

Stephen B. Bevans and Katalina Tahaafe-Williams, *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (London: James Clarke and Co.)  
154 pp. 15, paperback. ISBN 10 0227679989

Allen Yeh

In this era of World Christianity when the center of Christianity has shifted to the Two Thirds World, contextual theology is becoming synonymous with theology in general. This is rightly so, because theology *sans* context is an impossibility. However, most of the authors articulating this phenomenon thus far have been male evangelicals from the North. Here we have a compilation coming out of Australia, edited by a Catholic, Stephen Bevans, and a woman, Katalina Tahaafe-Williams. These different voices represent more of the diversity of World Christianity as it truly is. Bevans articulates well what this new Christianity looks like in his opening chapter: “global, minority-status, multicultural, young, persecuted, and poor” (12). In addition, he stresses something very important, that contextual theologies need to be in dialogue with each other, not simply each existing in their own cloistered environment (15). In this way, theology will truly be global, not just local.

At first glance this book, *Contextual Theology for the Twenty-First Century*, sounds like it may be a sequel to Bevans’s seminal work from 1996 (and revised in 2004), *Models of Contextual Theology*. However, this is not the case, as this is an edited volume and is more concrete than theoretical. Yet, it fits the theme of the book, that mission today is polycentric, and not just written by one culture or geography—or at least it *ought* not to be.

Hence most of the other chapters in the book, written by various authors, are about local theologies: Indonesia; Tonga; Australia (both indigenous and “Second People”); Korea; and Latin America. It makes sense that these all are located in or around the Pacific Rim, as the papers come from a conference on contextual theology held in Sydney, Australia. Yet, even despite this unifying geographic designation, it shows how diverse the cultures indigenous to the Pacific basin alone are, much less those of the world.

It is worth noting that perhaps not all the authors would agree with one another (in fact, I do not agree with all the authors)! Yet, there is an underlying assumption that the Church is comprised of a multitude of perspectives and that everyone, especially the ones who are oppressed and not usually heard, are

worth hearing. Yet, that does not mean that “anything goes.” The advantage of a multiplicity of perspectives is that we don’t exclude anyone who potentially may bring a rich dish to the potluck banquet. But not excluding anyone is not the same thing as not excluding any ideas. The only thing I wished this book had added is that we still must (to mix metaphors) separate the wheat from the chaff. In *Two Thirds World* theology, as with Western theology, there is both good and bad and we must be discerning about which is which. Jione Havea provides us the helpful caveat that even contextual theologians have their blind spots, because everyone has to come from some perspective and by doing so, they exclude other perspectives.

But each local indigenous theological has a meta-theological reason for existing: as James Haire expresses, “Much of Western Europe and North America, and indeed Asia as a consequence, is heir to that Christ Event in Jewish, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, German, and French traditions. However, are we forever to be controlled solely by the fact that the first post-Biblical God-talk took place in the Mediterranean basin?... Contextual theology must not, therefore, be seen as marginal or decorative, but as central to the international theological struggles of the church throughout the world.” (37)

Most helpful are the final two chapters. In the penultimate chapter, Bevans gives a definition of “mission” as prophetic dialogue. The dialogue is important because it acknowledges that mission is a two-way conversation and not, as has so often been done before, a one-way notion. Jooseop Keum expresses this well in the last chapter when he writes: “Mission is not conquering or winning over non-believers in other parts of the world. Rather, mission is a humble invitation to the ‘feast in the kingdom of God’ (Luke 14:16). Mission is preparing a banquet and going out to the streets and marketplaces of the town to extend invitations to ‘the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ (Luke 14:21) We (the people of God) are not conquerors, but servants called to invite them (all God’s people) to his banquet in the ‘garden of life.’” (114) This reorientation of what mission is a much better *modus operandi* than the paternalistic way mission has been done throughout much of European Christendom. It is also much better suited to the Twenty-First Century because the fourth self, self-theologizing (not just self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating) becomes the most important way we can

really be the worldwide church today. Keum leaves us with a final injunction: instead of just being characterized by the *logos* as the twentieth century was, the twenty-first century should be characterized by the *pneuma*. The Third Person of the Trinity should not displace but rather grow in importance to match the Second Person of the Trinity as we become more fully global and more fully Trinitarian.