

THE VERNACULAR CONSCIOUSNESS: MODERNISM'S INFLUENCE ON POSTCOLONIAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

Chris Burnett
Th.M. Candidate
The Master's Seminary

Case studies in postcolonial contextualization mark a forty-year-old missiological trend in evangelical scholarship. The largely unqualified support of indigenous theological expression by mission theorists represents an epistemological shift from a conservative bibliography toward felt-needs evangelization and religious roundtable dialogue methods. Evangelical contextualization theory today echoes German Romanticism's early assessments of indigenous language and local religion, especially as seen in the works of pluralistic Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). No study of postcolonial contextualization is complete without considering the enduring influence of Herder's "vernacular consciousness" on the current missiological mindset.

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The Challenge of Contextualization

The role of the evangelical missionary today remains in a perplexing state concerning the necessary attitude toward the use of the Bible in delivering the gospel to all peoples. Questions about the role of Scripture in defining evangelistic and theological contextualization in the Third (or Majority) World remain largely unanswered. Despite four decades of mounting research the most important discussions of postcolonial missiology have been left in a formative stage.¹ Bibliological ques-

¹ Missiologists struggle to match current contextual realities to their biblical counterparts. For example, Missional theorists Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch support John Travis' C5-level contextualization which encourages Jesus-following Muslim Insiders to maintain certain Islamic practices, such as mosque fellowship and prayers, despite the risk of being perceived as publicly denying Jesus' deity. Western missiologists who aim to uphold Muslim culture and community by new Christians might inadvertently incite local converts to similar sinful fears as the believing-but-not-confessing Jews in John 12:42–43 who sought the community comfort of institutionalized religion. Tim Matheny earlier concluded that Muslim felt needs must always submit to "ultimate needs, those seen from God's perspective," rather than from an

tions of essential interest to evangelicals (the doctrines of revelation, inspiration, inerrancy, authority, sufficiency, and Canon)² are largely unexplored and missing from the key models of cultural engagement which do exist.³

Contextualization, in conservative evangelical terms, strives to communicate the whole of God's revelation with orthodox faithfulness and cultural relevance in a fundamentally understandable way. The conservative process of contextualization focuses on the articulation and appropriation of the content of biblical truth (the gospel and theology) to spiritually blind, unregenerate sinners in a social or cultural context not innate to the ambassador for Christ such that biblical orthodoxy becomes reproducible in myriad contexts.⁴ Yet, because of the varied treatment of Scripture in

anthropological base (in Tim Matheny, *Reaching the Arabs: A Felt Need Approach* [Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1981], 153). See Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st Century Church*, rev. ed (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 83, with discussion on pp. 82–94, 121 n15.5; John Travis, "Must All Muslims Leave 'Islam' to Follow Jesus?," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, 34 no 4 (Oct, 1998): 411–15.

² Functional conservative evangelical definitions of the six doctrines of bibliology establish the foundation for conservative missiological theory and practice: 1. The general, non-salvific revelation of God must be accompanied by the specific verbal proclamation of salvation in Jesus Christ because unregenerate man cannot spiritually appraise natural theology unto salvation. 2. The words of Scripture were penned by men with their distinct personalities, styles, intellects, and wills, through the supernatural moving of the Holy Spirit; the Spirit now animates the Scriptures to directly and actively communicate the power of God to saving effect in the recipient. 3. Scripture itself attests that the words and syntax of the Bible in the original autographs are absolutely true when interpreted in their historical, grammatical, literary, and ethical settings, for all of the content and any topic or concept therein presented. 4. The authority of Scripture rests upon the character of God, the objective arbiter of truth; at the same time, the Holy Spirit effectually illuminates and enables a person to subjectively and spiritually appraise Scripture as the wisdom and the sure power of God. 5. Scripture affirms that the Bible provides all the necessary content for finite man to know God and to adequately perceive His will for salvation. 6. On the recognition of the divine authorship of Scripture by means of verbal, plenary inspiration according to the witness of God in Scripture itself, all "truth" must be tested for consistency with the total biblical content.

³ Conservative cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert seems to assume that the authority of Scripture is foundational for the "committed Christian theologians" who help construct his "metatheological framework" (see Paul Hiebert, "Missionary as Mediator," in Craig Ott, and Harold A. Netland, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 302–03). However, the assumption might be impractically broad, as not all prominent contextualizers share similar bibliological bases. For example, Kevin Vanhoozer offers unqualified appreciation of Roman Catholic Robert Schreiter who continues to inform evangelical theory even though he links criteria of orthodoxy to Vatican II magisterial tradition in determining gospel faithfulness (see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?' Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 123–24; Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1985], 115–17). Likewise, Grant Osborne relies on Roman Catholic Stephen Bevans to define the imperatives of contextualization though his "transcendental model" of experiential revelation assumes that the Bible is not a source of propositional truths which remain immutable, but that theology redefines the content of Scriptural truth (see Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 411; Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* [Maryknoll, NT: Orbis, 1992], 9–10, 97–112).

⁴ The focus of conservative contextualization theory and practice is on the "translatability" of the whole counsel of God (so Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* [Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2010], 85–86, 325). Conservative Dean Flemming underlines the importance of moving past the act of cross-cultural communication into the "life world" of the audience" with a message framed within the target context (see Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity,

mission theory across the spectrum of contemporary evangelicalism, the conservative definition does not represent the scope of contextualization studies today.⁵

Determining the boundaries of orthodoxy and orthopraxy in cross-cultural practice appears to be more fluid than rigid. Engagement with contemporary contextualization studies suggests that the lack of definitive bibliological treatment is the result of an overall epistemological shift away from the authority of Scripture. The bulk of publications suggest mission theory has largely embraced an anthropologically centered, culture-driven, felt-need response to the problem of conflicting worldviews.

This article will assess how popular anti-colonialist assumptions birthed studies on vernacular theologies, which led to the faulty ideals of an ecumenical *via media* for a globalized dialogue, ultimately resulting in theological inconsistencies among those who otherwise propose conservative evangelical doctrine.

Yet the epistemological shift is not new to this generation. Mission theory today bears similarities in tone and content to the early works on vernacular language and religion by German Romantic philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder challenged the orthodox missionary efforts of his day with argumentation comparable to that of many studies affecting evangelical missiology two centuries later. Notable alignment will thus be suggested between contemporary and Counter-Enlightenment thought concerning the evangelization and theologizing of indigenous people groups.

