


# Recontextualising theology: A challenge for theological training

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When communicating the Christian message, it is required to pass the message on in a format that will make sense to the receiver as well as carry the intended meaning as accurately as possible. In order for the message to be understood, the context of the receiver must be taken into consideration. This is referred to as contextualization. During contextualization the quest is to retain the essence of Christianity while simultaneously adapting to a specific cultural context. The Christian message has been passed on so many times to so many contexts that we need to talk about re-contextualization. Recontextualization refers to the process in a postmodern context to contextualize the modern. In short, recontextualization is to contextualize that which has already been contextualized. Passing on the Christian message is made challenging by changing paradigms. This is exacerbated by the challenge to train students to be able to pass the Christian message responsibly on into a new context. This contribution wants to alert to the challenges posed by changing paradigms and contexts to developing a theological training programme. Prof CPJ Niemandt as head of the Theological training at Huguenote College has had experience in guiding a tertiary institution in training ministers in how to convey the gospel across cultural boundaries. This contribution wants to pay tribute to his academic leadership.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This contribution emphasises the need to take the local context into account when conveying the Christian message. This contributes to peaceful social communities where religions interact.

**Keywords:** recontextualise; context; theology; education; inculturation; syncretism.

## Introduction

It is a privilege to be invited to contribute to the dedication edition in honour of Prof. Nelus Niemandt. Since the first moment I was invited, I experienced several challenges and reservations.

To begin with, my background is science of religion and Prof. Niemandt is a renowned scholar in mission studies. We come from worlds apart. Mine is a world where religion is studied to be understood, and his is a world where religion is studied to be converted. I realised I will have to 'translate' my thoughts into a 'language', which will speak to both worlds. We have here a cultural problem in transferring thoughts on theology.

Prof. Niemandt concluded his career as an academic administrator, as head of an institute of higher learning (i.e., Huguenote College, Wellington, South Africa). He oversaw the teaching of theology to students who will venture into the world spreading the Christian message. In this regard, education forms part of the perspectives addressed here.

The moment theology crosses cultural boundaries, we have the dilemma whether the sender will communicate the content properly so that the receiver will understand what the bringer of the message intended.

In this contribution, I will start by stating the problem with contextualisation. I will define recontextualisation before identifying the challenges it poses for theological education. I will then conclude with some actionable recommendations.

**Note:** The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'Festschrift Nelus Niemandt' under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Johannes J. Knoetze and Dr Yolande Steenkamp.

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## Problem statement

I want to believe that Prof. Niemandt and I share a long theological tradition. A tradition that has been passed on from one generation to the next, even across continents. Theologians and the church have throughout the ages been involved in the task of passing on the message of Christianity and interpreting the message of the church (De Vries 2016:2). This is not a new process.

The process of transmitting the message of Christianity consists of a four elements: a sender, a message or the content, the form of the communication and a receiver. The process is associated with the church's task of spreading the message: missiological or ecclesial (De Vries 2016:7). The challenge is the continuity of the intended content within a different environment or context. Let's call this the continuation of the truth of the message. Hesselgrave and Rommen (2013:1) formulate the challenge as follows: 'communication has always been to present the supracultural message of the gospel in culturally relevant terms'. Two immediate dangers can be identified: 'the communicator's own cultural heritage as an integral element of the gospel' and 'the inclusion of elements from the receptor culture which would alter or eliminate aspects of the message' (Hesselgrave & Rommen 2013:1).

With these dangers in mind, the question arises, is there an essential part of the gospel that cannot be allowed to change even if the message is transferred to a new context? Does theology have to change when conveying theology from one to another demographic location? De Vries (2016:8-9) indicates that theology can be contextualised in two instances: missional theologising and ecclesial theologising. The question is, when the church is doing mission work, what should the message of the gospel be and when practising theology, what should theologians from different regions talk about?

More to the point, what should the content of our theological training look like? Should there be a difference in the content of what we teach in Pretoria or Nairobi or Stellenbosch or Accra? These would be examples of cross-regional transfers of theology, but what about our attempts to teach theology in our local contexts?

Students studying theology come not only from different backgrounds: cultural, social, economic, but also different theological backgrounds, unique to a particular tradition, generation or region. How do we teach a theology relevant to the context of the student without stepping in the trap of syncretism?

