HEARING THE GLOBAL CHURCH ON THE TRINITY:

two exemples of contextualization and culture

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ABSTRACT

With the explosive growth of the global church has led to a growth in the need for non Western theologies. This requires theology that responds to the concerns and questions of their cultural context. Two examples from Asia and Africa, treating the doctrine of the Trinity, show that similar cultural concerns may lead to contrary theological conclusions. The conclusion is that contextual theology must take care so that Scripture drives the conclusion, rather than culture, even while giving culture a serious role in the theological task.

Key words: Contextualization. African theology. Asian theology. Simon Chan. Matthew Michael. Trinity.

RESUMO

Com o crescimento explosivo da igreja global levou a um crescimento na necessidade de teologias não ocidentais. Isso requer uma teologia que responda às preocupações e questões de seu contexto cultural. Dois exemplos da Ásia e África, tratando a doutrina da Trindade, mostram que preocupações culturais semelhantes podem levar a conclusões teológicas contrárias. A conclusão é que a teologia contextual deve cuidar para que a Bíblia conduza a conclusão, e não a cultura, mesmo dando à cultura um papel sério na tarefa teológica.

Palavras Chaves: Contextualização. Teologia Africana. Teologia Asiática. Simon Chan. Matthew Michael. Trindade.

INTRODUCTION

The latter part of the 20th century saw a shift in the theological axis from the North and the West to the South and the East. This corresponds with a shift of the majority Christian population to the southern and eastern hemispheres, where the decline of Christianity in the West is being offset by the explosion of Christianity in Africa and Asia.[2] "Christian theology is gradually becoming a non-Western theological exercise", notes African theologian, Matthew Michael.[3] He says, "In

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2   Jenkins, Phillip. *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
3   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions.* Resource Publications Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 132-133).

Africa, Christian theology must engage the worldviews of the African people especially in terms of the beliefs, values and traditional orientations of the African people."4 This is an obvious point, no doubt, as the past century of missiology has taught us. But it also serves to remind us that our own theological formulations are not simply abstractions, free floating from any culturally determinative influences. They too, were arrived at in response to questions emerging out of the evolving cultural tradition of the West. They reflect the worldviews, beliefs, values and traditional orientations of our own culture.

This plea for a contextualized theology usually begins against the backdrop of the Western tradition as if it were the normative, non-contextual standard to either be modified, eschewed, imitated or rejected. Indeed, it seems that Evangelical theologians in North American have often been guilty of assuming that their views are objective and unbiased, while those who reach different conclusions do so in order to accommodate culture. This type of accusation, then, becomes a means of discrediting the views of one's opponents as being unbiblical.5 This attitude assumes that there is such a thing as a non-culturally informed (non-contextual) theology. This is, of course, not possible. Theologians say that we know better by now; that the lessons of post-modernity have taught us a bit of humility. We claim to recognize that our theologies are influenced by our cultural context. But the arguments continue, nevertheless.

In this brief paper, I would like to examine how two recent examples from non-Western theology might help illuminate this discussion, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. While it is now taken for granted that theology needs be contextualized when taken to non-Western cultures, we often forget in practice that Western theology is itself the

4   Michael, Matthew. Christian Theology and African Traditions. Resource Publications Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. (Kindle Locations 107-108).
5   Recent discussion of the Trinity among Evangelicals is a good example. For two decades, a controversy has been raging over whether or not the Son is eternally obedient and subordinate to the Father, or if this applies only to the period of Christ's ministry on earth. Numerous meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society have dealt with this issue. Two examples of many publication making the accusation that those on the other side have reached their conclusions by surrendering to culture are "JBMW Forum" Journal for Biblical Manhood
and Womanhood, 12/2 (Fall 2007), 42, and Bruce Ware, "A Defense of the Ontological Equality and Functional Authority-Submission Relations among the Three Trinitarian Persons," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 20, 2009.

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product of a particular context. Hearing global voices as they wrestle with contextualizing the doctrine of the Trinity to their own realities will help westerners see ways in which our context may determine, for better or worse, our own understanding of doctrine. In addition, we shall see that contextualizing theology in non-Western cultures is more complicated than it seems. This is especially the case, given that many non-Western theologians received advanced degrees from Western academic institutions, and thus, often approach their work with its basic assumptions.

