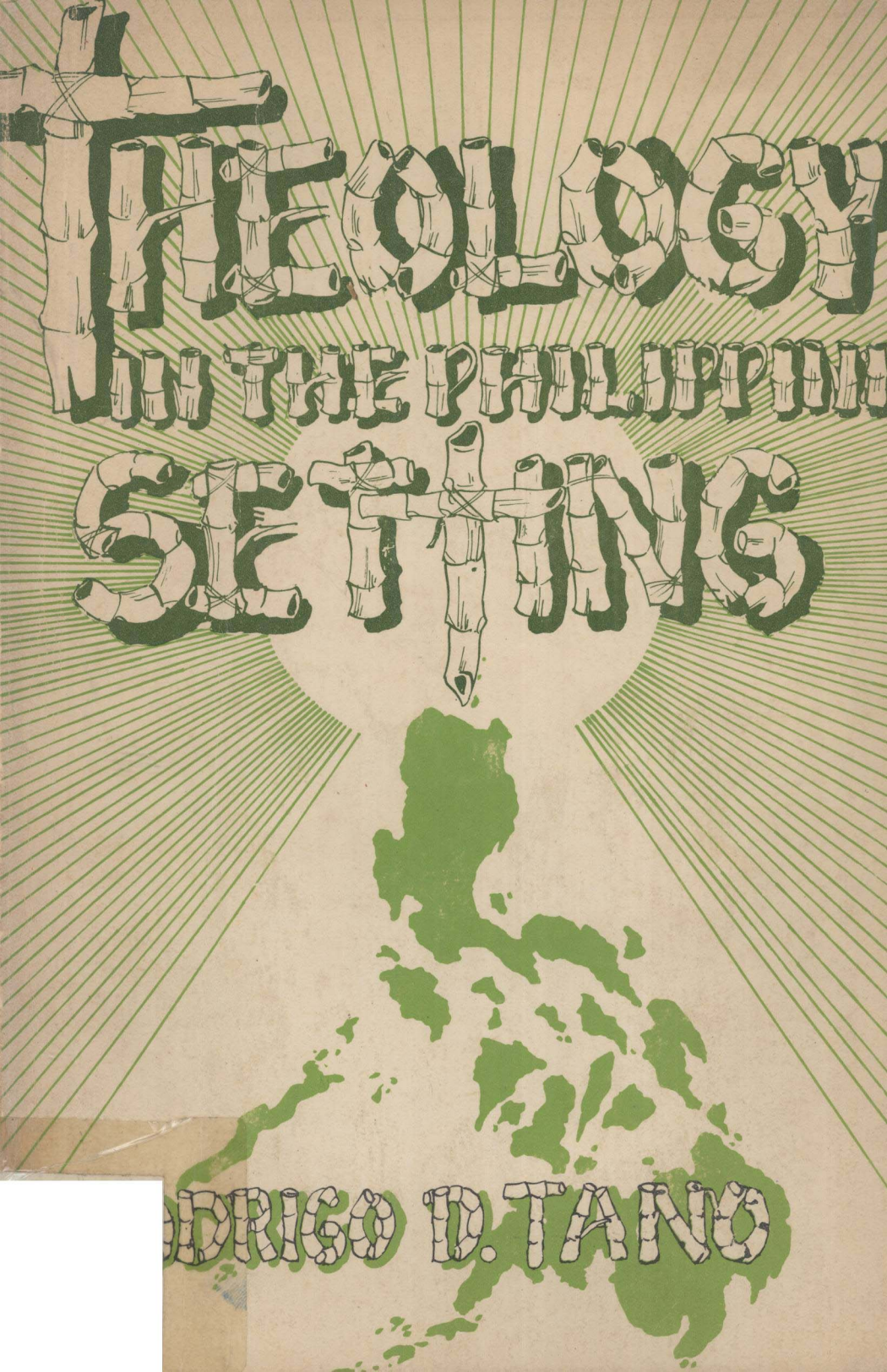
THEOLOGY IN THE PHILIPPINE SETTING



DRIGO D. TANO

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A Case Study in the Contextualization of Theology

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PREFACE

Does the Christian faith have any relevance to the Philippine situation? How may the processes of social change and modernization, the longing for equality and freedom, and the tension between old and new values be interpreted in the light of the biblical tradition? The process by which Christian truth is embodied and translated within a concrete historical situation is called contextualization. It calls attention to the significance of the present situation of faith for the mission of the church. In this sense, contextualization involves: (1) the interaction of the text (Bible) and the context (historical situation); (2) interpreting, challenging and transforming a particular situation; and (3) adapting the Gospel within a given culture.

