

Beating Around in the Bush: Methodological Directions for Australian Theology

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Abstract: The quest for an Australian theology has given rise to significant debate about methodology and the significance of the cultural context for any theological work. There are at least three different ways in which theology can attend to its context. Each of these gives rise to specific difficulties. A recent debate between Tony Kelly and Geoffrey Lilburne suggests a stalemate about methodology. Central to each approach is a conviction about the nature and sources of our knowledge of God. A third approach is proposed, drawing upon Paul Tillich's "method of correlation" but developing a more conversational stance. In light of this method, a number of issues are proposed as the basis for future conversational reflections. Finally, a series of criteria are proposed for the critical appraisal of contextual conversational theologies.

RECENT DISCUSSION OF METHODOLOGY for an Australian theology raises the question of the nature and tasks of a contextual theology. For some thinkers, the very idea of an Australian theology is a nonsense, since the context or location of the theologian is not relevant to the nature and content of theology as such.¹ For others, all theology is contextual and so it seems inappropriate to speak of some theology as contextual while other theology is not. Still others speak of "contextualisation" as a positive effort to relate theological work to the context in which it is being undertaken. In this essay, I shall begin by exploring the idea of a contextual theology, to identify a range of possible objectives in such contextualisation. I shall then engage with a recent debate about theological method and its appreciation of context. I shall argue that a development of Paul Tillich's "method of correlation" offers a clear way forward for an Australian, contextual theology. Finally, I shall briefly outline some elements of such a theology and the means by which it might be evaluated critically.

1. For example, Peter Jensen has warned of the "futility" of trying to construct an Australian theology. Peter Jensen, "An Agenda for Australian Evangelical Theology", *Reformed Theological Review*, 42/1 (1983), 3-9.

At the outset, it is important to identify a cluster of terms which are used in the discussion about context and its significance for Christian mission and theology: contextualisation, indigenisation, localisation or "local" theologies, and enculturation. Each term carries a slightly different emphasis and arises from a different approach to mission or from different philosophical assumptions about the nature of the Christian gospel. "Indigenisation" and "enculturation" both refer to an attempt to allow the life, priorities, values and activities of a specific church, a Christian missionary activity or theological reflection to be shaped by the indigenous culture of the situation, rather than by the culture of those who have come to the situation from another context. "Localisation" or "local theologies" share a similar concern, though here the emphasis is upon the locus or place of theological work as an active element in that work. Robert Schreiter observes that one of the subtle differences between "translation" or "adaptation" approaches to mission theology, on the one hand, and "local theologies", on the other, is that the latter begin with and focus more directly upon the local context and culture, while the former begins from another context and works into the local culture.² "Contextualisation" is a more general term which suggests a concern to take seriously the context of Christian thinking, speaking and acting. In this essay, I will continue with the term "contextual" to describe this cluster of approaches to theology, insofar as they all have in common an interest in the context of theological work.

THE IDEA OF A CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

The idea of a contextual theology arises from the concern of Christian teachers, pastors and missionaries to take seriously the context in which they work. At least two major influences have given rise to this concern, I suggest. The first is well recognised in the literature. David Bosch asserts that the term "contextualisation" was coined in the early 1970s by people interested in the education and formation of church ministers, proposing a more focussed attention to the context in which these ministers would be working.³ This emphasis went hand in hand with a growing concern in missiological discussion for a proper interest in the cultures of communities receiving the Gospel witness. Steven Bevans has identified and described a range of missiological approaches to contextualisation.⁴

2. Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1985) 12.

3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (New York: Orbis, 1991) 420.

4. Stevan Bevans, "Models of Contextual Theology", *Missiology: An International Review*, 13/2 (April, 1985) 185-202, and his book, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis, 1992).

