Review Articles

“Constants in Context and Missiology as a Discipline in Theological Education”

Special Reviews of


(Editorial Note: To write special review articles on the book co-authored by our outgoing editor [now Senior Contributing Editor] Stephen B. Bevans with Roger Schroeder [a contributing editor], we invited five scholars from different continents. Kirsteen Kim of England writes from Europe, Michael Nai Chiu Poon of Singapore from Asia, Diego Irarrazaval of Chile from Latin (South) America, Laurent Ramambason of Madagascar from Africa, and Paul V. Kollman of the United States from North America. The reviewers were asked to focus on the theme “Missiology as an Academic Discipline in Theological Education” in their reflection. Here are their review articles.)

“A Pneumatological Reading”: A REVIEW FROM EUROPE

By Kirsteen Kim

Constants in Context is a wonderful new resource for teaching mission studies. While substantially in agreement with the approach of David Bosch’s Transforming Mission, it complements Bosch’s great work by providing a catholic perspective not in the narrow sense of attending only to the concerns of the Catholic Church but in its assiduous attention to all the known movements at any one period in mission history and in the way it relates the “constants” of Christian faith with the “contexts” in which it finds itself. Its concern to recognise women’s contribution to mission is also particularly welcome. At the same time Constants in Context strengthens the theological foundations for contemporary mission thinking by making it more rigorous and by adding depth and nuance.
Reading from the beginning, so as not to miss anything from this treasure trove, I was intrigued by the theological structure of the book, which centres around three types of theology identified by Justo L. Gonzales and Dorothee Sölle: Type A or “orthodox/conservative”, Type B or “liberal” and Type C or “radical/liberation” (pp. 35–72). Bevans and Schroeder see these as recurrent throughout the history of the church. In each period of history the dominant type or types are highlighted and explained with respect to the “six constants” of the book’s title. The constants (deriving from an idea of Andrew Walls) are not (as might at first appear) unchanging beliefs but six essential theological concerns of Christians in mission: christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture. These questions are not mutually exclusive nor do the authors claim them to be exhaustive and, as the book develops, they become six ways of interrogating the mission theology of each context.

As a student of mission pneumatology, I could not help wondering what would happen if we looked at each type of theology from the perspective of its understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit, which we might also expect to be a “constant” as the object of theological reflection in each context. In other words, what is the pneumatology of each theological type and how does this play out in the different contexts of Christian mission? My own reflections lead me to suggest three types of pneumatology that arise from reading the biblical text and are discernible in different movements. I find that these correspond closely to the categories Bevans and Schreiter use. The pneumatology of theological “Type A” tends to be of the “from Pentecost” type; that associated with “Type B” “from creation”; “Type C” pneumatology relates to my category “from the incarnation”.

Type A theology, in its orthodox or conservative perspective, sees the Holy Spirit as the mark of the Christian church or the Christian individual stemming from the constitution of the church at Pentecost (Acts 2) or the rebirth by the Spirit of each individual in Christ (John 3:1–10). It emphasises the discontinuity between the church or believer on one hand, and the world and the “holy” or separate nature of the Spirit on the other. Type A theology encompasses both the high ecclesiology of conservative Catholicism and also the low ecclesiology of conservative evangelicals, who are united in their insistence on Christian distinctiveness and the challenge of Christian faith to other belief systems. In Type A theology the Spirit is bestowed from above on Christians, corporately or individually, and authenticates whatever is done in the name of Jesus Christ (1 John 5:6, 8). The Spirit equips with spiritual gifts and ordains ministries to build up the body of Christ and causes the church to grow (1 Cor 12, 14; Rom 12:3–8). Missiologically, the Spirit is understood to initiate, guide and