This book examines contextualization as a concept and Filipino theology as a case of theology arising from a particular locale. Like any living confession of faith, Filipino theology is sensitive to the realities in Asia and Philippine society. Its mission is to illuminate and respond to these realities in the light of the Christian faith, and its method, themes and emphases are shaped by the history, experience and aspirations of the Filipinos.

Analyzed and evaluated in this study are the writings of five local theologians. The ideas of Carlos Abesamis, Catalino Arevalo, Edicio de la Torre (Roman Catholic) and Emerito Nacpil (Protestant) are seen as variations of a theology of liberation and development adapted to the local situation. Vitaliano Gorospe (Roman Catholic) presents a theology of culture and outlines a perspective

within which Filipino traditional values and the Christian faith may be integrated to attain moral renewal in the Philippines. These men have been chosen because they have produced a significant amount of theological writings which merit critical study. While they do not represent a single religious group or theological position, their method of theological reflection and the themes they treat reflect a serious concern to contextualize the Christian faith at this point in Philippine history.

Along with many Filipino Christians, I recognize the urgent need to indigenize theology, theological education, church life and missionary methods. It is my fervent hope that from this study some insights may be gained which will facilitate indigenization in these areas in a manner that is both effective and responsible. Preserving the purity of the Gospel and at the same time making it relevant to a given situation is a necessary but complicated task. It requires thorough understanding of the life-experience, values and aspirations of the Filipino people, as well as the ability to interpret these within legitimate boundaries in the light of the unchanging Gospel.

Rodrigo D. Tano

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Christians in the Third World have long been passive and uncritical recipients of ready-made theological systems transmitted from the West. Consciously or unconsciously, they have been led to believe that the only valid way of "doing theology" is that which conforms to the theological systems in North America and Europe. This regrettable situation has not enhanced the intellectual and spiritual maturity of the churches overseas. The editor of *The Christian Century* was correct when he wrote a few years ago that "the Aryan bias of Christian doctrine is the most serious intellectual obstacle to full ecumenical fellowship with the younger churches,[1] to their theological creativity, and to Christian evangelism in Asia, Africa, and Latin America."[2] The younger churches' lack of theological creativity in understanding and communicating the Christian faith within their particular situations has produced a type of Christianity that is alien to their cultures. This situation justifies the feeling among Asians that Christianity is a "potted plant" which has been transported from the West without being transplanted in Asian soil.[3] What Hendrik Kraemer said of

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[1]The phrase "younger churches" refers to the churches established through missionary effort of the "older" or "sending churches" of the West.

[2]Alan Geyer, "Toward a Convivial Theology," *The Christian Century* 86 (April 23, 1969), p. 542.

[3]D. T. Niles, as quoted in Chandran Devanesan, *The Cross Is Lifted* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), p. 11.

the younger churches four decades ago still holds true: "The 'foreignness' of Christianity as now presented by Western missions confronts the churches in Africa and the East with one of their most crucial problems."[4]

What factors have contributed to this negative development? A study of the history of missions and traditional missionary methods will reveal several significant ones. The first is a faulty "monocultural system."[5] At the height of the modern missionary movement in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it was held by mission boards that the churches "in the mission fields" be modelled after the churches "at home." Church architecture, hymnology, liturgy, musical instruments, and decision-making processes were brought unchanged to the younger churches and were readily adopted by the new Christians. I. Wayan Mastra, a Christian leader of Bali, Indonesia, for example, reports that because the first church buildings erected in Bali under the direction of European missionaries were constructed in western style, older converts and ministers opposed the construction of new churches using Balinese artistic expression.[6] In the Philippines the long practice of using the piano and organ (introduced from North America) made it difficult for many congregations to accept the use of the native guitar in church services. A Nigerian graduate student also reports that North American missionaries prevented the use of the African native drum and dance in church worship there.[7] In time, Bible schools and seminaries were established, and these, too, were patterned after theological schools in the West in terms of curriculum, textbooks, and pedagogy. Moreover, churches were not free to govern themselves as they were controlled by foreign traditions and policies, expatriate leadership, and foreign decision-making processes. A case in point is the Phil-

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[4]Hendrik Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1938), p. 5.

[5]Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *Lausanne Occasional Papers No. 2* (Wheaton, Ill.: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978), p. 23.

[6]See I. W. Mastra, "A Contextualized Church: The Bali Experience," *Gospel in Context* 1 (April 1978), p. 14.

