

BOOK REVIEW

Flett, John G., and Wrogemann, Henning. 2020. *Questions of Context: Reading a Century of German Mission Theology*

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Reviewed by Rein den Hertog

Flett and Wrogemann offer a welcome compilation of German(speaking) missiological literature on the topic of contextualization. In six chapters, each covering a particular period, they allow different German missiologists – Hoekendijk being a Dutch exception – to speak through articles or excerpts from larger publications. Each chapter concludes with an analysis that places the various authors in a larger context, and in which Flett and Wrogemann search for the current meaning of the texts discussed. The final product is much more than just a collection of texts with comments, but also provides an in-depth reflection on the topic of contextualization.

The book owes its existence to a request for a bibliography of German missiological texts on the theme of contextualization. This request proved difficult to satisfy. However, not because of a lack of attention to the contextual nature of the gospel within German missiology of the past century. On the contrary, from the beginning, the question of the indigenous embodiment of the gospel played a significant role in German missiological reflection.

Flett and Wrogemann begin their compilation with texts by Warneck and Troeltsch. Whereas for Troeltsch, mission is fundamentally about spreading the cultural influence of the West and therefore relates primarily to education and civilization, Warneck - the father of contemporary missiology - stands up for the salvific content of the gospel that must take root like a native plant in foreign soils. The discussion between Warneck and Troeltsch shows that from the outset there was a focus on the complex relationship between mission and the cultural embodiment of the gospel within German missiology.

A generation later, missiologists such as Gutmann, Schomerus and Knak, influenced in part by a Romanticist view on the concept of *Volk*, would emphasize the importance of the primal ties (*Urtümliche Bindungen*) and *Volkstum* of indigenous peoples for the mission of the church. While this missiological approach cannot be equated one-to-one with the National Socialist emphasis on *Volk*, it did fit seamlessly into the conceptual landscape of Nazi ideology.

Not surprisingly, in response to this problematic entanglement, German missiologists sought a different approach. At first, missiologists like Hartenstein and Freytag found it in a highly eschatological perspective, in which reality came under the intense criticism of Divine judgment. However, by choosing this approach contemporary history and culture – and consequentially contextualization – lost almost any voice in missiology.

Beginning in the 1960s, things changed in ecumenical circles. Attention shifted to the existence of world Christianity, and even within German-speaking missiology, missiologists such as Hoekendijk, Margull and Hollenweger brought the world into focus as the locus of God's agency, while emphasizing the need for vulnerability and dialogue. In the decades that followed, this movement would deepen.

To interpret this development, Flett and Wrogemann refer to Shoki Coe's groundbreaking 1973 article, in which he shows that contextualization is a "dynamic process that opens up both the interpretation of the gospel and the local culture to the eschatological future." (165) Coe distinguishes between *conscientization*, *contextuality* and *contextualization*.

Conscientization refers to "the gaining of a critical awareness of the context in light of the *missio Dei*". *Contextuality* refers to the result of this, and concerns "the maturity of judgement that instructs the church where and how to participate in the *missio Dei*". Finally, *contextualization* is embodiment of this "capacity to respond" (166).

Whereas terms such as *contextuality* and *contextualization* have become standard in the English missiological vocabulary, this is not the case in the German-speaking missiological literature. In German missiology there was an increasing emphasis on what Coe called *conscientization*: the critical awareness of the context. In (contemporary) German missiology there is a great sensitivity to issues of contextual embodiment of the gospel, despite – or, one could argue, because of – the problematic history of the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike in the prewar period, however, missiologists realize that attention to the local context alone is not enough if the basic framing assumptions are still Western, as was the case in pre-war German missiology. One may want to be contextual, but if Western standards determine what that exactly means, one

still misses the mark. German missiologists therefore argue for developing a form of theologizing that does not assume a one-way traffic from sender to receiver, but in which all people involved dialogically seek a credible embodiment of the gospel. By taking this approach, missiologists like Sundermeijer, Lienemann-Perrin and Wrogemann himself have contributed to the emergence of a so-called *intercultural theology*.

Flett and Wrogemann's collection of texts and analyses are very helpful and stimulating in several ways. First, they offer a translation of important German missiological texts and thus function as an introduction to German missiology of the past century. In addition, by design, the book also offers a longitudinal introduction to the developments within missiology of the past century. Beginning with the colonial era, the texts take us via the problematic period of Nazism and the postwar response to it, through the era of decolonization to the current situation of world Christianity that demands a cross-cultural theology. Throughout the volume, Flett and Wrogemann engagingly show how the periods, topics, and themes addressed are still relevant today. For example, the problematic emphasis on *Volkstum* and Primal ties resonates even today in Donald McGavran's still influential Church Growth Movement. Clearly, even the developments in German missiology of the first half of the 20th century do not belong to a past that is at a safe distance but still represent a cautionary tale that should be taken to heart again and again. Finally, the book offers an engaging and thoughtful treatment of the concept of contextualization. Contextualization according to Flett and Wrogemann is not an easily applicable step-by-step plan but requires a dialogical process in which the universality of the gospel's message of salvation is not sought in a uniform embodiment, but rather in a multiplicity of cultural expressions interconnected by an ongoing conversation about the normative content of the gospel. Furthermore, this process is never finished since it is directed toward the discernment of God's unceasing and often surprising eschatological agency in this world. In the words of Flett and Wrogemann:

Mission is the participation of a community of joy in the ferment of the resurrection, which draws that community beyond itself and so into history and context as the realm of God's own acting. The Word remains a word from outside, meaning that the community is called to encounter its identity as a matter of continual surprise. If we understand the embodiment of the gospel as something that can only come out of the local culture, then mission is itself the process of discovering local expression. The gospel is not something an individual or community can "bring"—it is only something that a community seeks to embody (or is embodied by). (222)

About the author

Dr. Rein den Hertog, Amsterdam, rgdenhertog@gmail.com