The Rise of Contextualization Studies

A survey of the cultural-linguistic philosophies of the Romantic period provides important insights into the non-conservative presuppositions which shaped later studies on anti-colonial vernacular theologies. The work of budding cultural anthropologist Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788) paved the way for a new understanding of God's revelation to cultures.⁶ His studies gave rise to the important humanistic efforts

2005], 19–20). Also see the helpful definitions in David J. Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 143, 200; Scott A. Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2012), 36.

⁵ Insofar as the “Christian orthodoxy” has been replaced by a generic “evangelical ecumenism,” Hesselgrave addresses EMS members with questions as to the integrity, intent and priority of Scripture in contemporary mission theory and practice. Though EMS requires adherence to the ICBI Chicago Statement on Inerrancy (accessed February 16, 2016, www.etsjets.org/files/documents/Chicago_Statement.pdf), the widening range of missiological confessions means members hold varying and conflicting positions on the authority of Scripture in global engagement. David J. Hesselgrave, “The Power of Words,” published in *Global Missiology* (January 2006), accessed February 16, 2016, www.globalmissiology.net; also see Richard V. Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” in *New Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) pp. 311–13.

⁶ See James C. O' Flaherty, ed., *Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia: A Translation and Commentary* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), 169. Charles Taylor details what he calls the “expressive constitutive” theory of language and human thought, a dialogical understanding of language most typified by German Romantics like Hamann. See Charles Taylor, *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 4, 48–50.

of Herder, whose theories on the vernacular nature of consciousness have come to be at least implicitly expressed by contemporary dialogue theories.⁷

Hamann played an important role by proposing that God's revelation about Himself through nature, history, and His Word is to be codified on the human plane, not through lofty reason.⁸ Hamann developed a *metacritique* to prove that language not only expresses the thoughts embedded deeply in man through symbols, but that language controls all thoughts. Thus, by implication, human consciousness is indivisibly rooted in the expressions of words. The religious implication thus emerges: the language and symbols of Scripture express spiritual truth, and the perception and comprehension of the divine reality must be found in the significance drawn out by the words themselves.⁹ Religious knowledge arrives through local, culturally specific language; therefore, only through communicable human language can philosophical thought be expressed and Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, become known.¹⁰ Divine words translate into human words and must be met by human thoughts in order for the transcendent reality to be perceived.¹¹

⁷ German Romantics Hamann and Herder are by no means the only early linguistic philosophers to arrive at conclusions similar to those of contemporary evangelical missiologists on the importance of faith and theology rising from personal, cultural experience. Other modernists are herein highlighted: English rationalist supernaturalist John Locke (1632–1704); French Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778); French philosopher Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1714–1780); German Romantic Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834); British Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834); New England Transcendentalist Horace Bushnell (1802–1876). Of important note, but outside of the scope here is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), whose 20th-Century “language-game” concept concerning meaning behind thoughts and the import of presuppositions in communication factors heavily into contextualization theory today, especially with the contemporary cultural and linguistic models of post-, non-, and anti-foundationalism. On Wittgenstein's contribution to cultural-linguistic expressivism; for example, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1922; Roger E. Olson, *Reformed and Always Reforming—The Postconservative Approach to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 141–42; George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine—Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 6, 10, 19; with cautious delimitation in F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology—Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 36, 53–60.

⁸ For an essential survey of the man and his thought, see Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment—Vico, Hamann, Herder*, edited by Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 321–447.

⁹ Michael Jinkins, *Christianity, Tolerance, and Pluralism: A Theological Engagement with Isaiah Berlin's Social Theory* (New York, NY: Psychology Press, 2004), 48. Taylor recalls Hamann's concept that “we don't simply recognize the signs of God; we translate them; ‘Reden ist übersetzen’” (“To speak is to translate”). In Taylor, *Language Animal*, 344.

¹⁰ Livingston, *Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century*, 72.

¹¹ The nuances of this Counter-Enlightenment claim are a common feature in contextualization theory today. Alister McGrath opposes the propositionalism of historic conservatives like Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and Carl F. H. Henry, who upheld the direct proclamation of Scripture as “truth” in global evangelization. McGrath falsely assumes, like Pannenberg, Grenz, and Franke, that the absolutism of those who contend for a conservative bibliography shares the epistemological base of Enlightenment-era rationalists. Rather, the propositionalists in question appealed to the inner witness of the Spirit as assurance that God has told the hearer what to objectively believe, apart from the dynamic (subjective) controls of the contextualized faith community in its secular society. See Alister McGrath, *A Passion for Truth—The Intellectual Coherence of Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 163–79; Shults, *Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*; Stanley J. Grenz, and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism—*

Hamann's influence in the area of linguistic priority over reason was directly felt by his disciple Herder (1744–1803), the “Father of German Romanticism,”¹² who borrowed the term “vernacular” from his teacher.¹³ Herder's impressive work in cultural anthropology and comparative religions has led him to be regarded as “a remarkable thinker who gave early expression to many themes that were to become entrenched in modern cultural relativism.”¹⁴

Herder on the Development of Vernacular Language

Johann Herder's enduring work on the faculty of speech, “On the Origin of Language” (1772), reveals a complex development of Hamann's initial proposition on the link between reason and language.¹⁵ Herder's four “Laws of Nature” remain “central to contemporary Postmodernist criticism: the fundamental role of concrete language in our knowing.”¹⁶ These “Laws” are predicated upon man being both the creature and creator of the evolving human language. He posits that (1) Man is dependent upon language in order to promote meaningful thought and action; (2) Language development is a natural and necessary part of man's essence; (3) Diversity of languages derives from the dispersion of man into distinctly developing nations; (4) Cultures are inextricably tied to language.¹⁷

Herder thus advances the notion that if humans are to have a sense of spiritual realities, they must rely on the inner faculties of consciousness, reason, discernment, and the outward construction of culture and society.¹⁸ As language develops, so must

Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 13–14; John R. Franke, “Reforming Theology: Toward A Postmodern Reformed Dogmatics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 65:1 (Spring 2003): 1–26.

¹² John H. Moran and Alexander Gode, trans., eds., *On the Origin of Language—Two Essays: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), v.

¹³ So, Werner Ustorf, “The Rainbow and the Missionary: Revisiting Johann Gottfried Herder,” *Swedish Missiological Themes*, 92, no. 3 (2004): 386 n7.

¹⁴ Harold Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith & Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 140. Ustorf traces Herder's influence in vernacular studies of culture, linguistics, and nationalism. He nevertheless recognizes the paucity of attributions in contemporary missiology to Herder. Ustorf posits that one of the reasons that Herder is not viewed more prominently relates to accusations of atheism and unorthodox thinking, claims which ostracized him from academia. Ustorf, “Rainbow,” 386–87.