[7]Interview with Titus Oluwafemi, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, 15 November, 1978.

ippines. In practically every phase of church business meetings (committee, executive board, denomination assemblies), parliamentary procedures according to Roberts' Rules of Order are strictly followed. This is contrary to the practice of informal group discussion/decision (consensus) which is indigenous to Philippine culture. Curriculum changes in some mission-sponsored theological schools could not be implemented without prior approval from North American mission headquarters. All this produced an unwarranted sense of dependence on the part of the new churches.

A second factor was the cultural provincialism of missionaries who planted churches in the mission fields. The great technological achievements and the affluence and sophistication of western countries bred a feeling of cultural superiority. While Christendom was identified with western civilization, non-western cultures were deemed to be pagan and demonic; hence, they were inferior. When Christianity was introduced in Bali, for instance, missionaries identified Christian European culture with the Gospel and tried to impose it on the converts. Missionaries told the converts that their culture and religion were demonic and urged their destruction.[8] This attitude produced a lack of sensitivity to, and appreciation of, non-western cultures. The truth that God works in and through all cultures was overlooked. Disregard of the cultural values, outlook, and thought patterns of the new Christians led to the imposition—however unconsciously—of western theological and ecclesiastical traditions upon the churches and theological schools overseas.

A third factor arises from a misunderstanding of the nature and function of theology. The traditional concept of the nature and role of theology is exemplified by A. H. Strong in his definition of theology as the "ascertainment of the facts respecting God and the relation between God and the universe, and the exhibition of these facts in their rational unity, as connected parts of a formulated and organic system of truth."[9] This view of theology is based on the assumption that revelation is the unveiling of timeless truths through passive inspired writers who produce an unchanging

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[8]I. Mastra, "A Contextualized Church," p. 14.

[9]A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson Press, 1907), p. 2.

document. The task of theology, according to this concept, is "to build up these individual truths (propositions) into a coherent, homogeneous system."[10] The desired end in theological activity is a "*theologia perennis:* the ever self-identical, unchanging articulation and application of immutable divine truth."[11] Thus, theological systems and traditions may be transmitted from one culture to another without modification or reformulation.[12] This mistaken view of the nature and task of theology has been responsible for the "Teutonic" or "Latin captivity" of theology in the younger churches.[13]

The present need then is for Christians in the Third World to understand and communicate the Christian faith in ways which are intelligible and relevant to their cultures, "rather than," as Charles Taber puts it, "tagging along at the tail end of the long history of western embroidery, and restate the Christian faith in answer to Asian/African questions, with Asian/African methodologies and terminologies."[14]

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[10]David W. Lotz, "Theology As Risk," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 29 (Spring-Summer 1974), p. 171.

[11]Ibid., p. 170.

[12]An alternative—and, to this writer, more adequate—view of the nature and task of theology is based on the thesis that revelation as word-event is rooted in and expressed through concrete historical situations. This is exemplified by the incarnation itself. In that theology is a mode of reflection and response to the Christ-event, it is drawn into the stream of human experience. It should therefore interpret the revelatory event in the historical situation. Accordingly, set theological categories and concepts need reinterpretation. Advocates of this view are: Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 4, 57, 73-74; John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966), pp. 1, 2, 12; C. W. Christian, *Shaping Your Faith* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973), pp. 11, 25, 29-35; Paul Lehman, "Contextual Theology," *Theology Today* 29 (April 1972), pp. 3-6; David W. Lotz, "Theology As Risk," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 29 (Spring-Summer 1974), pp. 170-176.

[13]See Choan-Seng Song, "The New China and Salvation History: A Methodological Enquiry," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 15,2 (1974), pp. 55-56; and R. H. S. Boyd, *India and the Latin Captivity of the Churches* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), for a discussion of this problem.

[14]Charles R. Taber, "Is There More Than One Way To Do Theology?" *Gospel in Context* 1 (January 1978), p. 10.