A second major element in the emergence of interest in context is epistemological in its origin. Bosch refers to an "epistemological break" in theological work, represented especially in the development of praxis theologies.⁵ Liberation theologies, in particular, have been critical of the intellectual methods and assumptions of Western theological work. The assumptions of a static world, of the neutrality of knowledge and of the knower, and the idea that the primary purpose of theology is to explain things, rather than to act, are major targets of this protest. These arguments and responses, however, can be seen as part of the broader movement of thought beyond the modern paradigm of knowledge, which paid no attention to the situation and stance of the subject, the knowing person. Indeed, in this paradigm, we have referred to "knowledge" as if it were an object, a commodity or content existing without relationship to or involvement of people. In the emerging post-modern paradigm, it is recognised that human beings are involved in all knowing. Knowledge is a human activity, not just a body of "objective content". In the study of texts, it is argued that all writers and readers are *situated* and that our situatedness influences what we mean, how we read or understand and how we respond. As a result, it is necessary to take account of the context of authors and readers, preachers and theologians. The context is part of our knowing and part of our theology.

Given this new interest in and emphasis upon the context of theological work, there is still considerable confusion about its significance. What are we actually trying to do, in attending to our situation? If we acknowledge that our context is a significant factor in our thinking, what place do we self-consciously give it, in a "contextual" theology?

It is possible to distinguish three different views of the significance of our context for theological work. Each of these views implies a different approach to the nature and tasks of a contextual theology.

A theology might see its context as its *audience*. The attempt to take seriously the context of our theological work might express a wish to understand those who will hear, read and perhaps receive our witness. In this case, the context may not be determinative of the content of the theology, but it will influence the linguistic and other communicative forms in which it is expressed. This approach would be broadly analogous to the "translation" approaches to Christian mission. According to this view, the content of faith is not different, from place to place, only the linguistic carriers of that content. This view is subject to criticism insofar as it implies that theological meanings and content (the content of theology) are entirely distinct from the linguistic and cultural forms in which they are expressed.

Secondly, a theology might seek to be attentive to its context as one of the *sources* of that theology. On this view, God is known, at least in part,

5. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 423-25.

through a context and situation, so the knowledge of God must be formulated in the categories and cultural forms of that situation. This is not so much a choice as the recognition of a necessity. All knowing is contextual, so to pay proper attention to the context of theology is no more than to be appropriately self-conscious in our attempts to articulate the nature and meaning of our faith. In order to know who God is and to articulate the character of our faith in God, we must pay attention to our cultural situation, as well as the historic stories of faith, for it is in this present and local context that God is known. Accordingly, however, since context is one of the fundamental sources of theology, there is no inherent or necessary continuity between the theologies arising from one context and those of another. Some writers see here the spectre of a theological relativism which is for them sufficient reason to reject this approach to contextualisation. Others observe that this consequence can be avoided, while still accepting the historically situated character of all theological work. Max Stackhouse, for example, argues that provided there are other sources which ensure a degree of continuity across contextual differences, relativism can be avoided. Alasdair MacIntyre has argued for a "tradition" of theological reasoning which commends itself as rational *and* historical, through articulating the narrative of the community which has developed its particular theology. Such "traditioning" avoids relativism by including in its account a critique of its own former perspectives and an openness to critique of its present position, through encounter with other historical perspectives.⁶

Between the "audience" and "source" approaches to context is one which makes a distinction between the sources for theology and the *formative factors* of theology.⁷ The sources for theology determine the ground and essential content of the witness of faith. Usually, God's self-revelation in the history of salvation and especially in Christ is seen as the fundamental ground and source of theology, while other factors, such as cultural forms, contemporary experience and practice, and philosophical methods, are seen as formative factors for theology. These factors are variable, through history and from place to place. Yet it is

6. Max Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization, and Mission in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 116-17; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); see esp. chapters 18 and 20 and particularly pp. 360-69.

7. Here I am using the expression "formative factors" differently from John Macquarrie, who uses it to refer to revelation, scripture and reason, as well as experience and culture, all as formative factors in theology. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1977), esp. p. 418. Macquarrie's terminology seems to conflate elements which can be seen as sources or material for theological reflection and other elements which give form to that reflection. Perhaps it is part of the difficulty of theology, however, that some of the elements of theological reflection are both sources and formative factors.

essential to theology that it has some form. Necessarily, we see God through some cultural, philosophical framework. Thus, for example, the use of Aristotelian metaphysical categories has been a strong influence on the form of much western theology. It is a formative factor but is not necessarily a determinant of the content and ground of our knowledge of God. Christians expressed their faith before the adoption of these forms by Justin and Origen, and many theologies today work with other ways of thinking. In this intermediate view of contextualisation, theology seeks to take seriously its context in order to determine the form, not the ground and content, of our talk of God.