## What is recontextualisation and why should we talk about it?

### Definitions

The concept contextualisation has a long history. Boeve (2009) and De Vries (2016) both give an overview of the historical development of the concept. Several other authors who contributed to the debate on contextualisation include

Hesselgrave and Rommen (2013), Schreiter (1995), Schineller (1990), Shorter (1995), Wijzen (2001) and most recently Wrogemann (2016, 2019).

The process of making a message relevant to a new context is called contextualisation. Contextualisation brings into words the process of local communities searching for the particular way in which faith must be lived in their situation (Schineller 1990:1). For Schineller, there is a wide variety of words being used to describe the same process: imposition (1990:14), translation (1990:15), adaptation (1990:16), indigenisation (1990:18), contextualisation (1990:19), incarnation (1990:20) and inculturation (1990:12,21). In essence, the process described with different words is to de-westernise Christianity (Schineller 1990:11). Wijzen (2001:222) adds a different perspective to the discussion by referring to contextualisation in a missional dimension as the process of developing intercultural theology.

Wrogemann (2016:184) indicates that the formation of new theologies especially in Asia, Africa and the Pacific is a relatively new phenomenon and a consequence of decolonisation. The process started at around the 1960s, although Western theology still dominated the way theologians practised theology in Africa and Asia.

Boeve (2009:27) defines recontextualisation as '... a contemporary systematic-theological approach which intrinsically relates theological truth to context and history'. If contextualisation is to make a message relevant and understandable within a new context, what is recontextualisation? For Boeve (2009:40), recontextualisation entails the process in a postmodern context to contextualise the modern. In short, recontextualisation is to contextualise that which has already been contextualised. That which in the past has found a foothold in a context needs to be recontextualised in a new recent and changed context. Recontextualisation is therefore, not to generate a new theology, but to interpret and translate an existing theology, making it relevant to a new context.

Under the leadership of Prof. Niemandt, Hugonote College evolved into becoming a change agent in society, recontextualising its task to align with the needs of the community. Evidence of this is found on the homepage of the College website where it formulates its mission as follows:

Hugonote Kollege dreams of communities of dedicated and well-equipped people participating in the caring for and healing of the ills of this world. To build such communities, innovative social leaders are needed to build and develop the human and social capital of our nation. (n.p.)

The emphasis in this statement is on increased community engagement and capacity building of ethical leadership. Prof. Niemandt as leading scholar on leadership (see Niemandt 2013; Niemandt & Niemandt 2021) guided the institution in refining the focus of the training to serve this goal. The huge contribution and accomplishment of Prof.

Niemandt in this regard is acknowledged by the institution (Meissenheimer 2025).

Recontextualising has as a result a theology taking on a local recognisable and relatable form (compare Hesselgrave & Rommen 2013:2), or as Shorter (1995:20) labels it 'a local theology', or more correct, 'local theologies' (Shorter 1995:6), with the plural implying varieties of interpreting theology. This implies for Shorter (1995:21) that gospel, church and culture are essential to the process: the church is the incarnation of the gospel and culture is the context within which this happens. In the process of transferring the gospel from one context to the next, the gospel, the church and culture cannot be ignored. This is evident from the way in which Prof. Niemandt emphasised training in church leadership to address the need of a particular community. There is a relation between cultural context and theology, and theology and the local community (Shorter 1995:6).

If this sheds some light on what recontextualisation refers to, why is it still important that we talk about it?

### Reasons for recontextualisation

As to why recontextualisation is necessary, Boeve (2016:34) indicates that '... contemporary theology should relate to the challenges of the current context'.

