THE ETHNOI IN MISSION WITH THE TRIUNE GOD
Contextual Theology Working Group

Roy I. Sano

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THE CONTEXT AND CONTEXTUALIZING

The Context: — The paper is written from the perspective of an Asian North American responsible for overseeing the Los Angeles Area of The United Methodist Church. The four hundred churches and 110,000 members in the Area cover Southern California, Hawaii, Guam, and Saipan. As such it is a portion of the Pacific Basin, where the weight of U.S. trade shifted in 1978, and world trade in 1980. Amidst the major changes in the post Cold War era, nations in Asia, in the Pacific, as well as in North, Central, and South America have rushed to secure a place for their interests in this region. The scramble has intensified economic rivalries and raised serious justice issues, escalated massive movements of people and heightened cultural exchanges. U.S. dominance is sought by controlling the region’s airways, ocean routes, and underwater with sophisticated surveillance, counter insurgency networks, and redeployment of armed forces.

In recent years, long time residents, particularly in Southern California, were traumatized by transitions in the economy. Despite stoic denials and sly evasions, many of these residents are reeling from the inundation of a dizzying diversity of newcomers and their cultures. Pent up frustrations over failure to protect their familiar worlds recently erupted from the ballot box in attacks on immigrants and affirmative action. Recent arrivals, on their part, consistently come from homogeneous societies and are therefore less prepared to relate to strangers around them. Inability to obtain acceptance or find gainful employment spawns gang violence and explodes in the fury of the 1992 urban uprising in Los Angeles. Social tensions were further exacerbated by a quick succession of record-breaking natural disasters, including typhoons and hurricanes, landslides and fires, droughts and the costliest earthquake in U.S. history. A measure of hospitality is fortunately rising in some neighborhoods, but a pervasive alienation still drives people into cocoons for personal pursuits or enclaves for cozy friendships with narrow interests. In the face of demographic and cultural shifts, economic and ecological disruptions, we face enormous challenges as we seek an inclusive community in the Body of Christ and promote a sense of community in the body politic which is necessary to be human.

Contextualizing: — The theme for the 10th Oxford Institute is therefore particularly appropriate when it invites us to explore issues of community and power in relation to the triune God. Efforts to contextualize theology in various settings for the last 25 years have increasingly made evident the possibilities of a reformulated trinitarian doctrine addressing our situations.
We contextualize faith by entering into the pathos and anguish of our struggles and stalemates, our setbacks and sufferings when we try to rectify wrongs or to fulfill our deepest aspirations. We give meaning to these experiences as we process them through the cultural and religious traditions we have received. Critical reflection on, or reasoning about, these traditions uncovers the crucial stories and scripts, symbols and rituals which are actually at work. It also reformulates traditions so they will process experiences more adequately and offer better guidance to promote the divine reign and realm (Matthew 6:33). The Bible has consistently provided promising options. Contextualizing therefore leads us through rounds of a spiral where we use the so-called Wesleyan quadrilateral. The spiral promotes faithful ministries of the ethnoi (marginalized people, or minjung in Korean) in mission with the triune God.

I will focus on the “economic trinity.” The beautiful picture of the divine community portrayed in the “immanent trinity” can seduce us into sublime euphoria which distracts us from involvements in the nitty gritty of God’s mission in the world. While we need a glow of hope in our arduous sojourn, the economic trinity directs us more sharply to the Good News of the triune God unrelenting in the divine mission. This vision braces us for participation in the grand drama of that mission through repentance and faith.

GOD AS CREATOR

1. God creates us out of nothing and says we are good: — An openness toward the strangers rises like tender shoots in some quarters. At the same time, however, long time residents and recent immigrants feel a loss of their distinctive identity and question their worth. Defensive reliance on a narrow strand in our theological heritage dismisses these concerns. We have learned, however, from the ferment for human dignity astir globally over the last half of this century that faith directly addresses these issues.