¹⁵ For translation, see Moran and Gode, *On the Origin of Language*, 85–166. Part Two of Herder's essay, entitled “The Way Human Beings Could and Must Have Most Easily Invented Language for Themselves,” is translated elsewhere, in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, Marcia Bunge, trans., ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 77.

¹⁶ In Livingston, *Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century*, 72. Gode, in Moran and Gode, *On the Origin of Language*, 173–74. Gode recognized Herder's contribution to linguistic theory to be both “timely and possibly timeless,” yet to be replaced by a more developed philosophy, and one which addressed the linguistic and theological issues of Gode's late 1960s.

¹⁷ For apparent contradiction on this point, see Berlin, *Three Critics*, 240–41.

¹⁸ Herder, “On the Origin of Language,” 118–19; Jürgen Trabant, “Herder and Language,” in Hans Adler, and Wulf Köpke, eds., *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), 135–36.

the human consciousness, so that man might reach upward for the apprehension of spiritual concepts.¹⁹

Herder on Cultural and Religious Pluralism

Herder's recognition of the development of culture by an expressive human consciousness thus made a foray into early contextualization theory. According to the German Romantic, language is humanly derived and constantly undergoing an evolutionary process specific to the culture and society of a time. Therefore, the religious beliefs expressed through the cultural voice of a given locality are necessarily unique and independent of beliefs expressed elsewhere or at a different time.²⁰ Because of the historical, political, and socio-cultural factors at play in forming indigenous character, no one people group can claim superior spiritual truth over another.²¹ His position may thus be viewed as "an unqualified cultural relativism" which promotes religious pluralism²² for several reasons.

First, Herder contradicts the biblical testimony of the gospel's supremacy and universal applicability, though he finds Christianity to have a vaguely norming, purifying effect among the nations.²³ The person of Jesus Christ is an inspiring figure of humanity and love to all people in all settings, from whom a Christology for all religions might be derived.²⁴ He also believes that the Bible offers a "fatherly explanation" through "a voice of God" to point readers toward God's ultimate purpose of helping all peoples to fulfill their humanity as bearers of God's image.²⁵ As a divine

¹⁹ Herder, "On the Origin of Language," 122.

²⁰ Livingston, *Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century*, 74.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 74–75; Berlin, *Three Critics*, 291–98. To Herder, "anything that annihilates one's individuality or consciousness cannot be love.... True love of God and neighbor begin with one's individual existence and not with the attempt to be united with God and all things." In Bunge, in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 22–23.

²² Livingston, *Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century*, 75; Bunge, in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 23–27. Berlin attempts to distinguish the ambivalence of relativism from the tolerance of pluralism, recognizing Herder's tolerance as a form of religious and cultural pluralism. Berlin, *Three Critics*, 208, 218, 292; Isaiah Berlin, *The Power of Ideas*, edited by Henry Hardy, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 14–17.

²³ Livingston also notes his vagueness: "Herder calls for toleration, mutual respect, and understanding.... He would appear to see Christianity as having a very special role in helping other religions to 'purify' themselves, and, in so doing, helping all humans toward the ideal of *Humanität*, civilization.... Herder leaves unaddressed the very basic questions about truth, pluralism, and relativism, especially as they relate to Christianity's claims to normativeness, as well as the possible liabilities, even dangers, of ethnic and religious particularism." Livingston, *Enlightenment and Nineteenth Century*, 76; Bunge, in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 19; Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 141; Johann Gottfried Herder, *First Dialogue Concerning National Religions*, in *Against Pure Reason*, 103, 105.

²⁴ Jesus Christ was "the pure expression of the image of God,... an 'ideal,' a representation of the 'supreme character of humanity.' Bunge, in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 31. For Herder, "'Christ' signifies the ongoing incarnation of God in processes of people's survival, transformation, reconciliation, and salvation (inside and outside Christianity)." There are thus "different images of 'Christ.'" This means that nobody can present a definitive interpretation of 'Christ.'" In Ustor, "Rainbow," 399–400.

²⁵ Bunge, in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 29–30.

guide for all generations, “people are to appropriate the Bible in new ways according to their own capacities and historical circumstances.”²⁶

Second, the vernacular infiltrates all levels of Herder's theology. His historicism, when applied to all religions, reduces Christianity to little more than an historical phenomenon—a politically entangled, culturally evolved worldview shaped by Hellenism, Jewish thought, and gnostic theories.²⁷ In his groundbreaking work, “First Dialogue Concerning National Religions” (1802), Herder asks, “Was not even the religion of the ancient Jews wholly a religion of Palestine?”²⁸ He implies that Christianity holds no rights over other languages and beliefs of other geographical regions or times because it is itself a vernacular worldview rather than the divine message universally mandated to mankind.

Third, Herder's religious relativism is distinctly anti-propositional, urging for an embracing cultural empathy to rule all missionary efforts. He voiced early resistance to the emerging missionary activities of the colonial age, which were largely built on the Calvinistic ideals of propositional truth as God's means of converting the heathen.²⁹ To Herder, rather, the natural sense of God as perceived by a historically rooted culture births a national desire for God that is not necessarily reconcilable with the divine longings of another culture. Thus the direct transfer of knowledge or truth between peoples and epochs smacks of a spiritual superiority which must not be tolerated.³⁰

Fourth, missionary engagement is for ethical, not salvific purposes. To Herder, “every nation loves God in its very own way and serves the neighbor in the way that most pleases God.”³¹ One's heart language is sufficiently capable of communing with

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Ibid., 19. Bunge reports, “Herder also appreciates the individuality of each work, refusing to judge texts according to foreign standards or to compare them to one another. In speaking of the Hebrew Bible prophets, for example, he says that each has a particular spirit, history, and language.... In the same way, he claims that the Gospels are highly individual, for each reflects the unique interests and gifts of the authors and their particular audiences.... No piece of world literature is ‘ideal’ for all cultures. Literature of diverse cultures should not be compared to one another; attention should be given to their natural distinctions.” Ibid., 27–28.

²⁸ Johann Gottfried Herder, “First Dialogue Concerning National Religions,” in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 103.

²⁹ Ibid., 141. “First Dialogue Concerning National Religions” was published nearly ten years after the outset of William Carey into polytheistic India. Carey was not the first evangelical missionary to bring the propositional truth of Scripture to bear in pagan evangelization. He was influenced by the earlier efforts of David Brainerd (1718–47), passionately described by Jonathan Edwards in his *Account of the Life of the Late Rev. David Brainerd*, as well as by the journals of James Cook, evangelical explorer, and others. For discussion on the early influences of Protestant mission in relation to Carey, see John Carpenter, “New England Puritans: The Grandparents of Modern Protestant Missions,” *Missiology: An International Review* 30, no. 4 (October, 2002): 519; also see Mark Terry, Ebbie Smith, and Justice Anderson, eds. *Missiology—An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 201.