These three views of the context of theology will give rise to differing emphases in contextualisation and to different ways of *evaluating* contextual theologies. The question of how we derive critical criteria for contextual theologies is itself shaped by the way we see the context. On the first view above, a contextual theology will be judged by the effectiveness of its communication within a local context, but the fundamental elements of that theology will not be subject to local critique as such. The tests for orthodoxy or appropriateness of theology are derived from some other basis, usually an ecclesiastical authority or some other "objective" basis. On the second view, where the context is seen as one of the sources of theology, though not the only such source, the criteria for evaluation of contextual theologies will themselves be contextually shaped. Though there may be appeal to sources and authorities beyond the situation, there must also be a degree to which the local situation and its demands determine the inadequacy or validity of a theological statement. On the intermediate view, the form of a theological formulation, though not its grounding or fundamental content would be subject to contextual critique and evaluation.

It is at this point, however, that the distinction between sources and formative factors begins to break down, for there seems to be no way in which one can escape the formative factors of one's theological system in order to identify the ground or fundamental content of that theology as such, let alone to evaluate the form in which that content is to be articulated. Furthermore, any attempt to *evaluate* theological formulations must also be subject to those same formative factors. This seems to bring us to the horns of a dilemma. Either we are left with the contextual relativism mentioned above, having no "ultimate" basis on which to commend our theology to anyone beyond our own immediate context, or we must insist upon some context-free basis for our theology, appealing to some grounds which all people regardless of their context or culture must accept if they are to engage with and comprehend the validity of our theology. In this second instance, the ultimate basis or core of our theology is not "contextual" and the apprehension of this core is assumed (or asserted) to be available to all people independent of

their situation. Here there is an appeal to at least some knowledge and formulation which is not "situated".

Perhaps it is the difficulty of this dilemma that causes some contextual theologians to stress "outcomes" as the principal basis for commending their approach. While many contextual theologians do identify wider ecclesiastical authorities as criteria of orthodoxy, their practical emphasis is upon the effectiveness of a theology in enhancing the life of the people, within the local situation. Some contextual theologians, for example, indicate criteria such as whether a theology leads to liberation of the people, or whether it enriches their worship and community life, or whether it enables them to live the values of their faith.⁸ In effect, these tests are contextually applied, though they do appeal to wider values which can be affirmed on a general level. We can see this approach as an application of Stackhouse's proposal to avoid theological relativism. Some contextual criteria are applied as well as some more general criteria, shared by other theologies, and perhaps by all theologies.

The possibility of such general criteria for theology leads us into consideration of the question of methodology for contextual theologies. Only when we have a clear idea of the method of theological work can we be more clear about the criteria by which we evaluate that work. Only when we know what we are seeking to achieve, in doing theology, can we specify how to determine whether or not we have achieved that purpose.

METHOD IN THEOLOGY: A CONVERSATION STALLED?

That there is a significant interest in the possibility of "an Australian theology" is evidenced by the plethora of approaches surveyed in Gideon Goosen's recent book *Australian Theologies: Themes and Methodologies into the Third Millennium*.⁹ Goosen begins with the elementary question: What makes an *Australian* theology? His answer is that Australian theology is written by Australians with at least some intention to write for Australians. The central chapters of the book offer a typology of approaches, arranged according to colours of the rainbow. This somewhat artificial device groups theologies according to their major sources and methods. For instance, Tony Kelly's work is seen as stressing "transcendence" or the "big issues" at the centre of life, and is

8. For example, M. Thomas Thangaraj argues that new Christological titles should issue in transformative praxis, while Robert Schreiter suggests that local theologies need to be liberative, not merely ethnographic. See M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingsdon Press, 1994) 141-42; Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 14-15.

