



Theological ‘Contextedization’: A New Paradigm in Contextual Theology

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

LYGUNDA LI-M, Fohle. *Contextualisation aujourd’hui : Questions approfondies en théologie contextuelle*. Kinshasa: Fohle Legacy Publishing, 2023.

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Introduction

Contextualization is a well-known word in Christian circles and is everywhere present in theological reflection today. Without doubt, all theological disciplines speak of contextualization to varying degrees. In fact, the nature of this generalized contextualization differs from one theological discipline to another. It concerns not only the elements of the text under study, but also those that are relevant to the theologian’s current situation.

Contextualization is a concept, if not a theological paradigm, which, in the eyes of Fohle Lygunda li-Mwangwela (henceforth Fohle), needs to be rethought. In this book he proposes a new paradigm as an alternative to traditional contextualization. The aim of this review is to set out the argumentative mesh of this concept. Other aspects of the book, as well as the inconsistencies, puns and paradoxes inherent in any human work, will not be discussed, as they are considered minor in relation to the founding ideas of *contextéisation*, a French neologism, or ‘contexted-ization’.

Two points punctuate this review. The author deserves to be better known, and his gigantic body of work needs to be brought to light. While it would be tedious to present his entire intellectual output, given the plethora of his writings, the content of the founding work of ‘contextedization’ will be revealed. A critical examination of the author’s thought is necessary, in order to present the inadequacies of the arguments put forward in support of ‘contextedization’, while at the same time emphasizing its positive aspects.

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The author and his thought

In the world of theological reflection, it is not very common to come across new concepts, let alone neologisms, when reading a work. This book is one of those rare encounters. The author, his book, and his thinking are worthy of our attention.

Fohle Lygunda li-Mwangwela is a name that can no longer be ignored today in theological circles both within and outside Africa. Commonly referred to as Professor Fohle, this atypical man stands out for his prolific theological output. This genius was born on 17 November 1963, in the village of Malinda, in the eastern province of Kisangani, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). His uniqueness is enriched by his ability to speak several languages: Topoke (his mother tongue), Lingala, French, and English. His academic background was quite ordinary. He obtained his theological BAC (BTh) in 1989, from the Institut Supérieur de Théologie Evangélique de l'Ubangi (RDC); a Doctorate in Ministry (DMin) with a concentration in *Mission Theology and Leadership Development* in 2009, at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, USA; and finally a PhD in *Missiological Education* with a focus on *mission theology, mission history and higher education management*, in 2016, at North-West University, South Africa.

His excellent performance on this academic course has earned him several awards and scholarships, the exact number of which cannot be reported. Professor Fohle presents himself as a highly committed and tireless man, enamoured with issues of mission and academic training. A true pastor, his humility has no equal, and he displays exceptional human qualities. He is the founder and director of several structures. He teaches in several faculties and universities in Africa and around the world. His intellectual output is essentially missiological. Contextual theology is currently the focus of his attention, leading him to offer the theological world his seminal work on the concept of "contextedization" : *Contextualisation aujourd'hui. Questions approfondies en théologie contextuelle*.

General editorial context and structure of the book

It all started with a collective work entitled *Contextual Theology: Skills and Practices of Liberating Faith*, edited by Sigurd Bergmann and Mika Vähäkangas, published in London by Routledge in 2021, which sparked off discussions among missiologists. The author seems to be challenged by this publication, which has led him to reconsider the contextuality of theology in French-speaking Africa (chapter 1). He intends to participate in international debates on contextualization by proposing a new paradigm. He poses the following fundamental question, the answer to which will give a new direction to his

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thinking: Should theology be contextualized as it was yesterday?

This question poses a challenge to traditional contextualization. What is Fohle's criticism of this customary contextualization, which has long served as a theological model? It probably has aspects that are no longer beneficial today. Fohle will attempt to demonstrate this in his book, by proposing a new model, which he christens with a new name, while retaining the common linguistic root: context. His new paradigm is explained in this seminal book: *Contextualisation Aujourd'hui: Questions approfondies en théologie contextuelle* ('Contextualisation Today: In-Depth Questions on Contextual Theology').

The author organizes his thinking into three main sections. Each chapter, which is not essential for this review. The first part comprises seven chapters, the second eleven and the last seven. There is a clear symmetry in the author's thinking.

The first part takes stock of the contextualization of theology in Africa, drawing up an evaluative balance sheet, and examining at length themes such as African culture and theological education. The author aims to understand the extent to which traditional contextualization has taken root in African Christian circles, but also in the intellectual production environments in which most religious leaders are trained, places where they are taught to contextualize. Fohle's interest in academic programs lies in their comprehensive diagnosis. This approach enables him to identify the real problem of theological contextualization in Africa, which in turn enables him to propose an alternative model for contextual theology.

In the second part, the author reports on the discussions of other scholars of contextualization, outlining in turn the various debates involved and drawing the necessary conclusions. Interpretation of the Scriptures seems to hold a great deal of attention and space, and everything is at stake here, in the contextualization of these sacred texts.

In the final section, the author continues his discussion of traditional contextualization, entering its sanctuary in chapters 24 and 25, the longest of the book, which are the culmination of his long reflection, to propose to the world his definition of *contextedization*, his new theological paradigm. All the epistemological conditions of this concept are well explained. In this section on the meaning of pedagogy, he goes on to define the nature, content and sources of *contextedization*. How is this paradigm applied? The author answers this question by proposing a methodology. In his enthusiasm to explain this new concept, Fohle is very demonstrative though perhaps unhelpfully longwinded at times.

Argumentation of the book

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The thesis is as follows: *The African theologian has all the resources at his or her disposal; he or she is capable of creating new theoretical frameworks and original theological concepts (TC) on his or her own, with intellectual freedom and independence; "contextedization" serves as an epistemological guide.* This thesis brings together two relationships: each African theologian's relationship with him or herself, and their relationship with Western thought. Everything lies in these two types of relationship, with *contextedization* playing a fundamental role.

To explain these two types of relationship, Fohle uses the trilogy contextuality, contextual, and *contextedization*, the latter of which he contrasts with the concept of contextualization, to which he attaches inherited but imported theoretical frameworks and theological concepts (TFTC). This trilogy is what African theology needs to achieve, since it has long been a theology of contextualization, i.e. of adaptation, according to the author, which has always given pre-eminence to TFTC, such contextualization should now be overcome.

Contextedization brings together the contextual and the contextuality of theology, and these two concepts explain why. Contextedization has an epistemological connotation, being a process, a reflexive dynamic that consists in thinking out new and original theological conceptual frameworks (chapter 24, pp. 231–232). This epistemological reflection takes — and this is where the author breaks new ground — within the framework set by four criteria of contextuality. For Fohle, a theology is said to be contextual when it meets these four criteria: (1) it emanates from a real need in the context concerned, which defines its problematic ; (2) it effectively responds to this real need ; (3) it is constructed from sources which come primarily from the same context, and is composed according to the epistemological and philosophical categories of the context; (4) finally, it is characterized by a linguistic expression corresponding to that of the addressees, to facilitate its reception (chapter 3, pp. 52–53; chapter 15, p. 165; chapter 24, p. 237; chapter 25, p. 254).

Fohle is convinced that the African theologian has what it takes to establish TCs (chap. 22, p. 214 ; chap. 24, pp. 29–30 ; chap. 25, p. 267). The various existing theological writings by Africans, the innumerable sermons, the written and oral minutes of various ecclesial and theological meetings and consultations, the reports of colloquia held by Africans, etc., are all elements that can constitute sources for reflection in contextual theology (chapter 5, pp. 70–71).

The African theologian has to start from himself, from his environment, and from the reality he wants to study, to build an Africanized theological discourse (ATD), which is simply articulated in African conceptual categories, according to an African worldview. He must speak of God as an African, with pure African thought, remaining authentically African to speak of God (chap.

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21, p. 204). This ATD aims to preserve this African otherness while maintaining a dialogue with other theological thinking. Contextual theology as presented does not only apply to Africa — Fohle wants it to be universal (chap. 15, pp. 167–168). He believes that an African theologian can elaborate a Western contextual theological discourse even if he himself is in Africa, just as a Westerner can articulate an African contextual theological discourse even if he himself is in the West. The place of elaboration does not necessarily make a theology contextual. The theological contextuality he defends is mobile, transportable, and the theologian is its vehicle.

Fohle sees the TFTCs as colonizers of African theological thought, who for him constitute real impediments to the independence and freedom of thought of African theological genius (chap. 25, pp. 260–261, 263–266, 279–281). This explains why the African theologian is not in a position to propose TCs. The context, the milieu in which Western theological discourse is produced, is the decisive factor here. In Fohle's view, this Western milieu is affected by a coefficient of imperialist pretension. We can therefore understand his desire to decolonize the mind of the African theologian, to lead him to let go of these CTHIs, to trust in himself, and to create TCs based on reflection on the African context (chap. 25, pp. 272–273). Fohlian contextual theology does not close the study on a phenomenon; theological contextuality is for him a permanent questioning on a given phenomenon, to discover the maximum of possible aspects according to contexts (chap. 25, p. 275).

The interpretation of Scripture seems so central to Fohlian contextual theology that he devotes seven chapters to it (chapters 9–15). The 'contextualizing' theologian's relationship with Scripture is intended to be simple. The reader must be stripped of all inherited presuppositions and intellectual prejudices that might influence his approach to biblical texts (chapter 6, pp. 76–78). Without any other possible influence, the individual stands before the biblical texts with his or her own presuppositions. The author thus defines a hermeneutic for contextual exegesis, which brings two contexts face to face and brings them into dialogue. Fohle speaks of a to-and-fro between these two contexts: from the biblical context to that of the reader, and from that of the reader to the biblical context (chapters 13 and 24). The contextual theologian draws on no other resource than himself and his context to interpret the biblical text. For him, biblical theology and biblical exegesis must go hand in hand (chapter 6, p. 78).

Like contextualization, *contextedization* becomes a theological paradigm that applies to all theological disciplines. Fohle wants to change the traditional way of doing theology, as the division of this field into several disciplines seems problematic in his eyes. He rejects the compartmentalization of theological

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disciplines, which he sees as limiting, and wants to break down the barriers between them in order to emphasize their complementary nature (chapter 3, p. 54). Fohle is well aware of the theological heritage that continues to shape the theological landscape in Africa (chapter 8, pp. 105–112). Informed of the struggle, the claims and denunciations of the pioneers, he wants to go beyond them. He does not claim to re-found theology, but rather to rethink and reformulate it (chap. 8, p. 114).

The theology he promotes is not just a theology for Africans, it is a theology at the service of Africa and for the world (chapter 8, p. 114; chapter 15, pp. 167–168). What is important to him, and in fact the crux of his struggle, is for the African theologian to succeed in formulating his own theological conceptual frameworks (chapter 8, pp. 114–116; chapter 24, pp. 29–30). The African theologian must listen to God who speaks to him in his own context, must be able to express his faith freely with his own conceptions, without recourse to any foreign conception. In so doing, by giving the Holy Spirit an important place in his thinking (chapter 22, p. 210), the African theologian would come to formulate a life-giving theology, which is opposed to mortifying theology (chapter 25, p. 251). A mortifying theology is one that diverts the Church from its vocation and plunges it into formalism, whereas a life-giving theology makes faith alive, active and fruitful (chap. 25, pp. 251–253). Life-giving theology is characterized by a discourse whose content is not only understood by those to whom it is addressed, but also developed with their context in mind.