Community vs individualism

Non-Western views of persons and their identity are more often defined in terms of communities rather than the individualism common to their Western counterparts. This definition extends to the nature and essence of persons, not merely their social functions. The family and the community come first. The individual finds her meaning as part of the larger group. For North Americans, sending 18-year-old children away from home for university is a normal rite of passage. Other cultures view this as somewhat barbaric. They understand it as "kicking our children out" rather than granting them the autonomy they long for.[6] I bring this up only to highlight how strange this all sounds to North Americans, who urge their offspring to find their identities by nudging them out of the nest. This seems normal to them, but not so for many other cultures.

Given the priority of the community over the individual, it should be no surprise to find that Asian and African theologians identify the Trinity primarily as a community and seek to understand it in terms analogous to their own communal experience. What is interesting is to see the different ways this works out in the formulation of the doctrine. We will look at two examples; one from Asia and one from Africa.

Simon Chan and Asian Theology

We begin with Simon Chan and his well-known work *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up.*[7] As the title suggests,

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6   I remember speaking with a Brazilian college freshman who was genuinely puzzled at the idea that anyone would want to leave home to go to college. She actually had done so, and she was experiencing a sort of identity crisis from the resulting social dislocation of leaving home and living in a strange city.

7   (Chan, 2014)

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this is an exercise in doing theology from the bottom up, rather than as a series of abstractions brought down from on high.

Chan focuses on the ecclesial community as the ground point from which theology must begin. He points out that a theology grounded in cultural experience runs the risk of "privileging some aspect of culture and making it determinative for theology".[8] Chan does an excellent job of showing the various problems this causes at the hands of liberal theologians who do not adequately listen to the voice of the Spirit through Scripture and the Church. Rather than challenging culture, such a theology serves to reinforce whatever the culture find acceptable.[9] However, after completing his excellent critique of "culturally denominated theology"[10], it would appear that he fails to avoid this trap in his development of a contextualized view of the Trinity.

Chan begins with some basic assumptions. First of all he notes that humans are not discrete separate individuals but relational beings. In the Asian context he says that this relates to the most primary expression of human relationships, which is in the ordered family. A person's identity is discovered in relation to his or her family. According to Chan, this relationship in the family is analogous to that of Christ and his church. Christ initiates love and the church response. Given the importance of the family in Asian society, Chan holds that this should be the model for doing theology in Asia.

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Chan urges that,

> A more adequate way of organizing an Asian theology is to center it in the doctrine of the triune God as the divine family. This is not an arbitrary choice but faithfully reflects the fundamental way in which the first two persons of the triune God are revealed, namely, as Father and Son. In much of Asia a person's foremost identity is defined in relation to his or her family, and not just the immediate family but also the extended family, which may include an entire clan, and the linear family, which includes deceased ancestors. Given its importance, the concept of God as the trinitarian family could serve as theology's organizing principle.[11]

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8   Chan, Simon. Grassroots *Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p. 19.
9   Chan, Simon. *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p. 18.
10   Chan, Simon. *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p.26.
11   Chan, Simon. Grassroots *Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. pp. 42-43.

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It is interesting to analyze what Chan is doing. He takes a cultural principle from the Asian context and relates it to the fundamental nature of God in such a way that the cultural principle become identified as an eternal principle. The central importance of the family in Asian culture is linked to the Trinity, not simply as a relevant model that helps us understand it, but as a reflection of the essential nature of the Trinity. Chan's contextualization of the Trinity absolutizes something that is culturally relative.

The result of Chan's method is that the Trinity is interpreted "from the bottom up", starting with human culture as the paradigm for the transcendent nature of God. Thus, the divine family of the Trinity is understood in terms of the Asian family and its social structure. The Asian family is hierarchical. Thus, the relationship of Father and Son must be interpreted as a hierarchy with a chain of command. Since the Father eternally generates the Son, this must be an eternal relationship. "The Father commands and the Son obeys."[12]

Chan approves of the views of Lee Young Jung, that the hierarchical structure of social class is a reflection of a functional hierarchy in the Trinity.[13] Such a hierarchy is not necessarily oppressive, he says, but rather is the only alternative to disorder. While this is framed as an argument against the classless utopia proposed by Marxism, it also negates the type of egalitarianism promoted by Western liberal democracies. Apparently, mobility between social classes is a sign of disorder. Such disorder cannot exist in God, therefore hierarchy is the norm that extends from the nature of God into the nature of human culture.

The family, in its hierarchical order, is the principle manifestation of human relationships in Asian society, according to Chan.[14] Each persons, husband and father, wife and mother, and children have specific roles to play in a hierarchy, where the man initiates and the wife and children respond. This points to a functional hierarchy in the nature of the Trinity. The end result of Chan's contextual theology of the Trinity is the defense of the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father.

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12   Chan, Simon. *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p. 43.
13   Lee Young Jung, The Trinity in Asian Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), cited in Chan, p.58.
14   Chan, Simon. *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition. p. 44.

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In response to Chan we may observe that he assumes that Asian cultural realities reflect the true nature of the Trinity, but he does so without any convincing proof. He fails to show that his use of the Asian family structure is methodologically different from the use of experience and culture as a starting point for reflection that he criticized in liberal theology. In addition, he assumes that egalitarian ideas are products of the Enlightenment in western culture and discounts them on those grounds. He does no analysis of the roots of hierarchicalism to discover if it is truly biblical, nor does he interact with the consistent witness of the ancient church against any type of subordinationism in the imminent Trinity.[15]

For Chan, then, the hierarchical culture of Asia serves as a model which reflects the higher reality, much like the shadows in Plato's cave, while the Egalitarian culture of the West is a non-biblical projection onto the doctrine of the Trinity. But why should we accept this? How is this not an arbitrary distinction, especially with no argument to establish why the one is legitimate contextualization and the other is not? It appears that, in Chan's eyes, the mere fact that one is Asian and the other Western is what divides them between good and bad. Rather than doing theology that speaks to his cultural context from above, Chan allows his culture to determine his theology. This does not seem to be a helpful method of contextualization.

Matthew Michael and African Theology

Our second example comes from the work of African theologian Matthew Michael. Michael begins with a plea for theologians to relate theology to the "human context" lest it be a theology fit for angels but irrelevant to people.[16] God must not be isolated from humanity, but rather, close by and present. This is interesting in that the supreme God of much traditional African religion is viewed as distant an uninterested in daily human life. Michael's proposal engages African culture by confronting it on this point.

Michael urges that there must be a meeting of Scripture and the traditions and worldviews of the African people. Most significantly, he argues that

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15   See "The Compatibility of Ontological Equality, Hierarchy and Functional Distinctions"
Alan Myatt, Trabalho apresentado na conferência da Evangelical Theological Society New Orleans, November 20, 2009 http://myatts.net/papers/myatt_on_hierarchy.pdf acessado 2 de março, 2017.
16   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 105.

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Scripture must be the starting point for theological reflection, rather than a rehashing of the latest ideologies. Theological reflection then moves towards the issues of today's life. While engaging in significant interaction with culture, for Michael, theology begins from God's revelation above. It does not attempt to reconstruct doctrine in terms of human social paradigms. However, since the theology that Africans have inherited was formed in the context of Western needs and assumptions, it must be reconstructed to deal with African questions that are often not treated in standard works of Evangelical theology.[17]

In addressing the nature of God, Michael argues two theological points that serve as examples relevant to our discussion. The first relates to suffering and the atonement and the second relates to community and the Trinity.

Africans are an emotional people, says Michael, and therefore God's attributes of "love, grace, mercy, and goodness" are especially significant.[18] We may note that these attributes also are aspects of relationship in community. Community defines a person's identity, rather than Western individualism, according to Michael. Thus, Africans do not understand God as impassible. God feels and in the atonement, he suffers, not simply in the human nature of Jesus, but in God himself.