9. Gideon Goosen, *Australian Theologies: Themes and Methodologies into the Third Millennium* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2000).

included in the chapter called "Blue, indigo and violet theologies. Robert Banks' interest in the spirituality of everyday life is included in the chapter on "Red, orange and yellow theologies". These are characterised by a focus on "objects" of theological reflection, such as the land, or "everyday themes". Implicit in this description are assumptions about what matters are central to theology, such as "transcendence", and what matters are "objects" for theological reflection. These assumptions demonstrate a particular perspective on the nature of contextualisation.

Many of the works Goosen surveys have little to distinguish them from similar work done elsewhere, however; only some of them are self-consciously focussed on the Australian context and specific elements within Australian culture. Goosen's short survey of the idea of contextual theologies and some of the widely recognised methodologies indicates a rather limited focus. Whereas Bevans and Lonergan are given detailed treatment, the author declares in just one paragraph that he is "aware also of the value of Schreiter's book" on local theologies.¹⁰ Schreiter's typology is seen to be similar to Bevans' approach, and that is all the attention given to his distinctive contribution. This selectivity is an expression of a constant focus on a particular stream of literature and the interest of Australian Catholic scholars in this field. There is much less recognition of the approaches and works of others who have not participated in the distinctive approach arising from the "Lonergan workshops" of the 1980s.

More productive for our purposes is a consideration of the interchange, largely conducted within the pages of *Pacifica*, between Tony Kelly and Geoffrey Lilburne. Here we find a focus on method and sources for contextual theology, and the fact that this debate has reached a stalemate is, I shall argue, significant.¹¹

The impetus for the debate arose from several articles written by Geoffrey Lilburne, surveying approaches to contextual theology in Australia. One of his central arguments is that the theology of Karl Barth provides the only viable approach to "culture" as a source for theology. In developing this claim, Lilburne is specifically critical of Tony Kelly's theology. In order to examine these issues, it is fairest if we begin with an account of Kelly's theological method in its own right, rather than present it within the framework of Lilburne's critique.

10. Goosen, *Australian Theologies*, 82.

11. Geoffrey Lilburne has published two articles surveying contributions to Australian contextual theology and discussing issues of methodology: "Australian Theology: Protestant Contributions", *Colloquium: the Australian and New Zealand Theological Review* 28 (1996), 19-30, and "Contextualising Australian Theology: An Enquiry into Method", *Pacifica* 10/3 (1997), 350-64. Tony Kelly's contributions to this field have been numerous, but of particular note here are his book, *A New Imagining: Towards an Australian Spirituality* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990) and his article, "Whither 'Australian Theology'? A Response to Geoffrey Lilburne", *Pacifica* 12/2 (1999), 192-208.

Tony Kelly's various contributions to Australian theology, which he labels as a quest for an Australian spirituality, are guided by the theological method of Bernard Lonergan.¹² As I have already suggested, this methodology has been very influential in the literature about an "Australian theology", and so it is important to identify its integral features.

Lonergan's theological method is particularly complex and, to many who are not inducted into its distinctive approach, quite opaque. My own statement of the method is written as one who is not a "Lonerganian". I am quite open to the criticism that I do not understand it! Nonetheless, I want to try to explain how Tony Kelly, at least, sees and applies this method in the quest for an Australian spirituality. At a workshop several years ago, Kelly offered his own summary of Lonergan's approach. The following summary is drawn from notes he provided on that occasion and from Kelly's explanation of his appropriation of Lonergan's method.¹³

Method in theology is oriented towards its aims. Kelly suggests these aims of systematic theology:

- i. To tease out the meaning of the positions that have emerged as doctrines and foundations;
- ii. To work them into a provisional, assimilable whole within the intellectual framework of a given culture;
- iii. To exploit the four functions of meaning:
 - cognitive: an exploration of the objective reality on its own terms;
 - constitutive: the elaboration of Christian identity;
 - communicative: the reality of Christian community;

12. It might be argued that Tony Kelly is not seeking to offer an Australian *theology* at all, but rather aims to develop an Australian *spirituality*. On this view, Kelly would be seen as working with a theology which is either derived from other contexts or which claims to be universal, while the spirituality he develops is contextual. