


# Nicaea today? The logic of contextual theology

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Much contextual theology is implicitly shaped by what can be described as a postmodern outlook. This way of viewing the world presupposes an incomprehensibility between languages, cultures and historical periods. At a conceptual level, this renders dialogue among them problematic. This article explores the use of an alternative theoretical framework, epistemological particularism, in contextual theology. It then examines the practical application of this methodology by exploring the dialogue between Nicaea and the Akan of Ghana.

**Contribution:** This article aligns well with the scope of *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* as it contributes to a new subdiscipline in epistemology, exploring the conceptual and epistemological dimensions of contextual theology. By adopting a particularist epistemological orientation, the article presents an alternative theoretical framework to the dominant postmodern paradigm that permeates much of contextual theology.

**Keywords:** contextual theology; Clifford Geertz; Robert Schreiter; Roderick Chisholm; William Abraham; epistemology of theology.

## Introduction

Over the last 50 years, a general consensus has emerged among theologians that all theological reflection is essentially contextual (Botha 2010:181; Cortez 2005:85). Thus, while theology has always been shaped by the culture in which it is situated, theologians today are explicitly conscious of this dimension (Jenson 1997:ix). The phrase 'contextual theology' emerged within the World Council of Churches (hereafter WCC) Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in the early 1970s (Coe 1976:19–24; Muswubi 2024:1; WCC 1972:9). Shoki Coe, a coordinator of one of the advisory groups for WCC coined the term contextualisation in response to calls for a distinctive way of doing theology which gave both contemporary culture and context proper focus (Joseph, Huang & Hsu 2018:1; Shenk 2005:73, 2015:191).<sup>1</sup> Essentially, Coe defines the method of contextualisation in theology as a 'continual interplay between Scripture and one's ever-changing context' (Avi 1988:7–9; Wheeler 2002:77–80). However, over time, two distinct poles or emphases have emerged.<sup>2</sup> Those who give priority to either: (1) the context or (2) the scriptures and the Christian tradition.

Gustavo Gutierrez's *Theology of Liberation* offers a paradigmatic illustration that reflects on 'the experiences of men and women [...] in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America' (1979:ix). In a similar vein, the founding of the 'Institute for Contextual Theology in South Africa' (1980) sought to develop 'a theology which starts from our situation [...] not imported either from Europe or the USA or Latin America' (Botha 2010:181; Nolan 1991:1). Here the emphasis is firmly upon the context pole and a desire to allow the context to shape the contours of theological reflection.

There are also a plethora of writers who prioritise the scriptures and the Christian tradition. However, within this group, there are a whole spectrum of views ranging from what might be described as a protestant paradigm which focuses almost exclusively upon the biblical text and for example Catholic (and other) writers for whom the traditions of the church are given much more attention. Nevertheless, writers who prioritise the scriptures and the Christian tradition often maintain that the biblical text has a 'supra' or 'transcultural' validity. Several writers (Hesselgrave & Rommen 1989:1; Neely 1995:9; Nicholls 2003:13, 34), including David Bosch (1991:187), take this approach. A helpful example of this position is Wells (1985):

1. Coe writes: 'Indigenisation' tends to be used in the sense of responding to the gospel in terms of traditional culture. Therefore, it is in danger of being past oriented .... So, in using the word 'contextualisation,' we try to convey all that is implied in the familiar term 'indigenisation' yet seek to press beyond for a more-dynamic concept, which is open to change, and which is also future-oriented (Coe 1976:19–24).

2. Cortez eloquently summarises the situation: 'Despite this near universal consensus on the contextual nature of theology – including a general agreement that all theology takes place in the tension between two poles, the biblical message and the cultural situation – glaring differences remain as to precisely how this theological contextuality should be understood – e.g. re-contextualizing eternal truths' (Cortez 2005:85).