Michael engages in an extensive critique of the doctrine of impassibility, tracing its historical development and observing that it represents theology in Greek clothing.[19] It is necessary to develop a different conception of God, not only because it is more biblical, but also in order to free African theology from the hegemony of Western thought forms that have been imposed upon it.[20] However, Michael is careful to reformulate this theology from Scripture outward into culture, rather than the reverse.

Having dispensed with the doctrine of God's impassibility, Michael argues that in the atonement suffering is shared, in some sense, by each member of the Trinity. For this point, Michael offers an argument based

17   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 114.
18   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location Locations 2198-2201.
19   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2238.
20   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2262.

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on community. He argues that the Trinity is not a committee of three individuals. They are not merely three people in a room together.21 The community relationship extends to the divine essence itself. He appeals to the doctrine of perichoresis, the interpenetration of the divine Persons one with each other. This doctrine teaches that there is only one divine will and that the divine consciousness is shared equally by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The experience of one cannot be isolated from the others.

On the basis of his argument from community, Michael arrives at a conclusion quite different from Chan. For Michael, the nature of the relationships in the Trinity is best described as egalitarian. The shared experience and the interpenetration of the persons indicates a fundamental equality. He understands that this is counter to the traditional African religions conception of a hierarchy that exists in both the world of spirits and humans. Nevertheless, this egalitarian relationship has something important to say for African communitarianism. It points to the shared experiences of community, both its pain and its joys.22 God himself is a model for community. God is a community whose experience is not foreign to that of Africans. From it they can gain strength and hope.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may observe that each of these non–Western theologians work within the framework of societies that are based on community relations rather than individualism. They both offer critiques of Western individualism and its inadequacies for theological reflection in communal societies. They are equally concerned to engage in theology that speaks to the heart of their own cultures and people. To this end, they offer valuable insights and correctives to those who would simply translate and transplant Western theologies onto African and Asian shores. For this they are to be commended.

Nevertheless, the examples here should motivate us to be cautious. That they both start with community as an important assumption and

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21   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2233.

22   Michael, Matthew. *Christian Theology and African Traditions*. Resource Publications - An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers. Kindle Edition. Kindle Location 2233.

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yet, arrive at opposite conclusions about the nature of the Trinity, is instructive. Contextualization does not mean that we allow our cultural context to write our theology. Rather, it means that our theology should be molded to speak and respond to our cultural context. I would argue that Michael is more successful than Chan, in this respect.

Chan begins here below, with the communal nature of culture, and argues upwards towards a concept of God that is largely in the image of that culture. Thus, he imports an eternal hierarchy into the Trinity, discounting the tradition of the Church as well as biblical teaching against the eternal subordination of the Son. Michael begins with the communitarian nature of God and the doctrine of perichoresis, as found in Scripture, and then reflects on its meaning for community amongst the people. He allows the biblical doctrine of the equality of the divine persons to correct hierarchical notions in African society and illuminate egalitarian sensitivities that are already present. Michael's refutation of divine impassibility notes its origins from Greek culture, and then proceeds to show that the biblical data fits better with the African experience of feeling in community relationships.

The global nature of Christianity makes contextualization an imperative task, regardless of where one works. Yet, as we have seen, this cannot take place in a vacuum as if no one has ever done theology before. Both Chan and Michael are typical of many theologians in the non-Western world in that they were educated in the West.23 This is part of the baggage we all bring to the task. It is neither possible, nor desirable to shut out completely the theological tradition of the past. After all, the Holy Spirit has been teaching the church for 2000 years. But, it is essential to allow the culture where one is doing theology to act as a source of the questions and concepts for theological reflection. Doing so, as Michael has shown, can assist in revealing those aspects of the theology inherited from the West that are founded on western culture more than on Scripture. At the same time, theologians must avoid the error of building a theology from culture upwards such that it, rather than the Bible, determines doctrine. This is not an easy task, but it is necessary and well worth the effort, if theology is going to speak to the needs of the people that God has graciously placed under out stewardship.

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23   Indeed, Chan himself points out that much of the liberal theology that purports to be truly Asian has more of Kant and Tillich than it has of Asian culture. Non--western theologians need to acknowledge the influence of Western categories in their education and evaluate them biblically.