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**“Contextual Theology”**

**Origin – Purpose - Method**

**A View Backward**

When for the first time in the early 80th of last century I visited mainland China with a group of priests and faithful, I had the chance to look into the missals of some churches, in Beijing, in Datong, in Xi’an, finally in Guandong. Wherever we travelled, we found Latin missals; in few places the name of he pope was removed.

My last trip to the mainland was in 2006, and the situation in the churches had been completely changed. Benedict XVI was elected pope, and wherever I entered a church, I was greeted by a poster with the pope expanding his hands, as we were used to see him at home. The mass was celebrated in Chinese, and by paying attention we could hear the name of the pope mentioned in the Eucharistic prayer. Vatican II had reached the Chinese Church.

And yet, the decisive paragraph of the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* starts like this:

“Particular law remaining in force, the use of the Latin language is to be preserved in the Latin rites.” (SC 36.1)[[1]](#footnote-1)

For centuries Latin was the language tie which united all local communities of the Catholic Church. Consequently, all over the world the basic language of ecclesial education was Latin. When I studied philosophy in Germany and theology in Tokyo in the years before Vatican II, the main lectures were held in Latin. The basic texts for examinations we were using in Tokyo, were manuals following the Neo-Scholastic pattern, written in Latin, printed in Spain[[2]](#footnote-2). I like to illustrate the teaching method by one example taken from the introductory course in theology dealing with the possibility of revelation. Note: Before dealing with divine revelation as it happened in the history of Jesus of Nazareth, we asked whether or not a divine revelation is possible, as if we were able to know and to judge about revelation before it had even occurred.

The teachings were offered in the form of so called “theses”, that is to say, short statements which afterwards had to be explained: The thesis example sounds like this (in translation):

“A divine supernatural revelation, immediate or mediate, is possible.”

The thesis was built up in six steps:

1. Explanation of the notion, here: “possibility”
2. Explanation of the problem (“*status quaestionis”*): What is the question, when we talk about the possibility of divine revelation?
3. *“Adversarii”*: Who are the opponents of the thesis? Who denies the possibility of divine revelation?
4. Doctrine of the Church with its ranking in theology, whether it is a doctrine solemnly defined by a Council or generally admitted in theology or only discussed etc.[[3]](#footnote-3); here: “*De fide divina et catholica sollemniter definita”,* a teaching of divine and Catholic faith solemnly defined by Vatican I (DH 3027).
5. *“Probatio”,* i.e., the main arguments in favor of the thesis.
6. Refutation of the arguments against.

The structure of the argument was more or less the same in all basic treatises of systematic theology[[4]](#footnote-4). It fulfilled completely the demands of Pops Leo XIII as exposed in his Encyclical *Aeterni Patris,* publishedfew years after Vatican I in 1879. In the encyclical the pope described the fundamental task of philosophy in two main points: Philosophy as a scholarly enterprise with a universal outlook has to protect the truths transmitted by God and to combat those who dare to resist them. At the same time he declared Thomas Aquinas “the prince and master” of all the scholastic teachers (cf. DHH H 3135-3141)[[5]](#footnote-5).

Inside the Church philosophy was often put under the heading of *“philosophia perennis”.* That is to say: Against thecontingency of worldly beings and occurrences it emphasized the timeless and independently of time and space existing principles, truths and values which because of their timelessness should be possibly discovered in and transferred to all humankind wherever and whenever humans live[[6]](#footnote-6). Timelessness, however, easily causes disregard of history and historical differences[[7]](#footnote-7). In a period in which historical interest and research began to flourish, this kind of philosophy could hardly prevail. Indeed the self-destruction of metaphysical philosophy began, and a great number of different forms of philosophy with different interests sprang up[[8]](#footnote-8)

There is one more disturbing point. For turning to Christian theology, its starting-point is an historic event: life and death of Jesus of Nazareth combined with an absolute claim: Jesus Christ is the savior of the world. Therefore, from its very beginning Christian theology is bound to history. In fact, the history of Jesus of Nazareth is the central point of Christian message. Modern theology calls him a *concretum universale,* a concrete realization of universal value resp. absolute claim[[9]](#footnote-9). This, however, is not the result of human thought and reflection, but it is a gift presented to us by the grace of the Lord. What brings us to this insight, are the testimonies of witnesses which were handed on in the tradition of the Church. The main sources are Holy Scripture and the living testimonies of the saints.

**Holy Scriptures and their oly Scirpture and its ContexsContexts**

Texts are the main source of historical research. In Christian theology the basic text is the Bible composed of the Jewish Bible which Jesus himself as Jew read and used[[10]](#footnote-10), and the so called New Testament. Both groups of texts are considered as writings inspired by the Spirit of God. For a long time “divine inspiration”[[11]](#footnote-11) which made the texts the immediate Word of God, seemed to imply that it is forbidden to deal with them as if they were ordinary literature. Nevertheless, differently from the Islamic Koran, the Bible was translated into different languages, it is true. Already in the time of Jesus the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek and even enlarged by other Greek writings. The New Testament, originally written in Greek, was soon translated into the common language of the Roman Empire, Latin, in its standard edition called “Vulgate”.