The God who creates ex nihilo, out of nothing, offers hope to us when we fall into oblivion and become nobodies. The Creator broods over the “formless void and darkness (obscurity) covering the face of the deep” (Genesis 1:2). This God calls us forth and gives us a distinct identity which is not just “good,” but “very good” (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). We who were no people become the people of God (1 Peter 2:10). Praises be to God!

Excesses in affirming or recovering our distinct identity and worth can, however, degenerate into a quest for ethnic cleansing and a zeal for an exclusive religious orthodoxy. This applies to all people, regardless of their race or gender, age or station, religion or culture. Ezra broke up racially mixed marriages (Ezra 9:1-4; 10:6-22) and Nehemiah excluded Gentiles from the temple (Nehemiah 10:28-31; 12:44-47). Other pathetic excesses in the same vein moved leaders to prohibit cross breeding animals, sowing two kinds of seed in the same field, and wearing garments made from two different materials (Leviticus 19:19). We obviously need other stories to correct these excesses. While God separates creatures from each other (Genesis 1), this does not justify segregation or ideologies of racial superiority.
2. The Creator continues to diversify human families: — Celebrating diversity offers one corrective. Many who were indifferent to the previous point are troubled by diversity which threaten their familiar landscape. “From many one” (e pluribus unum) is, after all, the creative and hallowed move, according to the motto which launched the U.S. Republic, 1789.

The Bible challenges the dis-ease with diversity. The Creator acting as Providential Caretaker diversifies the descendants of key figures like Adam and Eve, Noah and his family, Abraham and Sarah (Genesis chapters 5 and 10; 17:3-6). Hence, the Apostle Paul says in Athens, “From one ancestor, (God as the Source) made all nations to inhabit the whole earth” (Acts 17:26). “From one many” is a hallowed part of the biblical story of creation.

3. The Creator mixes creatures: — A further corrective to idolatry about our unique identity appears in affirming mixture in our heritage. Mixing of cultures, and most particularly, religious traditions, are generally resisted. For example, many in this Area oppose immigrants because they see in them waves of barbarians bursting the frontier barriers and contaminating holy places in neighborhoods, schools, and churches. The immigrants themselves also resist mixed marriages and combining cultures in their own households and churches.

It has therefore become important to recognize the Caretaker mixing distinct identities of people and using persons with mixtures of ancestries and cultures. The most telling instance appears in Jesus (Matthew 1:1-17). His ancestors include three Gentiles, namely, Tamar, a harlot of Canaanite descent (Genesis 38:13); Rahab, a Gentile prostitute in Jericho (Joshua 6:25); and Ruth, a Moabite widow, who married Boaz, a Jew (Ruth 1:4; 4:13-22). Jesus Christ, our Savior and Sovereign, is therefore a descendant from racially mixed marriages which Ezra opposed. Similarly, the Apostle Paul, the great missionary figure in early Christianity, was himself a bi-cultural person, a Jew heavily shaped by Hellenism. The work of the Providential Caretaker, who cultivates the ancestry of Jesus and oversees the upbringing of Paul, invites us to welcome persons who come from mixed marriages and cultures. They can be agents in God’s mission.

While we seek to move with the creative and providential care of this God, we introduce sin and evils at all points. God in Christ leads us to rectify what has gone awry.

GOD IN CHRIST

1. Christ transforms us while affirming our distinct identities: — We are deeply indebted at some point in our sojourn to missionary efforts which transformed us and our ancestors. In the midst of the resurgence of repressed historic cultures in the human family, we see Christians in those cultures and life styles naming limits to those changes. As people incarnate their faith in new cultural expressions, some persons reject these expressions as misguided instances of syncretism, a return to paganism, and even an abomination.
A vivid example of the negative response appeared in the outcry against Chung Hyun Kyung after she delivered her keynote speech at the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, 1991. She subsequently faced threats on her life. Professor Chung contextualized her Christian faith with Shamanism from her Korean cultural heritage. Many of us who applauded her efforts did so because we had seen instances of cultural imperialism in missions. It is not too much to say some converts were expected to commit cultural suicide when they accepted Christ. “Become like us and we will like you,” is what some of us heard.