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Biblical revelation was given in a particular cultural context ... but what God the Spirit willed should be revealed was exactly what was written, and the content and intent of this revelation were alike transcultural. The biblical revelation, because of its inspired nature, can therefore be captive neither to the culture in which it arose nor to the culture in which it arrives. (p. 176)

Implicit within these writers is an epistemological undercurrent which yearns for a meta-criterion that can determine orthodoxy and adjudicate between the context and biblical text. However, while this trend is readily seen in conservative thinkers, it also manifests itself in prominent African theologians, as the following citation from Kwame Bediako (1990), a criticism of John Pobee, illustrates:

[Pobee] does not let the biblical revelation speak sufficiently in its own terms into the Akan situation. He too easily assumes similarities between Akan and Biblical (for him 'Jewish') world-views, underestimates the potential for conflict and so does not achieve real encounter. (p. 13)

At a theoretical level, however, the difficulty is how exactly contextual theologians might justify their desire to preserve the 'biblical revelation' as a transcultural message relevant to all times and places, given the increasing scepticism within philosophy concerning claims to have privileged access to supra-cultural knowledge. Contextual theology cannot be exempted from these questions and should not be viewed in isolation from the general intellectual climate in the latter part of the 20th century.

The increasing emphasis within philosophical discourse on the inability of human beings to transcend their culture, language and the historical period in which they are situated has led to a recognition across a variety of different disciplines of the importance of context. The mediation of these ideas within theology is both direct and indirect. This article will: (1) situate the emergence of contextual theology within this broader trend; (2) propose an alternative theoretical framework for contextual theology namely, epistemological particularism and utilise this framework to; (3) explore a specific aspect of the Christian tradition in relation to a cultural group, focusing particularly on the Akan (Ghana) and the Nicene Creed.

## The postmodern condition and contextual theology

The significant role of context in contemporary theological reflection has not emerged in a vacuum. In philosophy, there is a growing recognition of our inability to transcend the limitations of our specific time and place. A central figure in this development is Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his work *Philosophical Investigations*, he rejected the notion that human language corresponds to objective truth, arguing instead that meaning is shaped by the grammar of the language in which it is articulated. In summary, according to this theory, meaning, truth and knowledge are entirely contextual (Wittgenstein 1968:49–50, 138).<sup>3</sup>

3. Wittgenstein is the most famous of a number of writers who influenced this 'paradigm' shift including Wilfred Sellars, Willard Van Orman Quine, Thomas Kuhn and several others (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2007:20).

## The postmodern condition

Wittgenstein's work has had a monumental influence and has shaped the emergence of an intellectual paradigm which is often referred to as postmodernism. For example, his influence permeates Jean-Francois Lyotard's work, *The Postmodern Condition*, which argues for a shift away from what he calls 'metanarratives' towards something much smaller (Lyotard 1984:41). He thus maintains that, if it is impossible to establish the meaning of a statement by reference to an extra-linguistic objective reality, we need instead to focus upon how meaning is generated within micro-narratives – limited contexts where 'language games' form clear, if not clearly defined, rules for meaning and behaviour (1984:10). Lyotard stresses the incommensurability of these different micro-narratives or language games. For this reason, the ability to judge or legislate what constitutes meaning is only possible for those situated within the micro-narrative or language game. In summary, there are no criteria external to the culture or context that enable one to determine the legitimacy of a particular behaviour, opinion, or statement. Each culture or context represents a separate narrative or language game, and its meanings, truths and knowledge claims can only be judged or analysed internally (1984:7–8). These ideas have shaped a variety of disciplines, and, given the importance to contextual theologians of the ethnographic tools developed within anthropology, it is important to illustrate how these ideas have shaped that discipline.<sup>4</sup>

## Postmodern anthropology

The transmission of Wittgenstein's ideas within the field of anthropology is considerable (Spiro 1996:759). Essentially, the epistemological implications of this view prevent anthropology from measuring cultures using (imagined) objective criteria. A paradigmatic example of this is Peter Winch's critique of Edward Evans-Pritchard's analysis of the religious beliefs of the Azande of Sudan (Winch 1964:308).<sup>5</sup> When the latter labelled the rituals and practices of these Central African people as unscientific (Evans-Pritchard 1929:163), Winch argued that (Winch 1980):

[O]ne cannot apply criteria of logic to modes of social life as such ... each has criteria of intelligibility peculiar to itself. So within science or religion actions can be logical or illogical ... But we cannot sensibly say that either the practice of science itself or that of religion is either illogical or logical; both are non-logical. (pp. 100–101)

This citation illustrates how this theoretical framework prevents anthropologists such as Evans-Pritchard from evaluating the beliefs of the Azande people using a criterion external to that culture. Another example of Wittgenstein's influence within anthropology is Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973).