³⁰ Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism*, 141 n56. Herder remarks, “It is unusual for one language to be equally proper for every kind of conversation.... If this language is not suitable for expressing my ideas, if it has not sprung from my very own needs and feelings, then no matter how powerful it is to others, it is not my religious language.” In Herder, “First Dialogue,” 102.

³¹ Bunge, in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 19; Herder, “First Dialogue,” 103.

God without the help of the Christian witness.³² Thus, field engagement is not evangelistic but rather a sort of religious dialogue on mutual grounds for the purpose of meeting the ethical needs of the national consciousness according to the ideal of human civilization. Theology's central task is to help all people please God according to the confines of their national consciousness, without any assertive dissuasion from or violent uprooting of the indigenous belief system.

Fifth, insofar as Herder cannot divorce socio-political colonialism from the missionary propositionalism of his time, he assumes global anti-colonialist sentiments. Though he never traveled overseas, Herder posits that the result of propositional evangelization is the tearing away of indigenous religion such that the peoples lose their "spirit and character, indeed, their language, their heart, their land, their history...." and that "this is the reason for their indelible, irreconcilable hatred for the foreigners...."³³

Finally, Herder's indiscriminate appreciation of disparate worldviews came under suspicion by the academic community who found his ideas in plain contradiction to the condemnation of paganism by Scripture. At least two factors contribute to his largely unfavorable appraisal by his contemporaries. First, Herder struggled to define the concept of origins for language, and thus remained "teasingly unclear" about the origins of humanity, and of religion,³⁴ despite his extensive work on the book of Genesis.³⁵ Failure to read Scripture outside of his overtly allegorical system thus left him unable to reconcile his myth-based "historicity" with the Biblical account.³⁶ Second, he was unfavorably appraised for his support of Baruch Spinoza (1632–77) and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), both of whom were embroiled in charges of atheism or pantheism at best.³⁷ Their works helped concretize his own religious views as

³² In the dialogue, one friend, Dietrich, says to the other, "I use the word ["religion"] in the Roman sense of 'awe before the gods, sacred commitment.'" To this, his counterpart Winnfried questions, "In which language will the heart commit itself to the gods most lovingly and most intimately? Does it not have to be in the language of the heart, that is, in our very own mother tongue? The language in which we *love, pray, and dream* is our very own religious language." Ibid., 101–02.

³³ Herder criticizes the missionary efforts of St. Patrick among the pantheistic Irish who, in the tale relayed in *First Dialogue*, saw the repentance of the pagan representative from idolatry and blasphemy. Herder, through the two dialoguing friends, expresses his grief over this cultural "violence." Johann Gottfried Herder, "First Dialogue," 101.

³⁴ Herder is not ambiguous about the formation of national religion from the evolved character of families into tribes and nations, but he fails to link divine condescension to human ascent. Herder, "First Dialogue," 102–03.

³⁵ Gode, in Moran and Gode, *On the Origin of Language*, 174, with discussion on 169–70.

³⁶ Gode, *On the Origin of Language*, 169–70; Ulrich Gaier, "Myth, Mythology, New Mythology," in Adler and Köpke, *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, 178–79. Albert Schweitzer praised Herder's interpretive direction for the Synoptic Gospels, considering him "more than a generation in advance of his time," the precursor of Strauss on the question of the supernatural. In Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest Of The Historical Jesus: A Critical Study Of Its Progress From Reimarus To Wrede*, transl. W. Montgomery London: Adam and Charles Black, 1910), 35–37; Ustorf, "Rainbow," 387–88.

³⁷ Herder's work, *God, Some Conversations* (1787), paved the way for a more positive academic appraisal of Spinoza. For a brief but helpful treatment of the correspondence between Lessing, Jacobi and Herder which resulted in Herder's support of Spinoza, see Bunge, in Herder, *Against Pure Reason*, 23–

to the immanence of God in all things. Herder was ultimately denied a professorship at Göttingen under charges of atheism and heterodox missiology.³⁸

Herder on Religious Tolerance

By necessity, according to the Romantic philosopher, the key to sustainable global harmony and the perpetuity of indigenous worldviews is religious tolerance, not adherence to the biblical paradigm of repentance and belief as the components of saving faith.

As Herder brings “First Dialogue” to a forceful conclusion, he answers the question, “Would you like ‘national religions’ of all peoples on earth?”³⁹ With unmistakable clarity he answers “Yes,” with four qualifications: (1) Christianity is “the true conviction about God and human beings;” (2) Christian mission must not assert language or faith in a way that might tyrannize the language or character of another nation; (3) Christianity must not change the extant religion nor compromise the local essence of the people; (4) If the West is to have any influence abroad, it must first understand local languages and spiritual felt needs.⁴⁰

To achieve conciliatory intercultural engagement, Herder urges for Christian Westerners to abstain from any interaction (evangelization?) that might threaten the genuine consciousness of a nation, no matter how pagan its worldview and religious practices. Within Herder’s cultural-linguistic logic, as religion emerges from the language of a people, and language from the national consciousness, the cultic expressions and practices of a people represent the people themselves. As one collective body, like flower varieties in a field, there is now one unifying purpose on the earth.⁴¹ The “purpose” recalls the ethical character of Herder’s definition of religion: “Every religion would strive, according to and within its own context, to be the better, no, the best of its kind without measuring and comparing itself to others.”⁴² Hence, for Christianity to assume a place of prominence in the garden of human consciousness is both intrusive and irrelevant.⁴³

Herder does not overlook the individual component to his vernacular consciousness theory. He closes “First Dialogue” with attention to the practical work of mission—engaging not just a people group but each person of it. On individuality he

25; and Steven D. Martinson, “Herder’s Life and Works,” in Adler and Köpke, *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, 32–33.

³⁸ Ustorf, “Rainbow,” 387.