Our conversion involved death to our sins and rising to newness of life expressed with a unique cultural expression. This recalls the historic decision of the early church concerning Gentile converts. They were not subjected to circumcision because Gentiles were not required to become Jews before they became Christians. However much the Savior transforms us, the Savior does not contradict or violate the work of the Source who creates and cultivates our distinct identities, including the cultures which shape us. Similarly, while there is diversity of “persons,” unique attributes and actions, in the triune God, God is still one, as we learned from Judaism.

2. The Order of Salvation in the History of Salvation: — We have learned from the struggles of people in the last half of the 20th century that a lot more is required for community than a sense of worth and personal salvation. First, we learned the need for liberation from the broader systemic, ideological, and environmental domination and exploitation. People fought for freedom from European colonialism, from the neocolonialism based in the East and West, and from persisting instances of internal colonialism in racism, sexism, classism, and in policies which threatened indigenous people. The struggle is now directed against U.S. based domination in the post Cold War era. Second, these efforts tried to reunite people whose communities were destroyed by colonizing policies and practices. Third, these movements struggled to create liveable space by rebuilding neighborhoods, nations, and the natural environment.

Despite their moral ambiguities and flows, many of us sensed a divine presence in these movements and therefore supported them. Others dismissed them as secular and claimed they diverted us from the Good News in Jesus Christ. Persistence in supporting these movements through our denominational boards of mission and social action eventually heightened the objections and turned into acrimonious attacks from well-financed, self-styled “biblical caucuses” of Wesleyans. What had priority for the critics was the Wesleyan “order of salvation,” including justification, sanctification, and perfection. The Latin titles, ordo salutis and via salutis, give the doctrine a sacrosanct status. The conflict deepened in North America and was exported globally.

In examining the Bible, we cannot minimize the importance of the order of salvation in the work of the Savior. We see its importance in tragic instances of justice advocates and liberators who failed to attend to their own personal sins. What the critics overlook, however, is the biblical approach of subsuming the ordo salutis under the History of Salvation.

The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel offer a paradigm by placing the ordo salutis (Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27) within the wider drama in the History of Salvation (Jeremiah 31:31-
32; Ezekiel 36:24). The History of Salvation which interprets recent movements first appeared in [1] the exodus from Egypt, [2] covenant at Sinai, and [3] sojourn to create a new home. The story was updated in the face of the Babylonian captivity, as well as Persian and Hellenistic domination. Space will not permit illustrations of the same twofold story of salvation integral to the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and the Apocalypse under Roman occupation and persecution.¹

When the 6th Oxford Institute dealt with liberation in 1977, it located liberation in sanctification.² The move was a clear case of cultural imperialism based on a Wesleyan bias. The rich contributions from liberation theologians which had burst on the theological scene at that point could hardly be subsumed under sanctification in the ordo salutis. The tradition of the elders which made a fetish of the ordo salutis nullified the Word of God (Matthew 15:8-9, Mark 7:7-8). Attentive examination of the Bible would have urged us to subsume the ordo salutis, including sanctification, under the History of Salvation, which begins with liberation. With more than a century of studying histories of salvation in the Bible and after recent scholarship on centuries of resistance and revolutionary movements influenced by the Reformed traditions, no systematic treatment of salvation, evangelism, and holiness is defendable today which does not incorporate the ordo or via salutis in the larger sweep of the work of Jesus Christ as Savior and Sovereign in the History of Salvation or Redemption.³

**GOD AS THE CONSUMMATOR**

1. **Community in the consummation of God's realm:** — We all know that economic and political injustices, as well as social and cultural exclusion, destroy communities.⁶ I direct attention to a subtle exclusion of Asian North American middle class in the church and society. Reflections based on the discipline of political economics indicate that middle class Asian North Americans may live “above the poverty line,” but they remain “below the power line.” A preoccupation with economic status has led us to overlook this political reality. The issue is that the distinct needs and contributions of Asian North Americans are thereby excluded from the outreach of white middle class progressives.