4. A prominent example of this is Robert Schreier's work (1997).

5. Winch (1964) observed that 'Evans-Pritchard, although he emphasizes that a member of scientific culture has a different conception of reality from that of a Zande believer in magic, wants to go beyond merely registering this fact and making the differences explicit, and to say, finally, that the scientific conception agrees with what reality actually is like, whereas the magical conception does not' (p. 308).

## A rich description

Clifford Geertz, a figure frequently cited by contextual theologians,<sup>6</sup> is also associated with the 'postmodern' turn within anthropology (Bošković 2002:41; Pool 1991:309). Geertz, who might be described as 'Wittgenstein's reincarnation as an anthropologist' (Shweder 2007:201),<sup>7</sup> argues that ethnography essentially entails providing what he refers to as a thick description<sup>8</sup> of the grammar internal to a particular culture.<sup>9</sup> He thus defined culture as a 'system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms' through which human beings 'communicate, perpetuate, and develop' their view and attitude towards the world around them, believing that 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun' (1973:89). Thus, instead of using interpretive theories external to the culture, Geertz challenged ethnographers to listen for basic patterns and structures within a culture so as to understand the basic symbol systems in operation.<sup>10</sup> Essentially, rather than using external criteria, he encouraged anthropologists to formulate a 'thick description' of the context and behaviour of a people using the web of symbols internal to the context itself.<sup>11</sup> These ideas have had a monumental impact on theological discourse.

## Postmodernism and theology

Contextual theologians have not escaped Lyotard's *Postmoderncondition*. Indeed, his discussion of 'metanarratives' saturates much theological enquiry and biblical scholarship (Aichele et al. 1995; McKnight 2005; Short 2012). In like manner, a wide variety of theologians are shaped by Geertz's conception of culture (Dunlop 2021:294; Koning 2010:33; Rooms 2012:99; eds. Thompson, Pattison & Thompson 2019:8; Todd 2000:1). This manifests itself in a number of ways. For example, thick description in theological enquiry can entail a 'thick description' of the 'linguistic and conceptual world of Christian faith', a sort of 'ethnography of the public,

6. These are references to just a handful of the many examples available (Bevans 2002:146; Copeland 2014:46; Martey 2009:155; Matheny 2012:39; Otanga 2023:61; Pears 2012:5; Strauss 2006:99; Thomas 2012:50).

7. Geertz himself stated that: 'I am more than happy to acknowledge Wittgenstein as my master' (Geertz 2012:xi).

8. Geertz (1973) writes: 'Thick descriptions: What the ethnographer is in fact faced with ... Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of "construct a reading of") a manuscript - foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherences, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventional graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour' (p. 10).

9. Geertz (1973) defines culture as follows: 'is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of laws but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (p. 5).

10. Elsewhere he writes: 'Interpretive explanation ... trains its attention on what institutions, actions, images, utterances, events, customs, all the usual objects of social-scientific interest, mean to those whose institutions, actions, customs, and so on they are. As a result, it issues not in laws like Boyle's, or forces like Volta's, or mechanisms like Darwin's, but in constructions like Burckhardt's, Weber's, or Freud's: systematic unpackings of the conceptual world in which condottiere, Calvinists, or paranoids live. The manner of these constructions itself varies: Burckhardt portrays, Weber models, Freud diagnoses. But they all represent attempts to formulate how this people or that, this period or that, this person or that, makes sense to itself and, understanding that, what we understand about social order, historical change, or psychic functioning in general. Inquiry is directed toward cases or sets of cases, and toward the particular features that mark them off; but its aims are as far-reaching as those of mechanics or physiology: to distinguish the materials of human experience' (Geertz 1980:165-179).

11. Geertz (1973) writes: 'The generalized attack on privacy theories of meaning is, since early Husserl and late Wittgenstein, so much part of modern thought... what is necessary is to see to it that news of it reaches anthropology' (p. 12).

intersubjective meaning routines of Christianity' (Lindbeck 1984:32; Webster 1992:45). However, there is also an emphasis upon the 'thick description' of a cultural context in which the contextual theological reflection is situated (Schreiter 1997:28). A helpful example of this can be seen in the following excerpt from Dyrness (2009):

We have said that we seek to represent a broadly evangelical and ecumenical perspective ... we hoped that a thick description of the context, matched with an equally careful re-reading of scripture, would issue in a surprising number of theological approaches that, at various points, would deepen and occasionally challenge Christian tradition ... We seek within the various contexts to acknowledge the authority of scripture and the Christian tradition. (p. viii)