However, literary analysis and criticism came into existence only in modern times. Only in the “secular age” (Ch. Taylor[[12]](#footnote-12)) religions were scholarly examined in a twofold way, with the eyes of insiders, i.e. the faithful, and in an indifferent way with the eyes of outsiders and neutral observers[[13]](#footnote-13). Since that time also Holy Scriptures were treated with the general methods of literary analysis. The text itself is explored, its style, its genre, whether it is poetry or prose, history or fiction etc., also its origin, the author, his time and background etc. Attention was given to what we today call “context”, - items attached to the “text” and connected with it, however, not necessarily and explicitly expressed in the text. Today as a rule we find the author’s name on the title page of a book, also the year and place of publication, - all that is generally missing in books of old age. Indeed by knowing the author, his place and time of living, his abilities, his erudition and interest, we reach a deeper understanding of his writings and the traditions which are reflected in the texts, the living ambient, the way of life and thought, culture and religion.

Returning to biblical exegesis, although the Christian mind finds in the various biblical books the Word of God, nevertheless, it is the Word of God written in the language of humans with all the limitations we discover in human life. That remains the truth, even if we presume that God has prevented the authors of Holy Scriptures from grave errors. Through the scholarly study of the books of Scripture we learnt that e.g. the five books of Moses, the so called Pentateuch, cannot be simply ascribed any longer to the historic figure of Moses, or that the Book of Isaiah is a composition of maybe three authors who were gathered under the same name of the great prophet, or that before the Synoptic Gospels were written most probably a source existed which got lost, called in German the *Logienquelle,* literally “Sayings Source”, - a source which could explain many correspondences in the three Gospels. These are only three small items of a huge amount of findings discussed today.

Another field of continuous interest is the human biography of Jesus. The fact that he was brought up as a Jew, connected with the concrete knowledge we possess today about the background of his life, the Jewish people of his time, the political situation in Palestine, the social settings, the languages spoken, the religious rites etc., create the possibility of depicting a rather vivid picture of the land in which he lived and even of the personality we have to imagine. Of course, at any time in the official Church there was the fear that Jesus could be reduced to a simple human person stripped of his divinity: On the other hand, it can hardly be denied that by insisting on his divinity many questions were simply discarded and put aside to the detriment to his humanity. Keeping the balance of “true man, and true God” was and is often very difficult.

Of course, another danger cannot be denied. The discovery of the variety of contexts connected with Holy Scriptures can lead to the point that at the end contexts become more important than the text itself. In other words: It can happen (and actually it does happen) that scholars and students pay more attention to the circumstances of the message than to the message itself and that at the end they even lose sight of the message.

Moreover,oly the process continued. For what became important regarding the original texts of Christianity found its continuation in the study of later texts of Christian tradition and history, especially regarding the official texts and documents of Councils and popes. All of them had their temporal and cultural contexts. The interest in contexts exploded even more when it came to the conscious encounter with peoples of different cultures and the Europa-centered Church grew into a truly Universal world-wide Church. In fact, this revolutionary situation just began, and there are enough people who still are not aware of it and try to play it down.

**Fundamental Changes in Modern Times**

It was after World War II that the world situation thoroughly changed. However, it is a grave mistake to see in this war the basic cause for the changes, as it is also a grave mistake to make the Church responsible for the changes we are confronted with today in the Church. There are various factors which come together. Without going too much into details we have to mention some important points. They have one thing in common. They prove that it is not enough to reflect only about inner-Church affairs, the weaknesses and strong points inside the Church. As the Lord was a human being living in a certain period of time and at certain places in the world, we, too, live in a concrete world which we have to recognize before we get engaged in changing, converting and saving it, wherever we perceive the cries for change and salvation. Therefore we do have to be interested not only in the conditions inside the Church, but we have to be aware of the conditions outside the Church, the developments and occurrences in the world. For in order to reach the mind of the people with our message, we have to know their questions and problems, their needs and their hopes Only then the message will be a response and a reaction to the concrete world in which people presently live.

● Since the middle of last century European resp. Western colonialism came to an end. All former coloniesHowever, it is became independent, in Africa independent States, the Indian subcontinent was divided into India and Pakistan, Hong Kong lost its dependence from Great Britain, Macao from Portugal, both territories were returned to China. Eurocentrism ended.