What is sad is the false consciousness which affects these progressives. They miss the fact that they are caught in same political reality and are therefore marginalized. Although they are not manipulated, progressives are effectively managed. Although they are not oppressed, progressives are consistently outmaneuvered by principalities and powers operating through key individuals and institutions which are driven domestically, regionally, and globally by ideological forces and sanctions. However much their efforts may mitigate evil, the activism of white middle class progressives basically amounts to little more than the flaying of a “kept” people. The Mainline is now largely sidelined. It has become increasingly difficult to continue supporting the politically correct causes without confessing the charade in those noble efforts (Isaiah 6:5).

The false consciousness is a function of a powerful cultural force. Critical reflection reminiscent of the approach followed in cultural anthropology has directed attention to St.
George, the patron saint in an impressive array of European societies. He operates as an archetype for Christian identity and vocation. In many icons, St. George rides high on a white horse, dressed in shining armor. From his high point, St. George is slaying a dark dragon on the ground below him. He does this to rescue a helpless, fair damsel in the background pleading on her knees for help. We find here all the trappings for sexism, racism, and condescension (paternalism and maternalism) which discredit noble crusades and corrode community.

We struggle for an option to this prevailing cultural force which energizes evangelicals to save benighted and lost souls and rallies liberals to rescue poor and powerless victims. It has become useful in the Asian North American context to reflect on the biblical stories about the Jewish sojourn in the depths as well as in the heights of an alien society. People prominent in any rehearsal of Jewish history, like Joseph and Moses, Esther and Daniel offer illuminating options. Whether they were desperately deprived or whether they found fulfillment in high, if precarious, places, these models bear witness to God’s actions and to the responsibilities we have for ourselves, our people, and others.

The biblical stories therefore offer us correctives. First, God empowers “victims” to tackle their situations before rescuers arrived on the scene. No St. George was required. Second, if we eventually make our way into the power structure and even help existing structures function beneficially in some measure, we still remain aliens and guests. No St. George roams unhampered and triumphant. Third, acknowledging our marginality and seeing we still have a ways to go ironically becomes an opener for God to act through us (Hebrews 11:13-16). When we, therefore, walk humbly in faith with our God, we can love mercy and do justice (Micah 6:8; Matthew 23:23b). The racial ethnic minority middle class and white progressives who have accepted these realities for themselves begin addressing their sexism and racism, as well as their paternalism and maternalism. We thereby increase solidarity in mission with integrity and build in the church and society eschatological signs of hope for genuine community.

We long for the fulfillment of that eschatological vision of a truly inclusive community where we all have a place with our distinct identities. One vision appears in Revelation 7, where great numbers of people from the twelve tribes of Israel will be gathered around the throne of God. In addition, there will be many Gentiles, which no one could count, from every ethnoi, language, and dialect (Revelation 7:1-10). The inclusive vision reappears in Revelation 21, where the new Jerusalem will have twelve gates named after the tribes of Israel and the twelve foundations are named after the apostles. Judaism represents the entry points from all directions and the apostolic outreach to all people the foundations of the new City of Shalom. Finally we read that the gates will not be closed to the ethnoi and their rulers. Together they will bring in their glory and honor to the new community (Revelation 21:25-27). This community in the divine realm is multiethnic and multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-religious. Praise God!

2. Fruit and gifts of the Sanctifier: — Working for an inclusive community in missional efforts has reminded us of the crucial role which personal and spiritual qualities play. We have therefore appreciated the witness of our forebears who said the Sanctifier nurtures those qualities.
The Sanctifier does indeed cultivate the fruit of the Spirit in individuals (Galatians 5:22-23; Romans 5:1-5; 12:9-21; 2 Peter 1:5-11) and the gifts for their service through the same Spirit (Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11-13). These qualitative changes restore the divine image in us and therefore make us more humane toward one another. They offer tangible signs that God will be all in all (Ephesians 1:23; 4:6, 10) and will dwell in fullness in creation (Revelation 21). Because they are signs and not solutions, we look for more.