This citation illustrates the conceptual difficulty in play here as these writers attempt to maintain a supra-cultural authority for scripture and the church's traditions in the plethora of different contexts in which Christians seek to articulate a contextual theology. However, as was noted earlier, if one accepts the incommensurability of these different cultural and theological entities, it becomes difficult to bring these thick descriptions (of the theological tradition and the cultural context) into meaningful dialogue, as Winch's Wittgensteinian criticism of Evans-Pritchard illustrates:

A large part of the trouble here arises from the fact that he has not seen the point ... that criteria of logic are not a direct gift of God, but arise out of, and are only intelligible in the context of, ways of living or modes of social life. (pp. 100-101)

This criticism illustrates the challenge facing those who simultaneously embrace a postmodern outlook and yet seek to retain an objective standpoint from which they might compare and evaluate differences between two very different cultures and traditions. However, if postmodernism is correct that the plethora of cultures and traditions are: (1) not grounded in any objective reality; and are (2) incommensurate, then it is conceptually confused to evaluate one culture using criteria formulated in another. Sadly, theologians who embrace a postmodern outlook attempt to do precisely this.

## Evaluating the authenticity of contextual theologies

A paradigmatic example of this tendency is Robert Schreiter's (1997) work, *Constructing Local Theologies*. Schreiter makes considerable use of Geertz's anthropological approach and states that 'listening to a culture' requires what 'Clifford Geertz has termed thick description' (p. 28). In a similar vein, he views Christianity and Christian orthodoxy in terms of a religious language with its own internal grammar and norms of truth (p. 115). Nevertheless, despite embracing a Geertzian theoretical framework, he tries to set out criteria for adjudicating between authentic and inauthentic forms of contextual theology.

While Schreiter (1997) emphasises that all theologies are local theologies with their own grammar, he asserts that for a contextual theology to be 'truly Christian', firstly, it must



cohere with 'the tradition' – implying his own catholic tradition (p. 95). For Schreiter (1997), this relates to both doctrinal and liturgical aspects in that he believes contextual expressions must be continuous with 'the Scriptures, great conciliar and confessional statements, the magisterium' (p. 95). Secondly, he emphasises that authentic forms of contextual theology should not lead to moral behaviour that contradicts earlier Christian teaching and practice. Essentially, he considers that authentic forms of contextual theology will cohere with the beliefs, practice and worship of 'the' tradition (pp. 117–121).

In sum, Schreiter attempts to evaluate newer forms of contextual theology, emerging in particular contexts, using the wider tradition of the church. In this way, he seems to conceptualise the various contextual manifestations of Christianity as an internal part of what might be described as a grand Christian narrative. However, the postmodern framework underpinning his analysis rejects this grand narrative as having contested boundaries, given that each historical and cultural manifestation of the tradition (each micro-narrative of Christianity) contains particular practices, behaviours, opinions and rules that are contrary to alternative manifestations. In short, Schreiter is effectively trying to judge one cultural manifestation of Christianity according to the standards and criteria of another.<sup>12</sup> As was illustrated earlier, the incommensurability of this kind of comparison has long since been called out in anthropology, as Winch's critique of Evans-Pritchard's work illustrates. In sum, Schreiter's proposal to use internal coherence as an epistemological tool for determining authentic and inauthentic theological expression is rendered unworkable on this postmodern framework (Nye 2000:447).

## Summary

It is helpful at this point to summarise the central problem with postmodern approaches to contextual theology. If one accepts Geertz's Wittgensteinian presuppositions, then it is impossible to judge another culture or tradition on the basis of the criteria found within a different separate culture or tradition. This worldview presupposes an incommensurability of standards, which makes adjudicating between a local culture and the claims of a theological tradition inconsistent with this epistemological orientation. To be clear, a postmodern outlook does not prevent contextual theologians from creating a thick description of either a particular cultural context or a specific theological tradition. Nevertheless, this epistemological orientation entails the view that the diverse 'grammars' upheld by the very different webs of meaning spun in context and the biblical text are incommensurate. This makes judging between the heterogeneous features of context and the biblical text impossible using a postmodern framework. The following citation from Lyotard (1984) illustrates the challenge:

There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements ... Where after the metanarratives can legitimacy reside? Is legitimacy to be found in consensus obtained through discussion

12.Schreiter is not the only writer to propose an internal coherence as an epistemological tool for determining authentic and inauthentic theological expression (De Mesa 1982:86).