### Paradigm shifts

Schreiter (1995:2–3) reminds us that new contexts pose new questions to theology. Old answers no longer suffice. Thomas Kuhn's (1996) theory of paradigm shifts makes it clear that as the framework for our thinking changes, we can no longer be content with the answers we have. At some stage, existing answers will no longer apply to new questions. Hans Küng applied Thomas Kuhn's theory to the transitions of theological traditions (see Boeve 2009:31 for a detailed discussion). Science, also theology, is always perceived through 'paradigmatic glasses'. A paradigm refers to 'the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques' (Kuhn 1996:175), and it also determines behaviour (cf. Kuhn 1996:10). Kuhn illustrates how existing knowledge is created in response to an existing paradigm. The moment a crisis occurs, an attempt is made to respond from the existing paradigm only to reveal the limitations and shortcomings of the existing paradigm. The shift in the context leads to the revolutionary creation of a new paradigm (Kuhn 1996:12). Adjustment to a new paradigm causes changes in vocabulary, thinking patterns, behaviour and values and their application (compare Boeve 2009:32). A gradual move from the old to the new paradigm occurs. Boeve (2009:32) indicates that the old paradigm is not totally discarded resulting in a liminal space of continuity and discontinuity. The task of recontextualisation is then to investigate ways of fusing the horizons of the tradition and the contemporary context (Boeve 2009:32). This is a continuous process as the developments in contexts press for the creation of new paradigms and the need to recontextualise – to align – the tradition with the new context.

### Changes in philosophy

Boeve (2009:38) argues that philosophy (and human sciences) had an impact on theology. Philosophy has contributed to a change in worldviews, which created the new 'intellectual horizons' in which theologians try and understand the Christian faith (Boeve 2009:38). As Boeve (2009:38) summarises it '...the involvement of theology with contemporary philosophy has led to new ways of doing theology'. Contextualisation is not always to convey the gospel to a new context. Recontextualisation especially is to guide a Christian community to make sense in their own time and place of the gospel they already are familiar with.

### The church crossing boundaries

De Vries (2016:7) differentiates between two areas where contextualisation can take place: mission and ecclesial. Mission refers to the activity of the church to introduce the gospel into a new cultural environment. This will imply that a community for the first time is introduced to the gospel. The gospel needs to be brought to this context in such a way that the gospel is relevant and relatable within this context. Part of the missional transfer of the gospel is a shift in the weight of distribution of Christianity in the world. Christians and theologians in Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific have started to question whether European theology is still universal theology (Wijzen 2001:221).

Ecclesial refers to the local church improving on the theological confession, thus 'developing new theology' (De Vries 2016:9). This will imply that a Christian community is constantly confronted by changes in its context and needs to adjust its theology according to the demands of the context.

For our discussion, we can identify a third area where contextualisation is necessary, namely contextualising theology for the sake of theological training. In this regard, the work by Niemandt is a good example of a combination between mission studies and theological training. Niemandt is a renowned scholar in mission studies. This combined with his knowledge of theological training resulted in a unique emphasis on Christian missional leadership (see Cordier & Niemandt 2014; Niemandt 2015, 2019) as part of the theological training at Huguenote College.

### Globalisation

Globalisation refers to the process whereby people interact with communities, religions and cultures from other parts of the world (compare Wijzen 2001:222). The interaction of people may require an explanation of beliefs in such a way that others understand it.

Thangaraj (1999:150–152) identifies several challenges globalisation poses for theological education:

- Students will need to be taught how to understand their own faith in relation to other religions.
- Students need to be trained in pastoral ministry by the church to those who find themselves in interreligious

situations. For example, how does the church support church members who participate in interreligious worship or cross-religious marriages?

- Students need guidance in how to design the public engagement of the church with people from different religious backgrounds.
- Students need guidance in the way the church participates in guiding society on socio-political matters. What are the parameters for the public theology of the church introduced to a multi-religious community?

## Migration

Migration brings culturally diverse communities into contact (compare Wijsen 2001:222). People from different religious backgrounds interact, but so will Christians from different regions of the world get into contact. Exposure to the other creates awareness of the variety of beliefs and ways of interpreting Christianity in different contexts. Any migration results in a new context and may already demand recontextualisation. Refer in this regard the Peter Phan's (2020) contribution on the matter of theology and migration.

## What is the truth and the essence?

Recontextualisation is about transferring something old to something new. Will the old not disappear when the demand for the new weighs heavier, or will the new not be ignored if the old weighs heavier? How should we understand the relation between tradition (that which is transferred from the past) and context (the continuous changing landing place for tradition demanding adaptation to the context)?

