CHAPTER 2

Contextualization – Methodology and a Method

Several methods or models of contextualization have been developed in Christian missiology in the last decades. Most of the differences between them stem from differing epistemological and hermeneutical positions, and from differences in theological questions. The present study is also, as a matter of necessity, guided by preferences with regard to such basic issues as points of departure.

In the following I shall first (in Subchapter 2.1) present the epistemological and hermeneutical stances which are decisive for my choice of methods in theology – the fundamental beliefs I presuppose as points of departure. In the same subchapter I will present some methodological reflections dependent on my theological stances. In Subchapter 2.2 I will outline the specific method to be applied for the present study.

2.1 Fundamental Beliefs as Points of Departure

Contextualization of the Christian message involves an encounter between Christianity and non-Christian contexts, including non-Christian religions and worldviews. The basic question of how a Christian theologian should relate the Christian belief system to another worldview or religion, or everything else one knows, or believes, is then crucial.

A virtually unavoidable methodological requirement will then be to clarify the basic beliefs upon which one bases one’s approach of contextualization, the set of premises one uses as one’s points of departure. Without consciously acknowledging a set of basic presuppositions as points of departure, it is hardly possible to do any constructive theology. And contextualization without a

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1 In my doctoral dissertation, I include, as the first chapter of Part 2, a presentation of the history of the notion of contextualization. For those interested in this, I refer to the dissertation, Chapter 2.1.


3 See Bong Rin Ro, “Contextualization: Asian Theology,” in The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology (Taichung: ATA, 1984), 74ff: “Biblically oriented Asian theology must set up certain presuppositions and circumscribed limits in order to avoid theological confusion, ....”
constructive theology, with a merely descriptive and analytic approach, contradicts the basic idea of contextualization.

The deepest layer of basic beliefs must necessarily be beliefs of ontological, epistemological and fundamental hermeneutical character. One's choice here will, as Pannenberg expresses it, serve a criteriological function for one's theology. Consequently, there is a close relation between one's choice of method of contextualization and one's preference regarding ontology, epistemology and fundamental hermeneutics.

Thus, fundamental philosophical points of departure will in large measure, together with one's theological basis built thereupon, determine both the meaning and the method of contextualization. The differences between the various methods or models of contextualization can in many cases be traced back to differences in basic perspectives mainly of epistemological and hermeneutic character influencing one's total theology. It is therefore particularly clarifying, and, I will say, a requirement often neglected, that the one who tries to outline and employ a method of contextualization discloses his/her ontological, epistemological, fundamental hermeneutical, and theological positions. By specifying my basic starting-points I define on which grounds I am ready to, and obliged to, defend my research results.

First (in 2.1.1) I will briefly state my ontological and epistemological basic beliefs and provide some critical and constructive truth criteria for an adequate relating of the Christian worldview to the realm of thought. This I do in order to make explicit the basis upon which a study of contextualization, such as this one, can be built. Second (in 2.1.2), I will briefly expose how the philosophical and criteriological principles in 2.1.1 and Christian theology may be seen as complying with one another. Third (in 2.1.3), I will clarify my basic theological starting points as a traditional Lutheran theologian; what does it mean to subscribe to a Lutheran position as a point of departure. In the next Subchapter (2.2) I will proceed to outline a concrete method of contextualization on the basis of the presuppositions presented here in Subchapter 2.1.

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6 David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen considered it necessary to include a chapter on philosophical presuppositions in their textbook on contextualization, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 128–143.