³⁹ Herder, “First Dialogue,” 105.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Herder explains his field and garden metaphor: “In the same way, the human race would become one family, which it truly is and must be, with the most diverse characters and national religions, and it would *strive toward one purpose*.” Herder, “First Dialogue,” 106. Emphasis in original.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ The biblical doctrines of total inability and sin do not appear to factor into Herder’s understanding of humanity and culture. If there is to be religious and national peace on the global scale, Christianity must not promote itself as “a supreme shepherding nation” whose “foreign language or religion will tyrannize the language and character of another nation.” *Ibid.*, 105.

avers, “In the end all individuals would possess their own religions, just as they would possess their own hearts, their own convictions and languages.”⁴⁴ Peace on earth must be achieved both on the national and the individual scale through mutual respect, tolerance, and the acceptance of global and individual religious pluralism. A peace-bearing, globally sensitive Christian must be unassuming and unassailing in the face of conflicting worldviews.⁴⁵

The Emergence of Vernacular Theologies

Herder’s views resonate in today’s missiology. Local vernacular constructions of theology are commonly believed to have emerged as an overt anti-colonialist reaction to and dissociation from the purportedly deleterious theological effects of modern-era Western theology on target populations. These groups are viewed as holding fundamentally different cognitive approaches to communication, learning, and the assimilation of truth.

The emergent “vernacular, contextual, local, national, ethnic, or global theologies” common in the Global Church of the Majority World continue to yield surprising challenges to systematically oriented theologians unaccustomed to the emerging patterns of non-linear thought and dissemination.⁴⁶ In addition, homegrown theological concepts might be quite abstract from scriptural teaching. They might represent an unchecked, pandemic disregard of cultural sins and surrounding religions which open the door to syncretism and inappropriate religious pluralism. The search for theological relevance in the globalized context appears to place current contextualization approaches at greater risk of pluralism and syncretism in the Third World.⁴⁷ When the culturally dependent Global Church becomes the interpreter of biblical exegesis, the resultant theology might appear culturally significant yet have little to do with the original author’s intention for the text.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁵ Herder concludes, “No one would be allowed to judge the innermost heart of another.... In this way the so-called propagation and expansion of Christianity would win a different character.... Some useless trouble could have been spared in this way.” Ibid., 105.

⁴⁶ J. V. Taylor preceded most contemporary Western cultural anthropologists with a now ubiquitous question: “Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?” In John Vernon Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM, 1963), 16.

⁴⁷ The Global Church’s search for theological significance has led to the circular process of discovering meaning through cultural filters. See Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, 128–29, 130; Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, 250–53, esp. p. 251.

⁴⁸ Ghanaian Anglican lay scholar John Pobee collocates extrabiblical Africanisms within the greater whole of cultural identity, forcefully declaring, “I am first an African and second a Christian.” In John S. Pobee, “I Am First an African and Second a Christian,” in *Indian Missiological Review* 10, no. 3 (July 1989): 268–77. For an evaluation of African-Christian complementarity in Anglicanism, see Cephas N. Omenyo, and Eric B. Anum, *Trajectories of Religion in Africa: Essays in Honour of John S. Pobee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi [Brill], 2014), 137–39.

Anti-colonialist proponents have raised few flags concerning the long-term effects of sub-biblical vernacular theologizing on the Global Church.⁴⁹ The hesitation to engage clear abuses of Scripture appears largely rooted in hindsight bias.⁵⁰ Anti-colonialism might be recognized as historical fact on the world scale. Yet causation is not sufficiently established to prove that Christianity's demographic shift to the "self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating"⁵¹ Global Church of the Majority World is a negative response to previous Western attempts at Christianization,⁵² which has resulted in an increasing distance from Western theological thought and practice.⁵³

⁴⁹ As an example of missiological ambivalence, Fuller Theological Seminary's William Dyrness observes several ethnically distinct contexts to suggest that the construction of theology is a largely non-critical task. He asks: "Does all this suggest a different way (or many different ways) of doing theology?" Felt needs and socio-cultural concerns inform his postulations to the degree that he ultimately finds theological convergence between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism in Christianizing local worldviews (in William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 22–23). Along similar lines, Birmingham's John Parratt's work on vernacular theologies leads him to conclude that extra-biblical sources of revelation are necessary in order to develop a multifaceted theology capable of a multi-dimensional view of God (see John Parratt, ed. *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). In an extreme example, Roman Catholic priest, Michael Amaladoss, openly suggests that Asian contextualizers distance themselves from Western Christology and rather search pagan literature characters, culture, and symbols for aspects of the person of Jesus Christ. Amaladoss offers nine common Asian categories for the person of Jesus Christ in order to propose a viable correspondence between Christianity and Eastern religions (see Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006). His pluralistic constructions are now under papal investigation (see David Gibson, "Vatican Threatens Rev. Michael Amaladoss, Jesuit Theologian In India, With Censure," news report [May 13, 2014], accessed March 10, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/13/michael-amaladoss-censure_n_5311215.html).

⁵⁰ The claim that evangelical efforts floundered in overseas ministry needs evaluation. Hiebert provides helpful delineations concerning evangelical "obsolescence," noting that increased education of local populations led to greater cultural interaction which ultimately helped the West reassess their sense of cultural superiority. See Paul G. Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism," *Missiology: An International Review*, 19, no. 3 (July, 1991): 267. Furthermore, Osborne anticipates that the rise of vernacular theologies might in certain cases signal the maturing of biblical truth from the indigenous people the gospel was intended to affect. See Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, 428.

⁵¹ Henry Venn's 1854 "three self" definition of the autonomous indigenous church was considered a neutral description of anti-colonialism in practice. See Terry, et. al, *Missiology*, 209; Paul G. Hiebert, in Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 28; Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism to Globalism," 267.

⁵² Not all contemporary historical surveys agree that the practices and presuppositions of modern-era missionaries were laden with cultural ignorance and propositionalist arrogance. On the one hand, Hiebert sides with Wilbert Shenk that New Englanders like Jonathan Edwards insisted on Puritanical ideals and identity among tribal converts, making for poor contextualization practices. On the other hand, however, McDermott and Netland contradict these generalizations with details of Edwards' great pains to compare religions and contextualize the strictly orthodox gospel with a culturally appropriate orthopraxy. See Hiebert, "Beyond Anti-Colonialism," 264–65; Wilbert R. Shenk, "The Changing Role of the Missionary: From 'Civilization' to Contextualization," in C. Norman Kraus, ed., *Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), 35; Gerald R. McDermott, and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (New York, NY; Oxford University Press, 2014), 20–21.