Boeve (2009:36) argues in favour of a balance to maintain the Christian faith 'in fidelity to the tradition' while 'relating adequately to the context' or stated differently, 'a balance between continuity and discontinuity'. The element of theological truth is the element to which faith clings to in all contexts. This implies an 'identifiable kernel' (Boeve 2009:34) or essence that needs to be transferred into each new context. It is clear that there are diachronic and synchronic dimensions to the need for recontextualisation (compare Boeve 2009:39).

In considering contextualisation as the transfer of the gospel from one context to the next, the question remains as to what will remain true for the past, present and future, and what will be considered as the truth in all places. This is a question as to what is the essence or core of the gospel that must remain untouched and unchanged over time and within all contexts. There are different theories as to what constitutes the essence of Christianity. Two main categories of responses exist: it is possible to identify the essence and it is impossible to identify the essence of Christianity.

Theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) argued that it is not easy to identify the essence of Christianity. Morgan and Pye (1977:127) indicate that for Troeltsch, the essence of Christianity cannot be constructed but is available only in the totality of the living church and its activities.

The way the church manifests itself in every local community is the essence of Christianity. This implies a constantly changing essence. In each and every context, the way the church manifests itself becomes the essence of Christianity.

For the Roman Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (see Boeve 2009:34), the essence of Christianity is not to be found in abstract dogmas or rigid institutions, but in the lived encounter with the liberating and humanising message of Jesus Christ. He emphasises the humanity of Jesus and his solidarity with human suffering. His theology emphasises human experience as a locus for divine revelation, and he stressed the need for mutual dialogue between Church tradition and the modern world. For Schillebeeckx, a substance of faith – a kernel with universal significance – remains the same in all horizons. This kernel lies at the centre of what Schillebeeckx refers to as experience.

Peter Schineller, the Roman Catholic theologian, indicates that it is possible to identify the essence or centre of Christianity. Schineller (1990:59) states that at the centre of the gospel stands Jesus Christ, his life and message. The rest may be considered as matters lying on the periphery. Here it appears that Schineller emphasises the continuation of the correct dogma and practices of the church as a continuation of the essence of Christianity.

Hans Küng (see in Boeve 2009:35) presents a combination of all views discussed so far. For Küng, the essence or centre of all theology is linked to Jesus. This is only possible through the historical-critical engagement of exegesis of the Scriptures. This exercise is characterised by being contextual, value-laden and a process enacted through the lens of the reigning paradigm (see Boeve 2009:35). For Küng, the exegetical process ensures the continuation of the truth amid the challenges and questions posed to theology from the modern context (see Boeve 2009:35).

The question as to the essence of Christianity may have two responses: on the one hand, the essence is maintaining the truth of the dogma and practices of the past, and on the other hand, the interpretation of the Scriptures through the paradigmatic lens of the present – enabling a conversation between the past and the present. This argument will be picked up later.

## Are there limits to contextualisation?

Are there limitations to contextualisation? Can we teach theology and expect from students to replicate the exact theology when applying their theological knowledge and skills in their own context? The answer can be YES, if the teacher and student share the exact same cultural context. The generational context might differ, but the language and social environment may be similar. But what if nothing is similar: not the language, not social standing, generational differences abound and the social ecosystem differs? Are we preparing students to apply their theological knowledge and



skills in their own context or are we teaching students answers to questions they do not ask?

Let me illustrate this dilemma by referring to the Vanneste-Tshibangu debate of the 1960s. I have elsewhere discussed the debate in more detail (Beyers 2016). The arguments presented by Tshibangu and Vanneste also apply here.

Tharcisse Tshibangu was a student at the University of Lovanium, Kinshasa, when Alfred Vanneste was the newly appointed Dean of the Faculty of Theology (compare Bujo 2003:179). Tshibangu argued for a 'Theology of African colour' (Beyers 2016; Bujo 2003:179). The argument was based on the assumption that African culture had a unique and original system of thought. It would only be logical to talk about a unique African form of theology as there existed many other forms of theology resulting in a plurality of theologies (Bujo 2003:179) (the local theologies Shorter refers to). Tshibangu suggested that such an African theology should be expressed in non-Aristotelian categories that is so characteristic of Western thought and include an existential and holistic worldview (Beyers 2016; Bongmba 2006:250).

