Chapter 11

Models of Contextual Theologizing in World Christianity

Peter Phan has been a giant in the development of theologizing in the context of world Christianity.¹ His groundbreaking book on Alexandre de Rhodes, *Mission and Catechesis*, demonstrated the thoughtfulness, creativity, and cultural sensitivity, within the context of his times, of this great Jesuit pioneer in Vietnam.² His many lectures on inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and Asian theologies have been collected in the invaluable trilogy with the titles *Christianity with an Asian Face*, *In Our Own Tongues*, and *Being Religious Interreligiously*.³ He has also edited two important series of theological reflection—Theology in Global Perspective published by Orbis Books and Christianities of the World, published by Palgrave Macmillan.⁴ These are only a few examples of Phan’s prolific publishing in this area and what seems to be his indefatigable ability to travel throughout the world to teach and lecture.

As Phan has expressed it in a landmark article on doing theology with the relatively new consciousness of world Christianity, what is key to understanding the task of theologizing today is a recognition of the shift that has taken place in the center of gravity of Christianity, and the discovery of Christianity’s essential and continuing non-Western nature. Such recognition has resulted in major methodological shifts.⁵ Phan lays some of these out, and what I’d like to do in this essay is to lay out several more. I’d like to do this by proposing

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⁴ The series Theology in Global Perspective contains some twelve volumes already published; the series Christianities of the World, which Peter Phan has edited with Dale T. Irvin, has published nine volumes to date.
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four models of how Christian women and men are doing and can do theology with a world Christianity consciousness today. These are (1) the “Contextual Theology” model, (2) the “Neglected Themes” model, (3) the “Global Perspective” model, and (4) the “Comparative Theology” model.

Before I begin, however, let me explain briefly my use of “models” in this essay. To express it negatively, “models” here does not mean the same as my use of the term in my 1992/2002 work Models of Contextual Theology. In that work I referred to models in the more technical sense as, in Avery Dulles’s words, “relatively simple, artificially constructed” cases that are “found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated.” As I will explain below, I proposed six “models” that offered methodological options of and for doing contextual theology across a wide spectrum of theological perspectives, all of which are valid and useful depending on the context in which they are used. In this essay, I see this six-fold approach to doing contextual theology as one way of doing theology in the context of world Christianity. I am using the term “model” here, therefore, in a wider, less technical sense, perhaps more along the lines of an “approach” to theologizing. Compared to my use of “models” in the first approach presented in this essay, this understanding is more analogical than literal.

The “Contextual Theology” Model

A first way that theology is being done today within world Christianity is with the “Contextual Theology” model. The basic idea of this model of doing theology is to focus on a particular context—a personal or social experience, social location, a culture, or social change, as I have explained it—and put this focus in a mutually critical dialogue with the Christian scriptures and the Christian tradition.

Of course, while all theology is contextual, not all contextual theologizing is done in the context of world Christianity. For example, a North American feminist theologian focusing on her own particular context may be using many of the resources of a more Western, classical theology in her theologizing, and she may well privilege the North American or Western experience of women. However, the “Contextual Theology” model within world Christianity focuses on the particular resources in places and within social groups that

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6 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology.
8 Bevans, Models of Contextual Theology, 5–7.