⁵³ Western-trained Nigerian Victor Ezigbo traces palpable Nigerian anti-colonial sentiments while noting common misinterpretations and distortions of modern era teaching which highlight the difficulty of linking African impressions to actual Western abuses, especially in the area of Christology. Furthermore

Dissenting voices question whether conservative, orthodox approaches promoted during the modern era are obsolete. Does mission theory today indeed require the repeal of Western systematic methods in order to engage productively in local contexts?⁵⁴ A minority of evangelicals further disagrees that the Global Church has summarily rejected all forms of systematic theologizing. Conservative practitioners and theorists who recognize the continuity of systematic methods in the Majority World now raise opposing questions and present more balanced case studies.⁵⁵ Evidence of new global communities which confess orthodox bibliology to the degree of Western conservative evangelicals, yet with a local voice wholly their own, thus betrays many of the negative assumptions of anti-colonialism.⁵⁶

he recognizes the heavy influence of postmodern scholarship in African theological development, but stops short of asking to what degree postfoundational Westerners with hindsight bias influence Nigerian anti-colonialism today. See Victor Ezigbo, *Contextualizing the Christ-Event: A Christological Study of Interpretations and Appropriations of Jesus Christ in Nigerian Christianity* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2008), 1–13.

⁵⁴ Conservative evangelicals Steve Strauss and Ken Baker exegetically demonstrate how the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 successfully staved off racial tensions in view of a “fellowshipping unity without cultural uniformity” which did not sacrifice essential theological parameters for true gospel unity. To Strauss and Baker, successful contextualization is possible only when it is grounded upon a “theological foundation.” They offer sound ethical conclusions which stem from the transcultural gospel: “People groups should be able to accept the gospel and become fully a part of the universal church without giving up their core ethnicity. At the same time, this contextual openness does not preclude cultural sensitivity and respect toward the rest of the believing community.” In Steve Strauss and Ken Baker, “Acts 15 and the Purpose of Acts: A Model of Contextualization?,” in *The Theory and Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliott E. Johnson*, edited by H. Wayne House and Forrest Weiland (Silverton, OR: Lampion Press, 2015), 335–51, with quotes on p. 348.

⁵⁵ The paucity of inerrantist, conservative, evangelical research is alarming. Church networks and scholars who are able to pinpoint non-Western conservative communities on the global theological map appear reticent thus far to refute the sweeping claims of anti-colonialism in print or media. Of the meager conservative resources, the following demand consideration. See Robert W. Yarbrough, “The Future of Cognitive Reverence for the Bible,” *JETS* 57, no. 1 (2014): 5–18; Mark Tatlock, ed., *The Implications of Inerrancy for the Global Church*, Sun Valley, CA: Xulon Press, 2015; Mark Tatlock, ed., *Christ Alone: The Uniqueness of the Gospel and Its Impact on the World*, Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2017; Chris Williams, “Urgency for Inerrant Theological Education Today,” speech, TMAI Symposium, March 2, 2015, Burbank, CA, accessed July 31, 2016, <http://tmai.org/getinvolved/specialproject/audio/>. Also see Beale’s link between Anti-Colonialism and Postmodernism in his Addendum to Appendix 1, in Gregory K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges in Biblical Authority*, Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008. Blomberg calls for a return to sound biblical interpretation by proponents of liberation theology, feminism, politics, and religious pluralism. See Craig L. Blomberg, “The Globalization of Biblical Interpretation: A Test Case John 3–4,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 1–15; and *Ibid.*, “Where Should Twenty-First-Century Evangelical Biblical Scholarship Be Heading?” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11, no. 2 (2001): 162–72. Moreau offers what might be a more balanced evangelical methodology for contextualization. See Moreau, *Contextualization in World Missions: Mapping and Assessing Evangelical Models*, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2012. For an insightful survey of the role and use of Scripture by continent, see Pauline Hoggarth, Fergus Macdonald, Bill Mitchell, and Knud Jorgenson, eds., *Bible in Mission*, Regnum Edinburgh Centenary Series, Volume 18, Oxford, UK; Regnum Books International, 2013.

⁵⁶ Ethnically distinct modes of communication and patterns of thought will be equally faithful to doctrine insofar as Scripture is their common denominator. The Master’s Academy International (TMAI), for example, has furnished a series of current case studies which document several hundred local churches on six continents which propagate theological method similar to that of conservative modern-era missionaries. The often-underrepresented reality of biblically sound Majority World churches provides a living

Conservative scholarship submits that the shift to reactive anti-colonialism is less present than the majority of publications might report. Also, where independent, local expressions which disengage from the supreme authority of Scripture and the strict parameters of orthodoxy are present, the local believing population is placed in sub-biblical and theologically inconsistent waters. The character of vernacular theologies is therefore no longer the most pertinent question for research. The question is whether Western reporting has offered unqualified support of sub-biblical or unorthodox beliefs and practices in an effort to shift Western mission theory away from the propositionalism inherent to conservative bibliology.

Global Religious and Theological Dialogue

Missiological publications identify sub-orthodox ideals for relating Christianity to world religions and to indigenous Christian theologians. Recent dialogue methods between the West and the Majority World evidence ways in which contemporary evangelical contextualization studies have shifted epistemologically away from conservative bibliology.⁵⁷ Roundtable interfaith exchange proposes to offer a Christian alternative to local worldviews, but courtesies have led to the sacrificing of distinctly Christian theological ground potentially in favor of pluralistic ideals.⁵⁸ The call for

example that the claims of anti-colonialism have been to some degree exaggerated. See "Our Purpose" and "Ministry Distinctives," web content, accessed July 31, 2016, <http://www.tmai.org/about/purpose/>. Also see the volumes edited by Mark Tatlock, *The Implications of Inerrancy for the Global Church*, and *Christ Alone*, which present a collection of sound doctrinal treatments of bibliology, soteriology, and Christology by several Majority World leaders ministering in their contexts. See also Moonjang Lee, "Reading the Bible in the Non-Western Church: An Asian Dimension," in *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, eds. Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 149–50.

⁵⁷ For a conservative survey of the rise of pluralism in the West, see Herbert Pollitt's detailed tracing of the origins and development of several contemporary Christian ecumenical councils which influence the missiological landscape today. Herbert J. Pollitt, *The Inter-Faith Movement: The New Age Enters the Church* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 3–23.