● Since that time the world is striving for a new kind of unity which was partly realized in the United Nations which combined the different political and economic blocks, East and West, Northern hemisphere and Southern hemisphere. For quite a while we spoke about First and Second, Third and Fourth World. Western hegemony loses its power. The Second World of World Communism broke down. Political power is balanced in different ways. The Atlantic Ocean is no longer the main bridge between the continents. In many ways the Pacific Ocean takes its place by bridging the Americas and Asia and moving Europe out of the focus.

● Two technological revolutions shook the world: the developments in the field of communication and of mobility. Actually the world gets united by the unifying factors of technological know-how and equipment which is exchanged and sold all over the world. They create a new global culture which on the long run nobody can escape. Both revolutions together take care that long distances are overcome and more and more people come to know each other in a way as it never occurred before. They become witnesses and participants of events, wars and conflicts, but also successes and joys all over the world in a way our forefathers could never have dreamed about. This rapid evolution is, on the one side, a marvelous success of humankind. On the other side, it creates a big thread to the identity of the peoples and even the individual person, to their freedom and security. At the same time it broadens the distance between rich and poor, and this not only under the respect of material welfare, but also of intellectual and spiritual reasons, too.

● We are living in a pluralistic society at home, and become aware of the fact that the world as such is blessed with an immense number of tribes, peoples and races, languages and dialects, cultures and religions. For the leading religion of the Western world, Christianity, this is shocking and menacing at the same time. For as for a long time Western culture in general was self-confident and proud of its supremacy, Christianity was convinced about its first ranking among all religions of the world. Now all of a sudden Christianity turns out to be only one religion among others. This experience was very strong especially in Europe due to the immigration of workers and refugees from Islamic countries - many of them even becoming naturalized and claiming the same rights for themselves as all citizens in the country enjoy them. This affects the privileged situation of the former so called Christian countries. .

● The Catholic Church tries to match the situation e.g. by internationalizing the Roman curia step by step at least since Pope Pius XII. With John Paul II from Poland for the first time after centuries a non-Italian occupied the Holy See, succeeded by the German Benedict XVI. He again was followed by the first South-American, the Argentine Pope Francis. In his pre-conclave talk the later blamed the Church for – what he called – her “autoreferentialism”, that is to say that for too long a time the Church gave herself away to a rather narcissist attitude being constantly centering round herself. Therefore he urged the Church members including the hierarchy to get to the people, to stand on the side of the poor and distressed, to engage in actions for peace and reconciliation, and not to talk and discuss only but to act. He himself put a number of symbolic actions, but what impressed the world most was his strong appeal in the Syrian conflict where he not only invited all humankind to fasting and prayer, but got in contact with the political leaders of the world.

We return to the fundamental changes in the world. It is definitely a wrong conclusion when Europeans seek the main cause for the weakness of the Church only in the Church herself instead paying attention to the grave developments in the world. Accordingly, the deliberations and decisions of Vatican II need to be studied more urgently than before. I dare to say that so far the insights elaborated in the Council have not reached many of our Church congregations and a number of necessary steps have not yet been taken.

I have called attention to some important changes in human society which affect the world globally including the religious entities and also Christianity. By realizing the new situation which developed since the middle of the 20th century, a new danger has to be avoided: In the way the Church as such realizes the new situation, she must take care that she does not lose sight of her central task, namely to concentrate on the message which Jesus brought to the world. That leads us to the next step which I like to call “the contextual turn”, that is to say: to live in and with our contexts without losing contact to the very center of our life. .

**The “Contextual Turn”**

Actually Vatican Council II promulgated two constitutions regarding the Church, the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* and the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes.* The latter initiated a new species of documents with the result that certain authors find it a document of less dignity than dogmatic texts, which, therefore, could be neglected. However, it is basically a question of approach, whether we deal with principles of universal validity or with situations which are subject to change. *Lumen gentium* calls attention to the inner view of ecclesial self-understanding, whereas *Gaudium et spes* directly refers to the situation “of the men of this age”. Thus is begins:

“The joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grieves and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts.” (GS 1)

Accordingly the task of the Church is described in three steps which remind us of the strategy which the founder of the Young Christian Workers, the Belgian priest and cardinal Joseph Leo Cardijn (1882-1967) initiated: “Seeing – Judging – Acting”:

“To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of

* scrutinizing the signs of the times and of
* Interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.

Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other.

We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.” (GS 4)

*Gaudium er spes* is the first official text of the Church’s magisterium which offers an overall view of the big historical changes in society we are facing today: the impact of scientific work and technology which “is now transforming the face of the earth, and is already trying to master outer space”, the passing “from a rather static concept of reality to a more dynamic evolutionary one” (cf. GS 5), changes in the social order (cf. GS 6), psychological, moral and religious changes (cf. GS 7), which lead to contradictions and imbalance. It implies what I like to call a “contextual turn”.