THEOLOGICAL FREEDOM

Almost a decade ago, Karl Barth recognized the necessity for South East Asians to communicate the Christian faith in a manner that would speak to their problems and needs. In a letter to them, Barth raised two questions regarding the relevance of his theology in the region. "Can the theology presented by me be understandable and interesting to you—and how? And can you continue in the direction I had to go, and at the place where I had set a period —and to what extent?"[15] Barth's theology had to be set within its own context. His particular task was to "overthrow the influence of Schleiermacher and the theology of religious experience and to replace it with a 'theology from above:' a theology that adopts the Word of God as its starting point."[16] Recognizing the differences between the European and Asians situations, Barth offered this counsel:

> In my long life I have spoken many words. But now it is your turn. Now it is your task to be Christian theologians in your new, different and special situations. . . . You truly do not need to become "Europeans," "Western" men, not to mention "Barthians," in order to be good Christians and theologians. You may feel free to be South East Asian Christians.[17]

Christians in the Third World should heed Barth's counsel and exercise their freedom in the Holy Spirit as Africans, Latin Americans, and Asians, to understand and interpret God's Word in the light of needs and problems peculiar to their situations. For there is such a "theological freedom," which, according to theologian John Macquarrie, is "the right, within limits, to stress viewpoints and use methods which in the situation, seem to need stressing."[18] Given diversities of viewpoints and emphases, it should not be supposed that there is a uniform way of doing theology.

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[15]Karl Barth, "No Boring Theology," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969), p. 3.

[16]J. A. Veitch, "Is An Asian Theology Possible?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975), p. 28.

[17]Barth, "No Boring Theology," pp. 4-5.

[18]John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 17.

While the core of the Gospel is unchanging, the ways of expressing it may vary from culture to culture. To characterize a particular type of theology as western or Asian is to recognize specific features implicit in it. The historico-cultural and religious forces that shape it, the methodology employed, and the issues it addresses, distinguish it from other types.

Christian anthropologists and linguists (notably Charles R. Taber and Charles H. Kraft) have shed light upon the phenomenon of diversity in theological perspectives. They have clarified the nature of theology as a culturally conditioned mode of perceiving the Absolute (God as subject—not object—of theology) and responding to the Christ-event (Revelation as given). Kraft, who has written extensively on the subject,[19] contends that "reality at the perceptual level is culturally and subculturally defined rather than a function of biology or environment."[20] According to Kraft, while Reality and Truth are one, it is nevertheless "a fact of life that perceptions of that Reality and Truth differ greatly from culture to culture, from subculture to subculture within each culture and even from individual to individual within a given culture."[21] "Theologizing then," says Kraft, "may be seen to be a process taking place at the perceptual level—a process which is indebted to diversity of perspective and of approach" and is "helped when the participants in the process are granted the freedom to dissent and to pursue the discovery of Truth in terms of their own frame of reference." Thus, theological activity is a "dynamic process rather than a passive acceptance of doctrine 'once for all delivered.'"[22]

It is obvious therefore that when a particular type of theology is transmitted transculturally, it needs to be "reperceived" by the recipient in consonance with his psychological, subcultural and cultural frame of reference; otherwise, it will be irrelevant to him.

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[19]See Charles H. Kraft, "Can Anthropological Insight Assist Evangelical Theology?" *Christian Scholar's Review* 7 (1977), pp. 165-202; "Theology and Theologies, I," *Theology News and Notes* (June 1972), pp. 4-9; "Theology and Theologies, II," *Theology News and Notes* (October 1973), pp. 17-20; "Toward a Christian Ethnotheology," in Alan R. Tippett, ed., *God, Man and Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).

[20]Kraft, "Theology and Theologies, I," p. 4.

[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., p. 5.

Thus, as missiologist Bengt Sundkler indicates, "Theology is . . . translation. It is an ever-renewed re-interpretation to new generations and peoples of the given Gospel, a re-interpretation of the will and the way of the one Christ in a dialogue with new thought forms and culture patterns."[23]

INDIGENIZATION

In the foregoing discussion, the need to make the Christian faith meaningful and relevant to particular historico-cultural milieus in the Third World was stressed on three grounds. First, theological creativity is necessary for the intellectual and spiritual maturation of Christians in the younger churches. Second, making the Gospel culturally compatible and relevant frees it from the status of being foreign and incompatible—a stumblingblock to its acceptance. Third, from the standpoint of anthropology, theology is seen to be a culturally conditioned mode of perceiving God's revelatory act; hence, a particular theology (as perception of revelation) needs reperceiving by the recipient for it to be relevant within his own concrete historical frame of reference.

The incarnation of the Eternal Logos serves as the model of communicating divine truth. In order to "translate" God in intelligible and relevant terms, Christ came into a concrete historical situation. In the same manner, theology needs to be "translated" (incarnated) within a specific cultural milieu in order to be understood and effective. The process by which Christian truth is made meaningful and relevant to particular cultures and situations is known as indigenization. The word "indigenous" means "taking root in the soil," "growing out of the natural environment," "native," as opposed to foreign or exotic.[24] Indigenization may take the form of adaptation, accommodation,[25] or incultura-

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[23]Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa* (London: SCM Press, 1960), p. 281, cited in Kraft, "Theology and Theologies, I," p. 5.