⁵⁸ Recently, Miroslav Volf's proposal for greater reconciliation concerning Christian-Muslim relations demonstrates how interfaith dialogue might lead to theological pluralism. He regards monotheism as a common point of contact between Christian and Islamic doctrine. To Volf, distinctions between the divine person of God and Allah are less important than the commonalities of both being a god of love who requires an ethical response toward one's neighbors (see Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*, San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011). Jason Medearis, who contends for Christocentric dialogue (see Jason Medearis, *Speaking of Jesus: The Art of Not-Evangelism*, Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2011), highly supports Volf's methodology, noting in a blog comment that he "approaches the issue from theological, philosophical, etymological, historical and simply biblical perspectives." (in Georges Housney, "Analysis of Paul's Acts 17," article [April 4, 2011], accessed March 11, 2017, www.biblicalmissiology.org/2011/04/04/analysis-of-pauls-acts-17/). But Medearis' view of Volf appears too generous. Volf reasons that because Jesus is the final revelation of God, "a person can be both a practicing Muslim and 100 percent Christian without denying core convictions of belief and practice." Volf later comments in response to criticism, "In holding many Muslim convictions and engaging in many Muslim practices, you can still be 100 percent Christian.... I say that one can be a 100 percent Christian, and engage in some specifically Muslim practices." See Collin Hansen, "Do Muslims and Christians Worship the Same God?," online editorial (June 28, 2011), accessed March 11, 2017, <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/do-muslims-and-christians-worship-the-same-god/>). Not all evangelicals support Volf and Medearis in approaching the religious roundtable with theological leniency. McDermott and Netland, in their recent work

mutual dialogue between the Western and Majority World seems chiefly heralded by missiologists and ecumenical councils who view the West as rigidly Hellenistic and largely unhelpful to non-Westerners who think and learn through non-European means.⁵⁹

Intercultural dialogue between contemporary Western theology and the vernacular expressions of Majority World Christianity seem at the forefront of recent approaches to move beyond anti-colonialist separatism toward the unification of the Christian faith into a globalized whole.⁶⁰ However, missiologists appear hesitant or

on Trinitarianism, are not satisfied with Volf's pluralism. They detail how his "god of love" concept leads to methodological errors which both compromise the Christian gospel and poorly represent the tenets of Islam. In their estimation, Volf risks sacrificing theological ground by avoiding theological conflicts and upholding common values through civil interaction, even when doing so ignores the centuries-old theological gap between the two faith systems and serves no overarching purpose except to limit propositional evangelism. See McDermott and Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions*, 62–65.

⁵⁹ For example, Parratt contends that the West's "Hellenistic model" of the New Testament reveals a philosophical rigidity which does not adequately relate to the less-cerebral cultures of Africa and Asia who theologize through orality and symbol (see Parratt, *An Introduction to Third World*, 14–15). Contrarily, Bauckham recognizes that the original Gospel writers wrote for an "open category" audience, persuading for faith in all contexts, and thus demanding *specific* application to all peoples *generally* (see Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written," in *The Gospels for All Christians—Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 46). The "Seoul Declaration" represents an early global commitment to a Third-World evangelical theology which "addresses the questions of people living in situations characterized by religious pluralism, secularism, resurgent Islam, or Marxist totalitarianism." However, the hermeneutic through which the authority of Scripture will be born in and through the church appears to be the church itself. Theology from the "ground up" is necessarily subjective and dynamic due to the varied Global Church being the interpretive key for biblical exegesis. It ought to be asked to what degree the postfoundational commitments of Pannenberg and the developments of the early spread of postmodernism influenced this sub-orthodox framework. See "The Seoul Declaration: Toward an Evangelical Theology for the Third World," *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, Volume 7, Issue 2 (April, 1983): 64–65; also in Bong Rin Ro, and Ruth Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible and Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 22–23. Later, and more explicitly, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) concurred: "One of the most striking developments in EATWOT has been the challenge presented by some members to our common Judeo-Christian tradition. The living religions of Africa and Asia call for a conscious incorporation of theologies other than Christian into our thinking. This is especially true about Christology. It is impossible to accept that the majority of humankind would be deprived of the benefits of redemption and salvation. The Jesus of Nazareth should be expanded and considered also as the total and cosmic Christ." In K. C. Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies—Commonalities and Divergences* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 199. Parratt exposes their foray into liberation theology. Once they dialogued with national theologians from Africa and Asia, EATWOT found its doctrines "redefined to take in culture and religious pluralism alongside social and political analysis." Parratt, *Introduction to Third World*, 11.

⁶⁰ See Hiebert's general vision in Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 29. The Majority World's contribution to theology might provide a more complete picture of systematic theology than could be offered through the Western theological heritage. Bridging between the two increasingly separate worlds is a new and open-ended discussion among conservative evangelicals. See *Ibid.*, 311–14. Stephen Pardue has recently urged the evangelical West to listen to the Global Church with the express intention of challenging Western Reformation doctrines. To him, the five "solas" no longer represent what the Spirit seems to be teaching across the world. His view of culture's influence in developing theology raises questions as to how open he believes the canon to be today, and which Reformation doctrines he would suggest revising. See Stephen Pardue, "What Hath Wheaton To Do With Nairobi? Toward Catholic and Evangelical Theology," in *JETS* 58, no. 4 (2015): 757–70.

might be unable to define specific ways in which Western theological reflection is enhanced or redefined by dialogue with vernacular theologies. Genuinely important local contributions to global theology appear lacking, though certain cultural insights might shine helpful light on established Western teaching.⁶¹

Because biblical definitions of orthodoxy have received meager treatment in evaluating vernacular theologies, practical solutions for a united global theology are still being discussed. The concept of a globalized theological dialogue appears undergirded by the general presupposition that meaningful theology can be constructed apart from the singular base of Scripture.⁶² Few, if any, practical, reproducible solutions or models have been promoted for evaluating the soundness of locally propagated doctrines.⁶³ Since the first wave of sweeping interest in the topic, forty years

⁶¹ Western theology seems largely unaffected by ethnic reflections. For example, in Cameroonian Christology, the Gbaya people relate Jesus' ministry of community healing to the *Soreh* tree, known for playing a role in tribal reconciliation and community. Flemming promotes the *Soreh* as an example of how the missionary might effectively contextualize the work of Christ, and in so doing favors the potential of a richer, more nuanced global theology which implicitly downplays the risks of unorthodox formulations. Flemming, however, appears reticent to indicate how the *Soreh* illustration connects to Scripture, (such as connecting *Soreh* activity to the evangelistic ministry of reconciliation in 2 Cor 5:11–21) nor if it will indeed be framed within appropriate biblical bounds so that it is useful to the local ministry of the Word. See Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament—Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 299–300.