3. Empowerment for mission in the world: — Critical reflections on our efforts to promote an inclusive, life inducing community have brought to our attention additional operations of the Sanctifier and Consummator, especially in the baptism of Jesus. [1] We hear from John the Baptist how God had given Jesus a distinct identity (Mark 1:7). Immediately after he was [2] baptized by water, [3] the Holy Spirit descended on him with a witness. Jesus was a “son” or child, and the “Beloved,” with whom God was well pleased (Mark 1:10). The same witness is heard again in the Transfiguration (Mark 9:7).

Students generally understand each title functioned as a clue word to specific biblical passages. Although the symbol system is quite offensive, it is nevertheless summarized here to track the substance of the witness before it is restated in hopefully more accessible terms. First, “son” recalls Psalm 2:7-10 and 110:1. These passages work with the male dominated law of primogenitor in that cultural setting. A son therefore infers an heir. In using this tradition in a royal court, the heir who is next in line to reign, is seated to the right of the one who is presently reigning. To the extent that the son is seated and not standing, it suggests the heir is reigning in some sense. When the early church used this symbol system, they confessed that the risen Christ had become a Sovereign and Savior (Yehweh, or Lord). At the same time, the early church cried out, “Come, Sovereign Savior” (maranatha). “Seated at the right hand” thus symbolized the “already and not yet,” of the “time between the times.” The heir still had a task to accomplish in the interim. The task is to overcome the enemies to the righteous, just, and holy Sovereign with frightfully violent means (Psalm 2:7-9; 110:5-6). Thus, while a child of God already prevails over the forces of evil, work remains to permeate the new creation with the divine presence.

Second, the “Beloved,” refers to a chosen servant who is to undertake the task in less problematic terms. It is generally understood that “Beloved” recalls Isaiah 42:1-4, one of the servant songs. It announce a commissioning to practice mercy, foster righteousness, and implement justice. The passage is explicitly cited in Matthew to explain that Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit, rather than the unholy spirits as his opponents claimed, when he broke the taboos of his days (Matthew 12:18-21). The anointing of the Holy Spirit also called Jesus to accomplish liberation in the Jubilee (Luke 4:18-19, from Isaiah 61:1-4; 58:6).7

Early Christians similarly [1] heard God creating them good with their distinct identities. They saw themselves [2] entering into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, when they were baptized by faith in water (Romans chapters 6-7). [3] When the Holy Spirit descended upon them, they too heard a witness of the Spirit that they are children of God, and if children then heirs, and heirs with Christ in the glory he experienced so long as they suffer as he did in service

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(Romans 8:16-17). Furthermore, the servant is (be-)loved despite all the suffering which service entails (Romans 8:28-39). Read therefore in the light of the baptism of Jesus, [1] a child of God who has [2] died to sin and is raised to newness of life is [3] anointed by the Spirit to become an heir with a task of creating the realm of God. In place of sin, evil, and death permeating the created order, the holiness, love, and life of God will reign (Psalms 2:7-8; 110:5-6). Through repentance and faith the trinitarian drama in Baptism incorporates all Christians into God’s mission. The ecumenical consensus also reminds us that the trinitarian shape of the Eucharist rejuvenates and guides us to look and work for God’s reign and realm.

The Apocalypse recounts the arduous and costly spirals of creation/salvation into which the ethnoi are anointed to participate (Revelation chapters 4-11). They are also promised periodic interludes of Sabbath rest en route (Revelation 4, 7, and 8). The overall flow of the story moves toward the final spiral in the History of Salvation to a new creation. First, principalities and powers are decisively overturned (Revelation 12-14, 17-18) and secured in their place (Revelation 20), as the exodus led to the drowning of Pharaoh’s legions. Second, there will be unity among people, and most especially between God and the created order (Revelation 19 and 21), as it occurred in the covenant at Sinai. Third, the drama of the divine mission is consummated in creating a new liveable space where a river flows with the water of life and trees abound for the healing of nations (Revelation 21-22), as the children of Israel journeyed toward and reached the promised land. Where God dwells in fullness, sin and death are no more in a new heaven and a new earth. In the Apocalypse, we see the ethnoi participating in the divine mission which creates an inclusive new community in a life flourishing ecology. Hallelujah!