Actually the new approach consists in the following main points:

● For Christians the decisive “text” or - as *Gaudium et spes* calls it: – the “light” is the Gospel, the Word of God.

● However, the proclamation of the message demands a profound knowledge of the “contexts” in which the Gospel is proclaimed, in the terms of *Gaudium ert spes*: the “signs of the time”[[14]](#footnote-14).

● “Signs of the time” implies a shift of attention. That is to say: Considering the “contexts” does not consist so much in studying the past “contexts” of the biblical texts, but in recognizing the present “contexts” of modern time in which the present listeners and addresses of the Gospel lead their life.

● What at first sight seems to refer to the field of language, conversation and dialogue is fully realized, however, only in engaged action. This follows from the fact that at the very beginning *Gaudium e spes* calls attention to the poor and distressed who are not helped by consoling words alone but by practical help, as the Lord mentions them in the judgment parable of Matthew 25: feeding the hungry and thirsty, welcoming the strangers, clothing the naked, caring for the ill, visiting those in prison etc.

All this has its consequences for theology. Since we ask for the meaning of “contextual *theology*”, we now have to return to the reflective task of scholarly theology.

**Inspirations of “*Fides et ratio*”**

15 years ago in 1998 Pope John Paul II published the encyclical *Fides et ratio*[[15]](#footnote-15). Faith and reason are considered like “two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (n. 1).

Already at the very beginning of the letter the pope looks to East and West, He finds the basic questions of humankind all over the world. He mentions Veda and Avesta, Confucius and Lao-Tze, Tirthankara and Buddha, before he turns to Homer, Euripides and Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle (n.1).

Of course, John Paul II is a man of the Western world. Therefore, the developments of European history dominate his reflections. As it is good custom in papal writings, he recalls the memory of the former popes Leo XIII and Pius XII. (cf. ch.5). He emphasizes the “enduring originality of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas” (n. 43ff.). And yet, the horizon in which he describes the present world is different and by far more complex.

About the Western developments he states:

“From the late Medieval period the legitimate distinction between the two forms of learning [i.e. philosophy and theology – H.W.] became more and more a fateful separation.” (n. 45)

These observations, however, about the West never stay alone. He reminds us:

“Philosophy’s powerful influence on the formation and development of the cultures of the West should not obscure the influence it also had upon the way of understanding existence found in the East. Every people has its own native and seminal wisdom which, as a true cultural treasure, tends to find voice and develops in forms which are genuinely philosophical. One example of this is the basic form of philosophical knowledge which is evident to this day in the postulates which inspire national and international legal systems in regulating the life of society.” (n.3)

And he continues:

“In different cultural contexts and at different times, the process has yielded results which have produced genuine systems of thought.”(n.4)

And it follows the rejection of an attitude which till now can be found among many contemporaries in the western world:

“Yet often enough in history this has brought with it the temptation to identify one single stream with the whole of philosophy. In such cases, we are clearly dealing with a ‘philosophical pride’ which seeks to present its own partial and imperfect view as the complete reading of all reality. In effect, every philosophical *system,* while itshould be respected in its wholeness, without any instrumentalization, must still recognize the primacyof philosophical *enquiry,* from which it stems and which it ought loyally to serve.” (n.4)

Precisely this has to be acknowledged by western thinkers regarding their own thought and systems and their respect for non-European thought. It is interesting to note that

“The Church has no philosophy of her own nor does she canonize any one particular philosophy in preference to others. The underlying reason for this reluctance is that even when it engages theology, philosophy must remain faithful to its own principles and methods. Otherwise there would be no guarantee that it would be oriented to truth and that it was moving towards truth by way of a process governed by reason.” (n. 49)

In these considerations philosophy stands for a comprehensive search for truth which implies radical openness for God’s graceful revelation. In former days we were talking about the *praeparatio fidei,* the preparation and preconditions of faith. In the terms of the German theologian Karl Rahner every human is potentially a listener of the Word[[16]](#footnote-16). In our time of growing interest in the inculturation of the faith John Paul II adds:

“The life of the young Churches in particular has brought to light, together with sophisticated modes of thinking, an array of expressions of popular wisdom; and this constitutes a genuine cultural wealth of traditions. Yet the study of traditional ways must go hand in hand with philosophical inquiry, an inquiry which will allow the positive traits of popular wisdom to emerge and forge the necessary link with the proclamation of the Gospel.” (n. 61)

At the same time it cannot be denied that the authority of philosophical thought is diminishing and the influence of other kinds of human knowledge, history and sciences Is growing. Moreover, the alertness for the link between faith and culture creates a certain reluctance regarding the predominance of European thought. With good reason the pope, therefore, deals with the relationship between faith and cultures. I summarize some of his statements, and like to add that the English translation explicitly speaks about “context”:

● “Lying deep in every culture, there appears this impulse towards fulfillment. We may say, then, that culture itself has an intrinsic capacity receiving divine Revelation.” (n. 71)