... Such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games. And invention is always born of dissension. [*Postmodernism*] refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable. Its principle is not the expert's homology, but the inventor's paralogy. (pp. xxiv–xxv)

In sum, Lyotard here illustrates how this way of viewing the world renders it impossible to adjudicate between the two very different poles of contextual theology. This raises the question as to whether an alternative approach might be more suitable for the task at hand. At this juncture, I want to suggest an alternative approach which can enable contextual theologians to adjudicate between the knowledge contained within a particular context and their own theological tradition.

## An alternative epistemological orientation

### Beginning with knowledge

At this point, it is helpful to illustrate how a particularist epistemological orientation would enable contextual theologians to affirm both the knowledge contained within the said context, their theological tradition, and adjudicate between them. Inspired by the writings of Roderick Chisholm, this approach begins by assuming that people have real knowledge prior to obtaining a degree in philosophy. Indeed, Chisholm maintains that epistemology begins with knowledge, with what we think we know. It is from this point, a presupposition of knowledge antecedent to epistemological criteria, that the particularist evaluates what they think they know, exploring how it might be justified.

The particularist reverses the standard way of thinking about epistemology. Rather than beginning with a criterion outlining what is and is not a true belief, a particularist assumes the knowledge already in their possession to be valid and then (retrospectively) explores how these beliefs should be evaluated. While this might appear strange, given that philosophers have tended to presuppose rules (criteria) determining the parameters of knowledge, beginning with knowledge is not as ridiculous (epistemologically) as it might seem. Chisholm (1973) helpfully illustrates the problem with the standard approach:

To know whether things really are as they seem to be, we must have a procedure for distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. But to know whether our procedure is a good procedure, we have to know whether it really succeeds in distinguishing appearances that are true from appearances that are false. And we cannot know whether it does really succeed unless we already know which appearances are true and which ones are false. And so we are caught in a circle. (p. 3)

Put simply, those who would say we must begin with criteria for identifying genuine knowledge are unable to find criteria without already knowing what knowledge is. However, rather than succumbing to postmodern despair, because we cannot locate such criteria, we can instead assume that we do

possess genuine claims to knowledge (that we have two legs, arms and hands) and retrospectively formulate criteria for how we might know these things. This is immensely helpful for contextual theologians.

A particularist orientation allows contextual theologians to recognise the knowledge claims emerging from the said context and the knowledge claims in their specific theological tradition. It is from this epistemological starting point, in which context and text are presupposed, that we can move to a retrospective examination as to how differences between context and the biblical text might be resolved. To do this, we must ensure that, as far as possible, we formulate criteria appropriate to the case in hand.

**Beginning with the knowledge in the context:** On the particularist orientation proposed in this article, all the knowledge available (written or otherwise) about the cultural setting is a starting point. This, of course, raises a series of questions. If all the knowledge available is presupposed, how do we determine the most pertinent information relevant to our theological reflection? At this point, it is useful to attend to what has been described as the 'social turn' in epistemology, which illustrates how knowledge arises within groups. A theologian external to the context may have only obtained textual knowledge through a book or essay and is in a different epistemic position from someone formed within the context (Greco 2017:23–24). At the same time, not all insiders within the group possess the same levels of understanding. Hence, within the context, there will be internal criteria determining what constitutes an 'expert' and a 'non-expert'. Thus, the relevant epistemic authorities within a given context also need to be taken into account (Greco 2017:23–24).

**Beginning with the knowledge of the particular Christian tradition:** Knowledge of the specific Christian tradition from which the theologian comes, is also a starting point. Here, it is important to move away from an exclusive focus on the Bible. The reception of the Bible is shaped by various factors, including the particular ecclesial body which mediates the Christian faith to a reader. Thus, a more apposite starting point for contextual theology is to begin by presupposing the contents of the specific tradition under discussion as knowledge. However, while the scriptures and indeed the tradition may be taken as knowledge, it is clear that within this tradition (as in any given context), there are those who possess greater levels of epistemic authority. According to Zagzebski, 'all communities', including religious communities 'have a division of epistemic labour' including 'teaching', 'internal reflection' and 'clarifying' concepts (Zagzebski 2017:109). On this basis, a contextual theologian would need to be someone who has a good understanding of, and a capacity to transmit their particular tradition faithfully.