⁶² For example, Charles Kraft minimizes the presuppositions of conservative theology by exploring cultural and behavioral insights under the assumption that they might in some way elevate the role of man in mediating divine revelation (see discussion in Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study of Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, rev. ed. [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005], 152–68). According to Grant Osborne, the cultural process of deriving theology leaves Kraft with “too little that is supracultural. The Bible as he sees it is too culture bound, with too little theological truth that carries over.... a canon within a canon” (in Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006], 415–16). Also, Todd Johnson and Cindy Wu have recently analyzed worldwide religious demographics through the interpretive lens of “family” and now urge for an ecumenical interfaith dialogue that embraces a corporate human identity above a distinctly Christian one (see Todd M. Johnson, and Cindy M. Wu. *Our Global Families—Christians Embracing Common Identity in a Changing World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015; for a more extreme dialogue approach, see C. Norman Kraus, *An Intrusive Gospel? Christian Mission in the Postmodern World*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁶³ Ott and Netland present past proposals as to how a unified global theology might be communicated and formed, such as Schreiter's four-fold approach to theology (in Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*), Kevin Vanhoozer's missional “Theodrama” approach (in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?” Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 85–126), and Ott's modes of theologizing (in *Ibid.*, 320–22). These theoretical approaches arise in the West, rather than from the Global Church, suggesting that indigenous voices still need to reach a point at which they can productively engage with the West rather than react against it. To reach a global theology, Ott and Netland propose the West adopt strategies to foster a conservative ecumenism subject to international peer review by emerging local voices who have the potential to internationalize academia (see Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 329–36). The researchers propose a revision of systematic theology according to six areas of Western development which relate continuously to the Global Church: Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, soteriology, anthropology, and missiology (N.B. the surprising exclusion of bibliography; see the conclusion to Ott and Netland, *Globalizing Theology*, 309–36). Timothy Tennent attempts a conservative methodology for interreligious dialogue with Asian religions and proposes an integrative global systematic theology based on select systematic theological categories (see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

of research have still not produced long-range, longitudinal case studies which would help establish the usefulness of ethnic theologies in their own contexts. Furthermore, there are still no tested models of implementation to ascertain the viability of Western and Majority World dialogue in creating a hybrid global theology.⁶⁴

The corpus of contextualization research thus far evidences a general hesitation to either affirm Scripture as the only Spirit-inspired source of propositional revelation, or criticize sub-biblical vernacular theologies as doctrinally flawed. Questions largely unanswered by the academic community highlight the tension in many evangelical scholars today between the biblical call for propositionalism and the socio-cultural notions of postfoundationalism. Do the parameters of biblical orthodoxy apply to all cultures in all generations, or might they be modified where there might be a theological impasse? At what point does cultural accommodation require a change in the role of Scripture?

Another generation of global leaders and educators seems destined to accept the misleading evidences and fallacious claims that at least implicitly call for the abolition of rigid biblical orthodoxy in defining Christianity on the global plane.

Conclusion

German Romantic, Johann Gottfried Herder, functioned in the roles of pastor and linguistic philosopher at a time in which Christianity was rapidly expanding from the Western seat of Europe to the challenging frontiers of the indigenous world. A formidable mission theorist, Herder worked avidly in the fledgling years of conservative Protestant global evangelization to construct the link between thought and humanity, such that the language of man became the basis of the religion of man—a vernacular consciousness. His secular enterprise distanced him from the biblical claim that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the universally authoritative revelation of God, sufficient to save and sanctify individuals from all generations and cultures who repent of sin. True of many thinkers of his day, Herder followed his fellow philosophers away from a literal, plain-sense hermeneutic into the realms of abstruse allegory, and thus vehemently parted company with the orthodox doctrines of his Protestant roots.

Current evangelical mission studies appear, for the most part, not to recognize the influences of Herder upon the broad topic of the vernacular consciousness. Yet, his distinctive call for toleration and the appreciation of vernacular religious expression has been continually voiced especially since the 1980s. Several points of overlap emerge between Johann Herder's school of thought and that of contemporary contextualization research.

First, negative assumptions of anti-colonialism appear strongly rooted in anti-propositionalism in both eras. The postfoundationalist dismissal of absolute truth

⁶⁴ Indeed, some missiologists question the likelihood of ever reaching a legitimately globalized theology sufficient for all contexts. Over two decades ago, Dyrness cautioned: "We must not suppose that we are after some grand synthesis—a kind of universal theology that will apply in every place. It is clear by now that we cannot expect this, at least not until we stand before Christ." In William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 195–96.

closely parallels the Counter-Enlightenment move away from fideistic reason, although the epistemological core of conservative evangelicalism differs greatly from Enlightenment convictions.

Second, theorists today seem to hold inexact bibliological positions. They appear generally reticent to address or correct the Scriptural incongruences of vernacular religious symbols and expressions. The desire to be West-neutral and dialogue-focused in the face of conflicting worldviews approaches the distinctly Herderian ideal of seeking the validity of all worldviews for their time, place, and people. Bibliological ambiguity has thus far held back the discussion of corrective engagement for the biblical advancement of the Global Church.

Third, linguistic and cultural studies often employ theologically inconsistent hypotheses which result in illegitimate conclusions. The doctrines of total depravity and the noetic effects of sin factor little into proposals for evangelistic and dialogic accommodation. The corruption of man's soul and cultural mind necessitates an epistemological shift toward the objective truth of the gospel, rather than vice versa.

Fourth, the anthropology of Herder and some contemporary researchers might therefore be similarly soteriologically flawed. "Ground up" contextualization models downplay the biblical call to a redemption which subjects national identity and social dynamics to the unchanging standards of an other-worldly Christian culture in order to please God. The plea for radical holiness, separation from the world, and possible martyrdom as fools for Christ is conspicuously replaced by felt-need investigations and studies on socio-cultural relevance.

Fifth, the study of vernacular theologies opens the door to unconstrained religious round-table dialogue and religious pluralism. That Christ's uniqueness demands unequivocal allegiance was an intolerable position for Herder. The anthropologically driven missiology of today appears to speak a similar language, urging for an ecumenism which both promotes and adopts vernacular theologies, no matter how seemingly unbiblical.

Through conservative evangelical lenses, contemporary contextualization trends align unconsciously but notably with the Counter-Enlightenment linguistic and cultural theories of Johann Gottfried Herder. Yet, scant and indefinite bibliological treatment today cannot help but indicate an overall epistemological shift away from the authority of Scripture which was a lynchpin to Herder's pluralism.

Almost thirty years ago, Hesselgrave and Rommen warned of unconscious epistemological shifts from orthodox Christianity within contextualization studies:

If the Christian contextualizer consciously or unconsciously shifts ground and builds on a view of Scripture and theological knowledge that accords better with one or another of the non-Christian views, he not only sacrifices the uniqueness of the Bible but also finds himself standing on the shaken epistemological foundations of other faiths.⁶⁵

The failure to seriously engage with the absolute claims of Scripture calls into question the ability of the majority of mission theorists to advance contextualization in an

⁶⁵ Hesselgrave and Rommen, *Contextualization*, 143.

evangelical direction. The emerging Herderian attitude reveals an important yet unasked question: Is contemporary evangelical missiology more heterodox than evangelical?