Incredibly, we can find a quote like “Asian theology seems not to have made much progress” in a book published in 2010 from Singapore. But then religious publishers’ lists of best sellers, with titles prominently displayed in theology bookshops over the past decade, might well suggest that contextual theology has passed its sell-by-date. Healing and miracles, wealth, and well-being apparently keep religious publishers in business. Is this, then, the context for twenty-first century Christians? And yet a discussion in the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission on the problem of universal revelation and socially located theology has given birth to a remarkable anthology by a new generation of contextual theologians.

The authors, all from evangelical traditions, discuss the principles that undergird contextual theology, which they understand as “the processes, the means, the limits, and the criteria necessary for Christian leaders from diverse cultures to construct local evangelical theologies” (vii). The 18-page introduction by Rob Haskell outlines the aims and themes of the project, including a précis of the eleven contributions. The first key question tackled is whether cultural location radically determines our thinking and behavior patterns – and, if so, how can we maintain that the revelation of God in Scripture is a universal revelation that speaks at all times to all peoples and cultures? The second key issue is how evangelizers ought to conceive the task of creating local theology.

Five contributions examine the contextualizing of theology as undertaken by biblical authors and as undertaken in the translation and interpretation of Scripture. Dean Flemming of the European Nazarene College, Switzerland, elucidates how Paul develops a Christology in Colossians highly dependent on contextual cultural imagery. Paul affirms Colossian culture, while relativizing it in preaching a new creation. Without inventing new terminology Paul redefines existing vocabulary, imbuing it with Christological significance. Youssouf Dembele from Mali faces the issue of whether Christians can, in a Muslim context, call God Allah. He examines the way the Hebrew Scriptures make use of local names for God, in particular El and YHWH, terms translated as “Theos” in the Septuagint. Local names were given universal significance. Like Dembele, Craig Blomberg comes with experience of Bible translation. In the New Testament we find both literal and free renditions of quotations from the Hebrew Bible. A good translation helps us recapture the meaning
and significance of the gospel in our context. Natee Tanchanpons from Thailand, with a background in computer network engineering, takes a linguistic approach: meaning is found not so much in the ingredients of theology as in the outcome.

Other contributors turn to cultural categories. Ruth Julian, a professor at the Alliance Bible Institute of Congo, highlights the worldview of a people. She uses the hermeneutical spiral to explain what happens when our worldview interacts with that of the Bible, leading to an ever increasing adjustment of our notions to biblical thinking. The circular interplay between Scripture and our worldview leads to increasing clarification. Matthew Cook, teaching in Abidjan, probes the problem of whether “contextual” implies “not objective.” He outlines four different understandings of social location that impact theological objectivity. Also taking up the issue of truth versus subjectivism, Benno van den Toren acknowledges that we never enter a new situation starting from nothing. Our thinking changes as we dialogue with a new context. Osías Segura Guzmán sees practical theology as produced from the interaction of the biblical text and the human context in which the text is read. A good theology is sustainable and empowering while challenging; it is constructed from reflected experience that leads to action. Paul Siu, from Alliance Theological Seminary, New York, writes from experience in North and East Asia, noting that the theological resources of the West are inadequate in tackling the negative aspects of “globalism.” He argues for a balance between global and local issues in a “centre-set thinking” where objects are judged by their relation to each other rather than by their relation to the border of the set as is done in Western “bounded-set thinking.” A. Scott Moreau from Wheaton College, dissatisfied with the six classical models of contextual theology proposed by Stephen Bevans (1992/2002), takes a first look at an alternative approach which he later expanded into a book length monograph. And finally, Patricia Harrison of Tabor College, New South Wales, Australia, bridges the discussion of contextualizing theology as outlined by the previous authors to its concrete application in education settings.

What, then, is new? The World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission has produced a volume that not only reiterates the crucial importance of contextualizing theology, which occurs whether we are aware of it or not, but expounds at some length issues that presuppose that biblical theology is not about the defense of “biblical truth” while ignoring both biblical and contemporary contexts. If truth is a living word, a word to be lived, then it cannot be imprisoned in any specific culturally-bound propositions. Here we find evangelical biblical scholars citing Gustavo Gutiérrez, who defined theology as critical reflection on practice based on Scripture. This volume gives witness