**Retrospective evaluation and epistemic fit:** If we presuppose both the particular claims to knowledge within the said context and the theological beliefs within a particular Christian tradition, we will soon discover points of agreement and

disagreement between the two. How are we to retrospectively evaluate these different claims? Citing Aristotle, Chisholm argues that the most appropriate way to evaluate these competing knowledge claims is to recognise that each discipline has its own levels of precision (Chisholm 1973:35–36). Put simply, it would be foolish to expect a speech writer to offer a scientific justification for the structure contained within his oratory. In like manner, it would be ridiculous to accept a mathematical theory on the basis of orotundity.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, this Aristotelian principle, which Chisholm refers to as epistemic fit, requires us to retrospectively evaluate the particular claims to knowledge in context and the biblical text in an appropriate way. Having illustrated the differences between postmodern and particularist epistemological orientations, the 'Practical application: The encounter between Nicaea and Akan' section explores how this approach might enable fruitful dialogue between Nicaea and the Akan of Ghana. Having outlined Chisholm's particularist approach to knowledge, it explores how this approach might support contextual theological reflection.

## Practical application: The encounter between Nicaea and Akan

Having illustrated the differences between postmodern and particularist epistemological orientations, it is helpful to illustrate how this approach might illuminate the encounter between Nicaea and the Akan of Ghana. This will entail an examination of: (1) certain aspects of the Akan worldview; (2) briefly summarise some central features of the Nicene Creed; and (3) explore how the claims to knowledge in (1) and (2) might be evaluated.

### Akan ontology

The meteoric growth of Christianity in Ghana has led to the theological absorption of central features of Akan culture (Agbeti 2023:147; Williamson 1965:1). Nevertheless, it is also true that the Akan have a very different ontology from the Greco-Roman world in which Christian doctrine emerged. In contrast to the Greco-Roman Pantheon with its assembly of gods, the most high God for the Akan *Onyame* (*Onyankopon*) is one and indivisible (Agada 2024:15). *Onyame*, the creator [*Oboadee*], did perform the creation of all things himself. Thus, in contrast to Greek and Roman deities who often delegated tasks between various gods, *Onyame* did the work of creation himself (Ryan 1980:167). Therefore, while Akan ontology is populated by *abosom*, positive [*ahonhom pa*] and negative [*ahonhom bone*] spiritual agents or forces, these are not technically lesser deities, but powerful spiritual beings that are feared and inspire worship (Amoah 1998:3). However, the only reason that human beings engage with *abosom* is that they think the chasm between humanity and

13. Saint John Henry Newman's rendering of this principle in relation to Christian history is quite felicitous: 'It is much the same to admit the probabilities of a mathematician, and to look for demonstration from an orator'. Some things admit of much closer and more careful handling than others – and we must look for proof in every case according to the nature of the subject matter which is in debate, and not beyond it (Newman 1845:139). For further discussion of the application of this principle within theological reflection, see William Abraham and Frederick Aquino groundbreaking volume on *The Epistemology of Theology* (2017).

*Onyame* is unbridgeable, rendering intermediaries necessary. In addition, *Asaase Yaa* represents Mother Earth and matrilineal ancestors [*Nananom Nsamfo*] who can intercede on behalf of humanity. Nevertheless, *Onyame* [*Onyankopon*] remains the supreme, most high God. In sum, there might be other powerful agents, but there is no other god but God (Koranteng-Green 2018:101). As will be seen, this ontology clashes with the understanding of God formulated at Nicaea 1700 years ago.

## The Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed was formulated at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). The Council was convened following considerable conflict about the real nature of Jesus Christ. The Arian heresy had denied that Jesus was fully God, and the Docetist (which means apparition) heresy, which denied that Jesus was fully human (Ayres 2024:1). As a result, the Creed affirms that Jesus is both human and divine. Over the last 1700 years, the Nicene Creed has come to define Christian orthodoxy and, quite literally, to affirm that the Creed requires one to affirm that Jesus is fully God and fully man (Agyarko 2009:3–7). This differs from the Akan worldview.

