (1 Pet 3:13) links the present to the future. It is God’s “Yes” to everything that exists in His Son, in whom He renews His creation (2 Cor 1:19), that forbids any principled rejection of this world and the present age, at the same time calling for a critical attitude out of concern for human beings whose life is impoverished and whose yearnings remain unfulfilled. Thereby, the secular world (and other religions) and Christianity stand in the service of each other and are to learn from each other.³⁴ The theological contextualization into modernity, which the Council officially condoned, also led to serious tension in the Catholic Church.³⁵ As Yves Congar notes in his diary, even for great neo-Scholastic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, who before the Council had been at the forefront in the struggle for renewal, it was difficult to accept the theological changes,³⁶ a fact that had also to do with the longstanding accumulation of theological questions.

³² For the state of research, see Peter Hünemann, ed., *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit heute* (Freiburg, 2006).

³³ See Ingeborg Gabriel, ‘Christliche Sozialethik in der Moderne: Der kaum rezipierte Ansatz von *Gaudium et Spes*’, in *Erinnerung an die Zukunft: Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil*, ed. Jan Heiner Tück (Freiburg, 2012), pp. 537-553.

³⁴ See *Gaudium et spes* 11; 43-45.

³⁵ An impressive document with regard to the difficult process of ecclesial acceptance is Congar, *My Journal of the Council*.

³⁶ See Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, pp. 35f.

In the aftermath of Vatican II, the reference to the context (“the signs of the time”) led to an ongoing process of contextualization within regional churches. Liberation theologies in Latin America and other continents strove to inculturate the Gospel in the respective cultural contexts. Their authors were often regarded with suspicion by central Church authorities, who lacked a profound understanding of these contexts and also were influenced by dubious political actors not at all interested in a more critical social involvement of the Catholic Church. These contextual theologies were not free of one-sidedness, also exposing culturalist tendencies that put into question the possibility of universal reason and with it inner-church and universal communication.³⁷ This, however, in no way diminishes their importance and the need for theological contextualization within the Catholic Church.³⁸

These inner-ecclesial conflicts after Vatican II also mirror some of the difficulties of the contextualization of the Christian message in today’s complex, “run-away world” (Anthony Giddens). The process of globalization leads to the universalization of modern ideas, thus creating elements of a universal culture worldwide.³⁹ But this modern cultural hegemony also furthers the rejection of this globalization through new forms of particularisms and culturalism, which, especially when driven by religion, often become fundamentally anti-modern, exhorting the dilemmas described above.⁴⁰ Modern theologies have to take both tendencies into account, the global context as well as its interaction with the particular cultural contexts. This poses new challenges. The Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* under the title “The Church in the Modern World” tried to map out this interaction between the universal and the particular long before the so-called cultural turn (and post-modernism) and stresses the importance and value of cultures (see GS 53-62). It also shows that any contextualized theology

³⁷ See Georges De Schrijver, ed., *Liberation Theologies on Shifting Grounds: a Clash of Socioeconomic and Cultural Paradigms*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 135 (Leuven, 1998).

³⁸ The Apostolic writing *Evangelii gaudium* of Pope Francis (2013) shows a change in tenor, e.g., by citing documents from Bishops’ Conferences from all continents in a way not previously customary in the Catholic Church.

³⁹ Peter L. Berger, Samuel P. Huntington, eds., *Many Globalizations: Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 2003).

⁴⁰ Peter Berger, ed., *Between Relativism and Fundamentalism: Religious Resources for a Middle Position* (Grand Rapids/MI, 2010).

has to take into account this dialectic in today's world. Neither a focus on universality (and modern philosophy) alone nor one on cultural plurality (as shown in post-modern positions) can do justice to the present world.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

The stoic Zeno of Cyprus wrote that, confronted with the *ananke* (necessity), humans have the same options as a dog on a leash: they can either run or be strangled.⁴² This somewhat drastic picture can also be applied to theology confronted with cultural contexts. It cannot negate them with impunity but has to include the cultural surroundings, the *Lebenswelten*, with their social trends and ethical demands, in its reflections. Only this way can it give valid answers to questions posed by humans of a particular time. As the history of Western theology shows, a de-contextualization of theology in an ahistoric *theologia perennis* is not an option. It can neither avoid the traps posed by the time nor can it fruitfully proclaim the Christian faith. It rather is the responsibility of theologians as well as the churches to decline the Christian traditions so as to answer to questions posed thorough analysis, fundamental reflection and sound judgement based on faith, thus putting the riches of the past "in new wineskins so as not to spoil both" (see Matt 9:17).

Abstract

The article tries to show that contextuality and contextualization are central themes of Christian theology. It starts with general philosophical reflections based of H. -G. Gadamer's hermeneutics. It then shows their theological implications that in Catholic theology have been treated mainly under the heading

⁴¹ Cf. more extensively Ingeborg Gabriel, 'Der Beitrag der Religionen zu einem Weltethos', in *Geglaubt habe ich, deshalb habe ich geredet: Festschrift für Andreas Bsteh zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Adel Theodor Khoury and Gottfried Vanoni (Würzburg, 1998), pp. 107-124.

⁴² Cited in Maximilian Forschner, *Die stoische Ethik: Über den Zusammenhang von Natur-, Sprach- und Moralphilosophie im altstoischen System*, 2nd, revised and by an afterword and a literary addition extended ed. (Darmstadt, 1995), p. 110.

inculturation and this way been connected with the issues of Christian mission and cultural plurality. This is followed by an overview over three phases of contextualization in the West (St. Paul, Middle Ages; Vatican II). The concluding remarks reflect on the theological task of contextualization of the Christian faith in a globalized world.