[24]Cf. Melvin Hodges, *The Indigenous Church* (Springfield, Mo.: Gospel Publishing House, 1953), p. 1.

[25]The Vatican II document *Ad Gentes*, par. 22, uses the terms "adapt" and "accommodate" to refer to indigenization. See Walter M. Abbott, *The Documents of Vatican II* (New York: The America Press, 1966), pp. 612-13.

tion.[26] Adaptation and accommodation refer to the process by which components of a given culture are utilized to express the meaning of the Gospel.[27] Similarly, inculturation is the process of making the "gospel message intelligible in the idiom of the language and culture of the receivers."[28] Indigenization then is a general term which includes these concepts as they point to the processes by which Christian truth "takes root" and "grows out" of new cultural soils.

There have been divergences of opinion as to the nature and dynamics of indigenization. The debate on indigenization deals with these issues: (1) the nature of culture viewed anthropologically and theologically, (2) the relationship between the Gospel and culture, (3) the mechanics of indigenization, and (4) the danger of syncretism. Under the section on Contextualization, the issues related to indigenization/contextualization will be analyzed more fully.

BEYOND INDIGENIZATION

A revolutionary concept known as "contextualization"[29] has emerged within the last six years and is now preferred by mis-

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[26]G. Linwood Barney of the Alliance Graduate School of Theology and Missions, Nyack, New York, coined this term to describe "that process or state in which a new principle has been culturally 'clothed' in meaningful forms in a culture." See G. Linwood Barney, "The Supracultural and the Cultural: Implications for Frontier Missions," in R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *The Gospel and Frontier Peoples* (South Pasadena, Ca.: William Carey Library, 1973), pp. 51, 57; also James O. Buswell III, "Contextualization: Is It Only a New Word for Indigenization?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (January 1978), p. 16.

[27]The use of *logos* in the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel to convey Christian truth is an outstanding case of adaptation-accommodation. The term is not merely borrowed, however. It is invested with a new and distinctively Christian meaning which transcends (not changes) its original sense. In Greek thought, logos referred to an impersonal principle immanent in the world and which gives it order and meaning. According to the Fourth Gospel, the logos preexisted with God, created and upholds all things, and became incarnate in Jesus Christ.

[28]Buswell, "Contextualization," p. 16.

[29]Shoki Coe and Aharon Sapsezian of the World Council of Churches' Theological Education Fund (TEF) for the Third Mandate (1970-1977)

siologists over the older term "indigenization."[30] The terms "indigenous," "indigeneity," and "indigenization" derive from a nature metaphor ("taking root in the soil"). The metaphor has been considered static because it "tends to be used in the sense of responding to the Gospel in terms of a traditional culture" and is "in danger of being past-oriented."[31] Advocates of indigenization understand culture to be a closed system; hence, unchanging. The term, therefore, is not future-oriented and does not allow for the idea of change. Secondly, indigenization implies an uncritical accommodation of the Gospel within a culture. This may result in a "culture Christianity" which could be domesticated to serve the interests of oppressive systems and power structures. The concept of indigenization then overlooks the fact that the Gospel sustains a "double relationship to culture: on the one hand, it accepts and values cultural components, while, on the other hand, it judges and challenges them."[32] While contextualization as understood by those who advocate it as a guiding concept includes all that is implied in the familiar term "indigenization," it goes beyond its scope. As a concept, it is more dynamic and future-oriented, and, as a process, it does more than adapt and accommodate the Gospel to a given culture. This is seen in the fact that it "takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice which characterize the historical moment of the nations in the Third World."[33] Understood as the

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coined the word and gave it its original meaning in February 1972. See F. Ross Kinsler, "Mission and Context," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 14 (January 1978), p. 24.

[30]The contextualization of the Gospel will continue to engage the attention of missionary thinkers and theologians around the world. Late in 1977, the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization sponsored a consultation on "The Gospel and Culture" which was attended by leaders from all continents. In January 1978, Partnership in Mission, based in Abington, Pennsylvania, launched *Gospel in Context,* a journal which serves as the forum for international, cross-cultural, interdisciplinary and interdenominational dialogue on contextualization.

[31]Shoki Coe, "In Search of Renewal in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 9 (Summer 1973), p. 240.

[32]Aharon Sapsezian, as quoted in F. Ross Kinsler, "Mission and Context," p. 24.

[33]Theological Education Fund, *Ministry in Context* (London: World Council of Churches, TEF 1972), p. 20.