CONCLUSIONS

Critical reflections on our experiences have led us to contextualize our theology for the ethnoi in mission with the triune God. The Bible has led us to reformulate our cultural and theological traditions. First, while contextualizing theology calls us to reaffirm the crucial role of the ordo or via salutis, it equally locates our distinct Wesleyan contribution within the broader sweep of the History of Salvation in the work of the Christ, our Sovereign and Savior. If we fail to do this, we allow antiquarian interests in the tradition of our elders to nullify the Word of God (Matthew 15:8-9; Mark 7:7-8). Second, contextualizing in turn locates salvation in an even broader trinitarian economy of the divine mission. On the one hand, contextualizing draws us into the distinct work of Creator/Caretaker who continues creating and cultivating new creatures apart from the divine salvific activities. On the other hand, critical reflection leads to recover our participation in the unique work of the Consummator who combines a new creation with a definitive salvation. What begins in the Source and takes a decisive turn through the Savior, is now consummated in the Sanctifier. Third, and finally, we are drawn into the names (attributes and actions) of the triune God through the trinitarian shape of sacramental faith and spirituality in Baptism, just as the trinitarian drama in the Eucharist guides and rejuvenates us in the mission of the triune God. Thanks be to our gracious God for this hope-filled identity and calling! Amen.
ENDNOTES

1. This paper is written in loving memory of the late Jung Young Lee, the most erudite, original, and productive Asian North American theologian. His book, The Trinity in Asian Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), traces the contributions of Taoism for our understanding of the triune God. It represents the culmination of a caring, courageous, and creative ministry.

2. Contributing to the diversity is that many national ancestry groups have their largest U.S. population in Southern California. They include Armenians, Mexicans, Central Americans, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indo-Chinese (Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians), Malaysians, Indonesians, Filipinos, Koreans, Japanese, and Pacific Islanders (Samoans and Tongans).

3. The Kenyan struggle, like others against classical European colonialism, illustrates the parallels with the History of Salvation. They first rallied people to [1] uhuru, liberation. After independence, they called for [2] harambe, unity or community, for [3] nation building. Reordering the two stories of salvation is as foundational as the Reformation reversing the sequence within the Medieval order of salvation which moved from sanctification to justification. It is no exaggeration to say that theological retrenchment in post-modern “Christendom” is making the reordering as wrenching as the retrenchment against the Reformation reversals which prompted religious wars. Incorporating the new theological contributions could heal rifts in the church and societies.

4. The die was cast in the formulation of the question at the 6th Institute, as is evident in the papers from the gathering. See Sanctification and Liberation: Liberation Theologies in Light of the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon, 1981), edited by Theodore Runyon.

5. According to the Bible, participation in both stories promotes holiness and evangelism (Ezekiel 36:23). Our preoccupation with our holiness has become indulgently humanistic. Scriptural holiness finally has to do with the sanctity and vindication of the divine name. That kind of scriptural holiness spreads as more and more people come to know Yahweh through both stories (Exodus 6:7; 7:5; Isaiah 11:9; Jeremiah 31:34; Ezekiel 36:23). Not surprisingly, we see church growth in societies which have gone through new versions of the History of Salvation in Africa, Asia, Latin America, as well recently in Eastern Europe. In the U.S., we experienced the same growth in the decades following the Revolutionary War which our forebears supported.


7. The Holy Spirit anointed the consistently marginalized Judges to liberate their people from the oppression of sin and evil (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 15:14). The Spirit does lead us through the ordo salutis, but also empowers us to launch the History of Salvation as well. (Rev-8-7-97)