● “Cultural context permeates the living of Christian faith, which contributes in turn by shaping that context. To every culture Christians bring the unchanging truth of God, which he reveals in the history and culture of a people.” (n.71)

● “… no one culture can ever become the criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth with regard to God’s Revelation. The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it. On the contrary, the message which believers bring to the world and to culture is a genuine liberation from all the disorders caused by sin and is, at the same time, a call to the fullness of truth. Cultures are not only not diminished by this encounter; rather, they are prompted to open themselves to the newness of the Gospel’s truth and to be stirred by this truth to develop in new ways.” (n, 71)

● “In preaching the Gospel, Christianity first encountered Greek philosophy, but this does not mean at all that other approaches are precluded.” (n. 72)

Choosing India as an example, the Pope adds three criteria which we have to bear in mind reflecting about inculturation:

1. Man is privileged with a universal human spirit in spite of all human limitations.
2. History is a process which cannot be undone; it connects past and present, and affects all humankind consciously or unconsciously. In its casualty Christianity started in Palestine, but the first writings were done in Greek so that the inculturation of Christianity began in the Mediterranean. Rightly Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI preferred the term “interculturation” instead of “inculturation”, because a “naked” Christianity without cultural garment never existed[[17]](#footnote-17).
3. “…care will need to be taken lest, contrary to the very nature of human spirit, the legitimate defense of the uniqueness and originality of Indian thought be confused with the idea that a particular cultural tradition should remain closed in its difference and affirm itself by opposing other traditions.” (n. 72)

The paragraph ends:

“What has been said here of India is no less true for the heritage of the great cultures of China, Japan and the other countries of Asia, as also for the riches of the cultures of Africa, which are for the most part orally transmitted.” (n. 72)

Occasionally *Fides et ratio* has been called “the philosophical testament” of Pope John Paul II, but in the same way, even more rightly it could be called “the Magna Charta of contextual theology”. For as no representative of the highest magisterium of the Church before, John Paul II has elaborated the cultural impact upon theology by calling attention to the riches of the multitude of cultural traditions all over the world. If we do not read the text just with the eyes of western people, it sounds like an invitation especially to theologians outside of the western world to develop their own theology in the contexts of their native countries. Regarding the fact that his successor Benedict XVI as prefect of the Congregation of Faith and one of the outstanding theologians was one of the intimate collaborators of John Paul II, we do well to study his cautious reflections, too. Of course, I do not claim that the two persons have elaborated a contextual theology of their own. However, undoubtedly they opened the doors for a renewal of theology which I would put under the two headings which make us remember the time of John XXIII and his successor Paul VI, the two popes of Vatican II: *aggiornamento* and *ressourcement,* living in present time and being rooted in the sources of our faith, or once again in the terms of *Gaudium et spes*: scrutinizing the signs of the time and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel so that we are enabled to act accordingly and give witness to Christ in words and deeds.

**The Miracle of Language: “By Deeds and Words”**

As mentioned before, in its original meaning “contextuality” correlates with “texts”. Theologically speaking, Jesus Christ is introduced to us as the *Logos tou theou*, the Word of God. “Word”, however, is not to be understood in a narrow sense contrary to deeds. In its comprehensive meaning rooted in the Hebrew word *dabar* it is at once word-and-deed, a word which causes reality and becomes reality and history. Consequently the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* describes revelation in the following way:

“The plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.” (DV 2)

Similarly the revelatory action of Christ is expressed:

“Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself through His words and deeds, His signs and wonders, but especially through His death and glorious resurrection from the dead and finally sending of the Spirit of truth.” (DV 4)

I do not intend to explain the new concept of revelation of Vatican Council II, which brought about the change from a concept in which revelation is a set of new instructions gratuitously given by God (in German: *instruktionstheoretisches* Modell) to a concept which insists on a new interpersonal communication between God and humankind also initiated by God, shortly: God’s self-communication which finds its fulfillment in the total and, as we say today, kenotic self-surrender in Jesus Christ (in German: *kommunikationstheoretisches Modell*)[[18]](#footnote-18). I only mention it because the renewal of the concept can be partly perceived as a consequence of the philosophy of language in modern time by which qualities and functions, but also the plurality of languages have been taken into account.

I dare to say that only in encountering the plurality of languages we really discover the “miracle of language”[[19]](#footnote-19). For in the variety of foreign and strange languages, more than in speaking only in one’s mother tongue, we experience the blessings of mutual understanding as well as the harms of non-understanding. Indeed, by speaking and understanding a foreign language we learn to change perspectives and to enter into a different and often strange world - not only of talking, but of perceiving, thinking and even behavior[[20]](#footnote-20). Language is the door-opener to the other - may he be close to me or a stranger. Therefore, the use of language is also the entrance to “contexts” in the broader meaning, to everything hidden and implicit in whoever and whatever we meet directly and explicitly. Indeed we learn to observe and to judge things differently, because we see and hear them in other perspectives and from other points of view.