For the author, the positive impact of a theological discourse depends on its contextuality, i.e., it is expressed in the conceptual realities of the addressees. The addressees' frame of reference dictates the design of the discourse. Since TFTCs are constructed outside the context of the recipients in question, it's not surprising that they have little impact in a context foreign to their conception. The theological discourse elaborated in a Western environment is imbued with the Western context and seems inadequate to the African context. The author believes that such a theological discourse constructed with these TFTCs would lead to death. Only a theological discourse constructed with the conceptual realities of the recipients in mind would have an impact on them, and thus produce life. Fohle's thinking is coherent in the explanation he gives to ground his concept of *contextedization*. Despite this, we can observe a few shortcomings in this well-woven system.

A critical look at the work

The analysis here focuses on a few of the arguments, on certain aspects of them. It consists in raising elements which act as counterweights or which have not been sufficiently explored by the author. The limitations outlined in this

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section are of a practical nature.

Constructive insights

The author's articulation of his theological paradigm is undoubtedly well-intentioned. In seeking total independence for African theological thought in particular, he is driven by a desire to emancipate. As a result, his concept of *contextedization* comes across as eminently political. It is the idea of a struggle for the self-determination of African theological thought. This neologism in theological circles is a signal for an in-depth reform of theology, which must henceforth be expressed in the plural. There should no longer be a one-size-fits-all criterion for validating TFTC-dominated theological thinking.

Fohle works for equality of thought and mutual respect in the theological intellectual world, and strongly opposes the theological condescension of the TFTC. It's time for the African theologian to become aware of his intrinsic strength and the resources of his own context, which can and must enable him to create TCs. African theology is not to be minimized, it has something to say to the world, and it's up to the African theologian to wake up to this reality and work to produce TCs that measure up to TFTC. The world theological scene has long been dominated by these TFTCs, and the TCs of African theologians must now compete with them.

The process of creating African TCs is driven by *contextedization*, which defines four criteria according to which theological reflections must take place (see above). The fundamental Fohlian method is that the African theologian refrains from dialoguing upstream with the TFTCs and only does so downstream in the process of creating the TCs. This method of *contextedization* is now opposed to the traditional method, which allows dialogue throughout the research process. The promotion of a new way of doing science is not in question here, but rather the inadequacy of the method with the spirit of the struggle. How can one judge the originality of a TC without prior dialogue upstream of the research?

In theological research, there will always be common aspects, irrespective of the context of their formation, which need to be known upstream of a search. It is on the basis of these elements, which may include the TFTC, that we can judge whether the research is innovative, original or not, whether it will lead to the formation of any kind of TC. This principle is well known to Fohle, but for him, the upstream dialogue takes place solely (perhaps primarily) with contextual sources, with productions from African theologians (see above, criterion 3). He decides to bring this dialogue with the TFTC back downstream from the research. He believes that such an upstream dialogue would be likely to influence the African researcher, reducing de facto his lucidity and causing him to lose all intellectual freedom and independence. The creation of a TC

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based on such research would be compromised.

This kind of approach, original though it may be, has the virtue of depriving the African theologian of very important information, useful for his research. If the fear of TFTC influence is justified upstream, the same influence exists downstream. The principle of thought, which gives rise to a mosaic of ideas in the human mind, since there is never just one idea in the mind, does not allow for this chronology upstream. In human understanding, thought always takes place in the present moment. Upstream and downstream thoughts are in fact one and the same, but not immune to influence. In this respect, to be coherent with itself, "contextedization" would have to go to the end of its logic and definitively rule out all forms of TFTC in order to ensure the originality of TCs, thus refusing any intellectual dialogue with all forms of thought, except African contextual ones. Such a position is arbitrary and methodologically compromising.