Vanneste's argument was denying the existence of a so-called African theology (Bujo 2003:180). According to Vanneste, only a universal Catholic Theology existed (Bongmba 2006:25), a universal valid truth, which is an essence to Christianity that would be similar in all contexts. It is important to note that Vanneste was trained as a theologian at the University of Louvain (Belgium). According to Vanneste, theologians from Africa should seek the universal (theological) truth. Vanneste suggested that African theologians should construct a theology relevant to their own context while based on Western philosophy (Beyers 2016; Bujo 2003:180).

I would like to offer some remarks on the Vanneste-Tshibangu debate. As argued by Küng, a certain hermeneutic is required. The individual is constantly reflecting on tradition from a certain context. The tradition brings the individual in a conversation with the past, the present and the future. Tradition does not impose the past on anyone (Bujo 2003:181). Cultural elements become markers in the process of understanding the tradition, acknowledging that it is relevant to the present while simultaneously remaining true to the past and providing guidance to the future (Beyers 2016).

Cultural values are not the only determining factor. Bujo (2003:181) indicates how elements such as social, economic and technological considerations should also determine theology. A culturally centred theology remains incomplete without a holistic understanding of reality. This is particularly true of an African worldview (compare Bujo 2003:182). Bujo pleads for a theology from Africa that reflects not only cultural considerations but that also includes economic and social elements. Theology should not only consider the liberation from social and economic elements (Bujo 2003:181) but should also stay true to cultural (i.e., worldview)

orientations. A true theology from Africa requires an all-encompassing perspective (i.e., cultural, social, economic and technological). This is the challenge faculties of Theology in Africa must engage and a challenge that has been picked up by Huguenote College (Beyers 2016).

Applying Vanneste's point of view would imply that when Christianity enters a new culture, all traces of a different culture and religion had to be completely destroyed and replaced by a blueprint of Christianity to be replicated universally.

The problem is that religions rarely replicate and successfully function if not related to local culture. This is what inculturation refers to. Religion cannot exist nor persist in a new context unless it is articulated or translated into a culture (compare Müller & Sundermeier 1987:176).

## Challenges recontextualisation poses to theological training

If recontextualisation then refers to the process of contextualising that which has already been contextualised, what implications are there for theological training? How are we to train students to be able to implement contextualisation, either missional or ecclesial (compare De Vries 2016:8–9)? How will students be able to create new answers to new questions?

There are multiple challenges confronting theological training. Some challenges are only relevant to particular contexts, for example, the lack of funding to support students to study at tertiary institutions, the decrease in state budget allocations for higher education and rising unemployment. These challenges only apply to some contexts. Some challenges might be globally relevant, for example, the rising demand for training in the STEM (sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) disciplines, the decreased interest in studying theology, the decrease in church membership causing churches to be unable to afford full-time ministry. The decrease in students interested in studying theology appears to be a prominent global challenge. As Wijzen (2001:223) discusses the shortfall of clergy in the European context, he mentions the increase in the use of lay people as church leaders in an African context.

Besides context-specific challenges, there are also expected and predictable challenges:

- Globalisation and migration: Communities globally are now more than ever exposed to the diversity of religious affiliations. Technology contributes to the flow of information regarding religions. Knowledge of religions, and theology, is readily available. We have the emergence of what I like to call the self-taught theologian.
- The thread of relativism and pluralism: The awareness of the multiplicity of religions may create a feeling of relativism, causing a loss of identity. As Charles Tayler states that we live in a time where being religious is only

one more option besides that of not being religious. We also witness the rise of the phenomenon of Multiple Religious Belonging (MRB) (compare Bruce 2017:604).