As we know today. It was one of the greatest deficiencies of the missionary activities in the period of discoveries that only after some time the European missionaries recognized the necessity of learning foreign languages and that it was a mistake to rely too much on translations and translators. In their zeal and conviction that people would go to hell if they died unbaptized, they neglected the presuppositions of any good conversion, namely to get acquainted with language and thinking, customs and behavior of the addressees of their message. A serious conversion of grown-up people, however, calls for a free decision for Christ, which, again, presupposes a solid catechesis and instruction about the intentions of Christ followed by a rational self-surrender into the hands of God. After all, we are not dealing here with the baptism of infants. Westerners today find some consolation in looking at personalities like Matteo Ricci (1552-1610) in China and Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) in India and their successors. And yet, it is high time that we confess that our forefathers have become guilty by being blind for the reality they were meeting when they landed in India[[21]](#footnote-21) and reached America. They neither realized that Christianity had reached Asia before nor did they care for the real needs of the people, their thoughts and their hopes and expectations.

Even today while dealing with different cultures and enumerating the various elements which constitute a culture, we should insist more strongly on the importance of language and put it at the first place. It cannot be as I have experienced it when I first came to Japan in the 50th of last century that the Japanese had to fulfill a double job of translating German texts into Japanese and Japanese texts into German. The results were obvious when I only remember the translations of Heidegger’s texts into Japanese, whereas good translations of classic Asian texts were still widely missing. Encountering at eye-level presupposes the mutual knowledge of language. For this reason I regret very much that I do not speak and understand Chinese and that I am too old to learn this great and important language.

Gianni Criveller wrote a brilliant essay on *Christ Introduced to Late Ming China by Guilio AleniS.J. (1582-1649)*[[22]](#footnote-22)*.* At the end he finishes:

“Although he spent almost 40 years in China, Aleni could not create a Christology with Chinese characteristics. While, to a certain extent, he became Chinese with the Chinese, Aleni was still European. It could not have been otherwise. He also had few theological instruments to fully develop an inculturation process. Aleni and his companions must however be credited with having initiated a method that, thanks to the original contribution of the converts, opened the way to a Chinese Christianity. In fact, Chinese Christology can be created only by Chinese Christians. The converts had the intellectual and moral qualities for that. But inculturation is an endless goal, and requires the original contribution of generations of converts. Only they could unite in harmonious synthesis the ‘genius’ of their people with the newness of the Gospel.”

**Towards a Chinese Contextual Theology**

Summarizing the various perspectives we can define “contextual theology” as the theological method which takes into account the plurality and differences of cultures while promulgating and explaining the message of the Gospel in different cultures and situations of human life. Unconsciously as a matter of fact, wherever theology is taught in the vernacular, theology turns out to become contextual. For (a) the fact that the contents of theology originate in past history and a rather different cultural milieu calls for translation, that means change of time and place, thought pattern und languages, which all together implies an encounter of old and new contexts. (b) Independently of this encounter any receiver of a message lives in a particular surrounding which by itself stands for his living context. Thus “contextual theology” looks into two directions, the past and the present, and it is the attempt to bridge times, places and cultures.

Because Christianity did not start in China, Chinese Christians have to bridge their own present situation and their history and tradition, on the one side, with the Christian message which reached the country from outside, on the other side. Building a bridge is easy, if both sides meet in the spirit of mutual confidence and trust. In the case of China unfortunately this so far is not really the case. Christianity does not enter China only in a different cultural garment, but its organizational structure seems to intend to interfere into the national polity, national law and government. Actually there were different attempts in history to bring the Christian message to China, the earliest testimony being the famous so called Nestorian Stele of Xi’an erected in 781[[23]](#footnote-23). Most of them ended in distrust, conflict and, finally, in persecution and expulsion of the mostly foreign missionaries. We have to admit that in modern times this partly happened due to the conflicts which arose over the missionary methods between different missionary groups, partly also because of the mixed enterprise of colonial and missionary activities.

In front of the unfortunate past experiences and facing the challenges of present time a contextual theology needs to take different steps:

● In order to create a new atmosphere of mutual confidence Christian contextual theology has to teach the future messengers of the Gospel a profound knowledge of the “context” into which the “text” of the Gospel is to be inserted.

+ They have to know and to love their country and the people.

+ They must be acquainted with its history and its long traditions, especially with the wisdom of the old and the local religions. As history of all peoples in the world, also Chinese history is full of stories - stories of suffering, stories of search, stories of promises, stories of salvation, also stories of God and the Divine[[24]](#footnote-24). Stories are the basic ways of participating in the concrete life of ordinary people.