In the name of the principle of the universality of science, all knowledge attested on a given subject, whatever the context in which it was developed, must not be excluded from research at any time. Rather, they make it fruitful and contribute to the creation of TC. There is nothing to prove that just because something is done in association, it is neither independent nor free. All thinking is associative and cannot prevent creativity. It is just as possible to reflect with the TFTC while creating TCs. There's no danger in thinking with them, as long as the human mind is lucid enough to dissociate the contextual elements attached to them. Stripped of their contextual elements, TFTCs become universal, and are the property of humanity. To reject them outright is to reject science and rationality. The TFTC do not prevent us from thinking lucidly, rationally, healthily and African-style. Above all, we must not pit one African theological rationality against another.

In the course of his reflection, the author provides very few concrete examples of TFTC. Bultmann's concept of demythologization appears in his work. Perhaps this concept suits his argumentative logic better, but the explanation he gives is enough to create doubt about all TFTCs. He remains particularly general about these TFTCs, and is astonishingly silent about those which, in reality, are well suited to the African context, for example, those concerning faith, salvation, water baptism, work, charity, self-giving and so on. This selective reading of the TFTC is detrimental to his approach. To discern in the TFTC what is appropriate to the African context is to listen and live according to the apostolic model (1Thess 5:21).

For one of the few times the author shows nuance with regard to the TFTC, in the section he devotes to the development of moving from a "theology of wonder to a theology of commitment" (chapter 22, p. 207). He depicts the

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current situation of churches and theology as one of photosynthesis, a context that is no longer that of the missionary era, a new recomposed reality, which requires, in his words, "questioning *certain*² epistemological elements learned from elsewhere. . . . [and to] appreciate local cultural and epistemological values in order to draw from them the appropriate sap for the formulation of . . . contextual theological discourses" (chapter 22, p. 210). Why does he finally concede this nuance?

In truth, it can only be understood in the light of what precedes it in his book, where he acknowledges that Western missionaries are still intervening and planting churches in Africa today. This section addresses this situation to mean that today's missionary churches are planted in a context of photosynthesis. Theologians must, in this case, "question *certain*³ epistemological elements learned from the model elsewhere. . . . [and to] appreciate local cultural and epistemological values in order to draw the appropriate sap for the formulation of . . . contextual theological discourses" (chap. 22, p. 210). This nuance does not, in fact, apply to all African churches in general. The author remains true to his logic that these TFTCs, without distinction, are obstacles to the development of an authentic African contextual theology.

Throughout the book, evasive statements are made, which the author considers sufficient to justify his concept (chapter 24, p. 234; chapter 25, p. 252). The real causes on which his thinking is based require more concrete evidence, and the author gives barely any, whereas more should be provided, and we should go beyond trials of intent, when we want to establish a noble concept such as *contextedization*.

Is it wise to extend contextuality to all aspects of theology and Christian life? The author seems to show that all biblical texts are contextual, overlooking the revelatory character of Scripture. Universalizing contextuality weakens it and makes it relative; its scope is only actually reduced and ultimately does not apply to everyone. Is it not because of such a conception that African theology is said to be contextual and marginalized? Fohlian contextuality applied to biblical texts renders their revelatory character inoperative, deprives them of their universality, and renders their message relative. From this perspective, biblical texts end up saying nothing to today's world.

All theology is contextual, as the author repeatedly asserts, a contextuality that meets all four of his criteria. And yet, there are theologies that fall outside his epistemological mesh, that could be called 'a-contextual theologies', that

² Emphasis added.

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meet neither the first nor the second criterion, let alone the third. The fourth criterion is communicational, applying to all forms of thought. Some of these theologies are born, not from any need in the theologian's context, and so will not solve that need, built on the basis of available sources without any distinction, but coming simply from a personal need, from a simple scientific curiosity, from an inner call to explore a theme, a subject, a personal experience with God, and so on. Some of the writings of Boethius, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Reformers, etc., can be ranked among these a-contextual theologies, because they are recognized as universal, dealing with issues that concern everyone.