- Ecumenicalism: As churches struggle to survive, closer collaboration and even unification with other denominations create an ecumenical theological ecology. The finer nuanced theology makes way for the convictions that we all agree on and share, causing a loss of the unique theological identity. This impacts theological training as to what kind of generic theological training should we present to students enrolling for theology studies.
- Too theoretical versus too practical: The theological curriculum struggles to present all theology knowledge and skills to prospective theologians. In some cases, the practical skills are more emphasised than the theoretical knowledge. This influences the type of theological training presented to students who in most cases just seek a qualification that will guarantee them a job. To contextualise theology, the emphasis can be on theoretical or practical changes. Theological training that is too theoretical may result in transferring doctrines replicating the sending church in its beliefs and practices. When theological training is too practical, the doctrines remain similar to the sending church, but the expressions of belief are cosmetically changed to give the impression that the local context is reflected. A dissonance between beliefs still remain.
- Irrelevant and detached theology: The theological curriculum may be outdated. Only the main dogmas and doctrines are taught in a way similar to medieval scholastic training. This un-contextualised theology may convey knowledge, without ensuring it is relevant and connected to the current reality.
- Syncretism: In trying to be everything for everyone, theological training that is too accommodating may result in the mixture of local cultural beliefs with theological doctrines. Without going into too much detail as to what constitutes syncretism (compare Schineller 1992), we should be aware that when the form and the content of theological training change and result in an unrecognisable theology that does no longer resemble Christianity, the thread might be that it no longer is Christianity. Examples in Africa abound (e.g., Zionist Christian Church, Shembe, Kimbanguism). In this regard, it is important to mention Pannenberg's (1979:270) statement that syncretism is in fact a powerful characteristic of Christianity that ensured the survival and growth of Christianity across many contexts. The power of Christianity to adapt to new circumstances made it grow.

Having identified these challenges, the following questions arise:

- What should we teach? Should the content be some sort of essence of Christianity? Should the content be decolonised content with local relevance but internationally unrelatable?
- Who should teach? If we want to be sensitive towards cultural differences, the language of tuition must be

appropriate. Can there be equality among theologians, those trained in Europe as opposed to those trained locally? Is it possible to remove an attitude of inferiority and inadequacy?

- How should we teach? Different contexts surely have different pedagogies. How people learn should be taken into account. Some learn through narratives while others learn through memorisation. The local context of students should be taken into account as to the availability of reliable Internet connections, access to Internet enabling devices, an environment conducive to learning.
- When should we teach? Are we instilling faith or do we assume some level of biblical knowledge to be already present among our students? Should the difference between faith and theology be important?

Some of these questions require contextualisation.

## Actionable recommendations

To contextualise or recontextualise theology requires an understanding of the culture. This can play out in two scenarios: the expression of Christian faith in the own culture (what De Vries refers to as ecclesial theologising) or the expression of Christianity in other cultures (what De Vries refers to as missional theologising).

Wrogemann (2016:54) indicates that in the process of contextualising theology, Intercultural Hermeneutics (also called Intercultural Understanding or Cultural Semiotics) is important. I suggest that we refer to the ecclesial process of understanding the own cultural context as intra-cultural hermeneutics – critically evaluating and understanding one's own culture from within.

To convey meaning across cultures (whether it is in a missional context or recontextualising theology in the own culture), a process of understanding is necessary. Wrogemann (2016:55–56) explains intercultural hermeneutics as the process of determining meaning. Meaning is conveyed to someone unfamiliar with the author's or sender's background and intention and is trying to ascertain the same meaning the author or sender intended.

People communicate via signs or symbols. Signs or symbols are generated through a process of regular use of the same symbol with the same meaning (Wrogemann 2016:56). The community within which the symbol with meaning is generated becomes familiar with the symbol and its associated meaning. The context determines the meaning (Wrogemann 2016:57). The meaning can only be transferred once people agree on what the signs are. People must view the same signs according to the same semiotic code (Wrogemann 2016:58). Through a process of coding and decoding, we reach meaning (Wrogemann 2016:61).

When we discuss contextualisation, it is important to recognise that many different semiotic codes exist in different cultural contexts. To share meaning thus implies knowing

the signs and the meaning attached to the signs so that we use the correct sign to communicate the related meaning. A combination of signs and their meaning constructs a narrative. Paradigms determine signs and their meaning (Wrogemann 2016:59). We should be paradigm sensitive.

Charles Taylor (2007) describes the different paradigms or worldviews in terms of how people perceive their existence. For Taylor (2007:34), humans have two ways of assigning meaning to reality: one way is to locate all meaning within the human mind. Another way is to allocate meaning to entities outside of the human mind. The result is that humans can be labelled as open or closed. Taylor (2007:38) refers to the position of being open to influences from the outside world as being 'porous'. Forces outside the human mind can enter the human world, cause disruption or create harmony. This way of perceiving reality subscribes to causality. Causality drives existence: everything that happens, disease or healing, is caused by something (Beyers 2020).