+ The messengers of the Gospel need to know the present situation, the requests of the leading circles of the country and also the thinking and feeling of the ordinary people. Pope Francis wishes us to go to the “ends of the earth” (Acts 1,8), but he does not understand them so much in a geographical sense, but existentially: to know the needs of the people, their poverty materially and spiritually, their illness and despair, but also their hopes, their yearning, their desires. And he thinks about young people, the chances they have to build up a future in their life in happiness, hope and confidence.

+ “Contextual theology” watches out for the “signs of the time” which are signs taken globally and locally, because we all are living in the one boat of humankind which gives us the chance to survive together or to perish together. This awareness is growing in our days everywhere on the globe.

● “Contextual theology” has to interpret the present contexts in the light of the fundamental Christian “text” which is life and death of Jesus of Nazareth as it is handed on to us by the Gospel. In the light of the Gospel Christians are enabled to lead people in their desire on the path of truth and salvation. This can be realized only if the messengers of the Gospel themselves live by the virtue of the message of the Lord. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI this requires that we do not prefer anything to the love of Christ[[25]](#footnote-25).

+ By the Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth the Word of God accepted its own historical context. Jesus became a Jew, used the language of his contemporaries[[26]](#footnote-26), followed the Jewish law and exercised the Jewish religion, visited the temple in Jerusalem and read the Bible of his people. All these are moments of the context in which Jesus lived among us, and they gave Christianity its first inculturated outlook. .

+ The history of Christianity began after the resurrection of Christ. By gathering faithful from the circumcised and the uncircumcised, Jews and pagans, the Church changed into an independent religion gradually growing into the state of a world religion.

+ Looking back at the beginning of the Jesus movement we see that Christianity developed in three directions which according to their basic languages can be called the Oriental Syrian Churches, the Greek Church followed by the Orthodox Churches and the Roman (Latin) Catholic Church split after the Reformation. The three main branches had a common history at least up to the middle of the 5th century, the Council of Chalcedon 451. Regarding the Christological question Christian faith confessed Christ being “truly God, truly man”. In explaining the Christian doctrine the Fathers borrowed a number of terms from Greek philosophy, - a process which continued later on, especially in medieval Scholasticism, although Latin replaced Greek and became the language in which philosophy and theology were taught.

+ Turning to present theological teaching in China one of the grave questions is how far it has to adopt the Western processes of inculturation and contextualization in translating and rephrasing the Christian message for the Chinese. In other words: Why is it not possible to return to the very sources of Christian faith, to the Biblical texts and stories and to find ways of expressing the content of the Christian Creed in terms borrowed of the Chinese traditions so that the Chinese recognize more easily what the person of Christ is teaching them? Of course, the Church has a worldwide-spread membership, and a world-wide community is created by mutual understanding and common action which has to be guaranteed also in the future. And yet, why should it not be possible to get together in a Pentecostal experience where by virtue of the Holy Spirit people of different tongues come to a common understanding?

+ Present day contextual theology has to be effective in both directions: It has to bring the Christian message to the countrymen so that they understand it and find responses to their urgent needs and questions, get reconciled with each other and become collaborators in building a society in peace and justice, welfare and solidarity, together with all people of god will. At the same time they ought to feel as brothers and sisters in the community of the World Church which proclaims the message of Christ’s service to all humankind and gets engaged in common actions bringing salvation to all people in need wherever on the globe.

● The main purpose of “contextual theology” is not realized when we come to a better understanding only, and understanding is restricted to theoretical thought, insights and speculations. “Contextual theology” only comes to its aim, when it leads to a new practice of life – a life that is not egocentric but ready to selfless service.

Listening to the words of Christ we come across many allusions that Jesus Christ came as someone who is serving:

“The Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10,45)

Or after the impressive scene that he washed Peter’s feet:

“If I, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. Amen, amen, I say to you, no slave is greater than his master no any messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you understand this, blessed are you if you do it.” (John 13,14-17)

I like to conclude with some remarks which a wise man of the west made some decades ago. It was Gottlieb Söhngen, professor of fundamental theology in Munich, teacher of Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. He said in a lecture which he held in Salzburg:

“It cannot be otherwise than that the Chinese and other East-Asians argue from their Far-Eastern thinking about the Occidental way of Christian theology and do not produce a mixture half and half, as it were a minced chicken, but the totality of a new form of Christian theology, namely a Far-Eastern way of theology, whereas the Far-Eastern feature would become sensible for us Occidentals in the fact that our senses leave us, because since the Greek philosophers eyes and ears of the Occidental mind have been formed on other ways.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