## Evaluation

This brief discussion of Akan ontology and the Nicene Creed illustrates the way in which the Nicene Creed and Akan beliefs differ about the nature of God. There are, of course, a number of theologians who have looked at this problem, and it is beyond the scope of this article to survey the various alternatives (Aye-Addo 2013:9; Opuni-Frimpong 2021:21). On the contrary, the objective here is rather to highlight how a particularist approach offers a way through apparent contradictions between culture and tradition. This is not to dispute that Christianity in Ghana has readily assimilated a number of features contained within the worldview of the Akan people, including the creation of the world by the most high God, the chasm between humanity and God which cannot be bridged, and the need for mediators and sacrifices to engage the most high God. Nevertheless, the fundamental claim of the Nicene Creed that Jesus is fully human and divine has 'created confusion in the mind of its Akan recipients' (Agyarko 2009:3–7). How can these different knowledge claims be evaluated?

The difficulty highlighted by this case study is essentially this: where the said culture does not contain a concept that has been central to Christian orthodoxy, contextualisation reaches an impasse. Unfortunately, a postmodern framework does not contain adequate tools to resolve the problem. Therefore, while there have been several theological attempts to resolve this difficulty, I want to focus on two renowned Akan theologians who explore this question, John Pobee and Kwame Bediako, so as to illustrate how a particularist approach offers a solution to the impasse between context and the biblical text. Thus, in specific relation to this particular question, we will begin with a Pobee who emphasises context and then explore Bediako's approach, which emphasises the biblical text.

In his work *Toward an African Theology*, Pobee acknowledges that 'expressing Jesus' humanity is relatively easy' but explaining the idea of Christ's divinity is very difficult in Akan culture (1979:91). However, rather than giving priority to the Nicene formulation, he stresses the historical contingency of this Hellenistic formulation of Christianity which he describes as being 'alien' to contemporary society. Indeed, he contends that 'the language and concepts of the Creed are alien to modern language and thought forms'. As a result, he considers that 'our heavy indebtedness to Greco-Roman culture' leads us to unhelpful metaphysical speculation (1979:83–84). Instead, he emphasises that the Bible is 'almost reluctant' to refer to Jesus as God. Thus, it might be argued that Pobee's decision to focus on the scriptures indicates that he gives priority to the Akan culture, rather than the Creed. A different approach is taken by Kwame Bediako. In his work *Jesus in African Culture* (1990), Bediako is critical of Pobee and argues that his analysis is flawed because 'he approaches the problem largely through Akan wisdom sayings and proverbs' and 'does not deal sufficiently with the religious nature of the question'. Essentially, Bediako's criticism of Pobee is that he does not give sufficient importance to the 'Biblical revelation' (1990:13). This would indicate Bediako's desire, in this particular case, to give priority to the biblical text rather than context. This interpretation is reinforced by his description of certain aspects of the Akan worldview (ancestors) as myth, a projection that has 'no independent existence from the community that produces them' (1990:38–39).

Having illustrated the way in which these prominent Akan theologians engage with this particular question, it is apparent that the challenge facing both of these writers remains the methodological basis on which they seek to bring the Christian tradition and Akan culture into dialogue. On what basis can they critique context using the biblical text or vice versa? This is where a particularist epistemological orientation becomes useful to both writers – regardless of their final conclusions. While a postmodern framework does not permit a critique of one culture or tradition on the basis of another, a particularist approach would enable this. Thus, contextual theologians who seek to give priority to the second pole, the Christian tradition, can begin by affirming all the aspects contained in the culture that cohere with their beliefs while critiquing those aspects which do not. Thus, Bediako's desire to recast the central claims of the Christian tradition using African concepts is achievable because he can both uphold what he believes to be central to Christianity and synthesise these elements with traditional African concepts (1990:3). Similarly, those who wish to emphasise the cultural pole in contrast to the Christian tradition can affirm aspects of Christianity that align with their cultural perspective while rejecting those that do not (Pratt Morris-Chapman 2022:11). In simple terms, regardless of which pole one chooses to emphasise, a particularist epistemological orientation allows for a legitimate critique of features that conflict with the prioritised pole.



## Conclusion

This article has examined the central challenge facing contextual theology: the attempt to bring two very different entities – context and the Bible – into dialogue. It demonstrated how the growing emphasis in philosophical discourse on the limitations of human beings to transcend language, culture and the traditions that shape us both highlights the emergence of contextual theology and complicates its primary objective. However, by proposing an alternative epistemological particularist approach, the article shows how this theoretical framework allows contextual theologians to engage specific aspects of the Christian tradition with a particular cultural group without compromising what they consider the fundamental elements of either entity.

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The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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