Taylor (2007:37) refers to the position of being closed as the 'buffered self' – being closed to influences from outside the human mind. In this instance, humans are self-reliant and participate in bringing about results in the world. No exterior force affects human behaviour (Beyers 2020). The 'buffered self' has been associated with a Western mind-set, while the 'porous self' is prevalent among cultures from Asia and Africa.

The 'buffered self' concept was spread across the world through colonisation and came into contact with the idea of the 'porous self'. It is difficult to convey meaning between people from these two worldviews.

Wrogemann (2016:65) argues that understanding takes place on two levels: grasping and comprehending on the one hand and empathising and reliving on the other hand. Grasping and comprehending might be possible, but reliving and re-experiencing are impossible. Grasping and comprehending happen when one understands the semiotic codes. Then one grasps and understands what someone from a different culture means in a particular context (Wrogemann 2016:68).

The table is set for confusion: different worldviews, different semiotic codes and different histories and attitudes. What can be done at this impasse? I think we should refrain from talking about one another and rather start talking with one another. Engagement with the other can lead to understanding one another. Intercultural engagement and exposure can lead to understanding the different paradigms governing thoughts in different contexts. Becoming aware of the questions posed in different contexts creates awareness of different ways of assigning meaning. Different contexts pose unique questions and require different answers.

Getting to know the context helps to understand the relevant questions. The questions prevalent in an African context will relate to the socio-political-economic reality of despair of

people (compare Bujo 2003:181). These questions arising from a context of 'not-having' and perhaps 'never will have' require different answers than the questions posed in a culture of abundance and affluence.

Theology can only exist as contextual theology (Boeve 2009:39). The challenge would then be how to make theology relevant in every context.

## Close connection to faith communities

Developing tradition as part of theological training must happen in close collaboration with the church. A church without theology is no church; theology without a church is not theology. A church without contextualised theology is a dinosaur – irrelevant and extinct, at most a social club for those interested in ideas of the past. Theological training should be done in close collaboration with local faith communities.

## Theological training as innovation hubs

The development of tradition is the ongoing process of recontextualisation (Boeve 2009:39). For theological training to exist, participation and taking the lead in developing tradition is essential. Institutions of theological training should be at the forefront of developing new theologies. Theological training is not only the continuation of tradition but interpreting tradition and making it relevant to current contexts. In this regard, Niemandt excelled in making theology locally relevant through his concept of missional ecclesiology (Niemandt 2012).

## Theological training as centra for training theology

Theological training is not an expression of superiority: we have the knowledge and we impart that sacred knowledge to those who do not have it. Theological training should not only teach but also learn. Theologians should try and understand the changed context, adjust our thoughts and reformulate their dictums. Theological training should create an environment conducive to developing contextual theologies.

Theo Sundermeier (1995:46–49) in explaining the concept of convivence as a way of co-existing in different contexts emphasises equality and reciprocity. People from different cultural backgrounds should learn from one another and share with one another. We should constantly be sensitive and aware of differences.

## Conclusion

In my introduction, I referred to my apprehension of talking about religions instead of talking to religions. How do we teach theology students to engage with people from other religions and cultural contexts? In Africa, the context is that of aligning the church and gospel with African spirituality and cultural heritage. Will this constitute recontextualisation

or alienation of Christianity? It cannot be denied that it is an attempt at contextualisation and perhaps decolonisation. The question can be asked whether it constitutes successful recontextualisation. But what would be the criteria determining successful recontextualisation?

- Close connection to Christian faith communities contributing to the incarnation of the gospel in the church in local culture and context
- Theological training institutes as innovation hubs facilitating contextualisation through intercultural hermeneutics
- Theological training centres training theology to create environments conducive to recontextualising the faith in Jesus Christ

These could be the criteria implemented in theological training to ensure theology is responsibly contextualised. My advice regarding theological training would be: teach a contextualised theology that continues to contextualise theology. In this regard, Niemandt set an example of how theology can be taught in a contextualised manner.

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### Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study, and its findings are available within the article.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of

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