An African theologian who develops an a-contextual theology is called upon to reflect with the TFTC in this field, which do not constitute impediments to his freedom of thought and intellectual independence, this would not prevent him from creating TCs. Contextuality or not, the creation of a TC should not necessarily be linked to context, but rather to the genius of the researcher. However, we can agree with the author that context can encourage their creation. Beyond these argumentative shortcomings, there are real limits to the application of *contextedization*.

Limits to 'contextedization'

Contextual theology in Africa cannot be done without substantial, well-known bibliographical resources. The works of African theologians, speeches given by African Christians, university colloquia held by African theologians, proceedings of African ecclesial meetings, etc., which should serve as sources for African contextual theology, are lurking in the shadows. One of the failures of African theological contextuality will come from its lack of bibliographical resources, coupled with a lack of financial and material resources to carry out adequate research.

African theological productions are not sufficiently popularized. The most widely available and popularized bibliographical resources are those produced by TFTC. As the Burkinabe saying goes: "We dance to the sounds of the tom-toms beating next door." The far-off tom-toms of our brave African theologians, with the height of paradox, are in fact tom-toms beating next door, but their sounds seem so faint that we believe they come from far away. These sounds cannot be part of the festivities of African theology. Instead, tom-toms beating from far away manage to be heard up close, in Africa. This is the African paradox, and we must work to reverse the trend.

One of the limits of *contextedization* lies in the reluctance it will encounter, coupled with the lack of self-confidence of some African theologians in producing TCs. The greatest challenge will be to succeed in rallying minds to the cause of contextual theology. This challenge can only be met when the

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themes and topics addressed are of genuine interest both to the academic world, so that it can integrate them into its curriculum, and to the lambda reader and religious leader, who are seeking to cultivate themselves. The widespread reception of these African contextual theologies will enable us to measure their degree of influence and create a craze in their favor. Such a challenge is naturally part of an age-old struggle. The thoughts of certain theologians, now considered to have a universal character and occupying an important place in the curricula of theology faculties, did not impose themselves on the first production all at once. It was only after a lengthy theological debate that certain ideas came to the fore.

Contextedization must take into account the fact that some African theologians do not know exactly what the epistemological and philosophical categories of their context (EPCC) are, for two reasons: on the one hand, they live in a hybrid world, shaped by interculturality and the school, which distances them more and more from these categories, and on the other, in the absence or inadequacy of contextual bibliographical resources at their disposal, they cannot build up a capital of knowledge on these EPCC to form TCs. Faced with such a reality, *contextedization* has to reinvent itself.

The final element is linguistic. The plethora of African vernacular languages often makes communication difficult. There are as many ethnic groups as there are EPCCs in Africa, to the point where Africa is conjugated in the plural. How can we construct a theological discourse that draws on the EPCC of one locality, and is comprehensible in all other localities in Africa, without falling into traditional contextualization (adaptation)? The fourth criterion, that contextual theological discourse be expressed in the linguistic categories of the addressees, should be excluded here. Who are the addressees in Africa, especially as there are at least as many ethnic groups as there are languages? Perhaps the solution lies in the settler's language. If this is the case, then the African paradox becomes apparent: most of the works that can serve as sources for the 'contextualizing' theologian in French-speaking Africa are in English, including most of the intellectual works of our author, who comes from a French-speaking country. This begs the question: is this myth or reality?

Conclusion

Contextualisation Aujourd'hui. Questions approfondies en théologie contextuelle by Professor Fohle Lygunda li-Mwangwela is a truly seminal text, tracing the lineaments of a new theological paradigm that is *contextedization*. In reading this work, the reader feels connected to the spirit of the writer, who speaks with all the sincerity one can muster. This review will not have said everything about the understanding of this concept, which is just emerging and

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needs to be further elucidated by other explanatory texts from its founder or those who will be enamored of the concept and won over to the cause. As this work cannot be completely surveyed, it is the duty of those who want to know more to refer directly to this book, which will speak to them and which will probably correct some of their apprehensions with regard to this concept, which is a truly substantial contribution to the world of theology.