1. The texts of Vatican II are quoted from *James H. Kroeger* (ed.), Documents of Vatican Council II. Pasay City, Philippines 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. E.g. Sacrae Theologiae Summa I. Theologia Fundamentalis (= Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos). Matriti MCMLXI. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. *Hans Waldenfels,* Kontextuelle Fundamentaltheologie (= KF). Paderborn 42005, 511f. (Note: various translations available; Chinese translation prepared). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 3 For a general analysis of the development see my earlier lectures: From medieval Apologetics to contemporary Fundamental Theology: a change of relationship between philosophy and theology, in Theology Annual (Hong Kong). Vol.33 (2012) 45-93; Chin. translation: ibid. 1-43.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The teaching of Leo XIII has been repeated by the following popes; see *Pius XI*, Apostolic Constitution *Deus Scientiarum Dominus* (1931); *Pius XII.,* encyclical  *Humani generis* (1950). A new approach can be seenin the encyclical *Fides et ratio*  of Pope John Paul II (1998); see below.  [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. art. Philosophia perennis (*Heinrich M. Schmidtinger),* in: LThK3 (= Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche) 8, 248f. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. art Philosophie, immerwährende; lat. philoophia perennis (*H. Schneider),*in: HWP (= Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie) 7, 898-900. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See the historical articles about the various forms of philosophy in modern times in HWP 7, 682-795. 819-847. 848-879. 879-927. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. KF 67. 72. 217. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. *Hans Waldenfels,* Er war Jude, in: *Florian Bruckmann / René Dausne*r (Hg.), Theologie angesichts der Anderen. Gespräche zwischen christlichem und jüdischem Denken. Festschrift für Josef Wohlmuth. Paderborn, 685-701. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cf. KF 465-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf *Charles Taylor,* A Secular Age. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. *Hans Waldenfels,* The Double View of the Church, in: Tripod vol. XXXII, No. 167 (Winter 2012), 56-60

    [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Cf. *Hans Waldenfels,* Zeichen der Zeit in: *Mariano Delgado / Michael Sievernich* (ed.), Die großen Metapherndes Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils. Ihre bleibende Bedeutung. Freiburg 2013, 101-119; *Peter Hünermann* (ed.), Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil und die Zeichen der Zeit heute. Freiburg 2006. ününermann Hü

    [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For the translation see <http://www.vatican.va/holy_Father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en-html> (called: 11-09-2013). See *Hans Waldenfels,* Mit zwei Flügeln Kommentar und Anmerkungen zur Enzyklika “Fides et ratio” Papst Johannes Pauls II. Paderborn 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Cf. *Karl Rahner,* Hörer des Wortes = Sämtliche Werke. Vol 4. Freiburg 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See in more detail *Joseph Ratzinger,* Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen..Freiburg 22003, 46-65. The chapter was written as „reflections on the Encyclical *Fides et ratio’* and is translated also into English: Culture and Truth. Reflections on the Encyclical, in: Origins 28 (1999) 625-631; also my comments in *Waldenfels,* “Mit zwei Flügeln” (note 15) 78-87.. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See in more detail KF 189f. 193-202: also *Hans Waldenfels,* Offenbarung. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil auf dem Hintergrund der neueren Theologie. München 1969, 166-173. 320-255; *id.,* Einführung in die Theologie der Offenbarung. Darmstadt 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For the following see *Hans Waldenfels,* Jesus Christ and the Religions. An Essay in Theology of Religions. Milwaukee, Wi 2009, 85f; *id.,* In-Between. Essays in Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue. Bangalore 2011, 71-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cf. *Peter Antes,* Sprache als Welt-Anschauung? Ist die Geisteswissenschaft national oder universal? in: *Jürgen Courth / Michael Klöcker* (Hg.), Wege und Welten der Religionen. Forschungen und Vermittlungen. Festschrift für Udo Tworuschka. Frankfurt 2009, 31-38; also *Hans Waldenfels,* Lebenswelt – Religion – Wissenschaft, ibid. 663-670.; [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See my description of the Indian situation in *Hans Waldenfels,* Dreimal katholische Kirche in Indien, in:Stimmen der Zeit 230 (7/2012), 447-458. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Cf. *Roman Malek* (ed.), The Chinese Face of Jesus Christ. Vol.2. Sankt Augustin 2003, 437-460; quotation: 459. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Xu Longfei,* Die nestorianische Stele in Xi’an. Begegnung von Christentum und chinesischer Kultur. Bonn 2004. Note that today we should prefer to speak about Syrian Christians instead of Nestorians in order the emphasize the different kind of Christianity. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See *Hans Waldenfels,* Christ (note 19),65-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See *Hans Waldenfels,* Christ sein heute. Benediktinisch-ignatianische Impulse. Trier 2013. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I leave aside the question which languages Jesus might have spoken concretely, Aramaic, maybe even Greek. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Gottlieb Söhngen,* Der Weg der abendländischen Theologie. Grundgedanken einer Theologie des „Weges“. München 1959, 24f. . [↑](#footnote-ref-27)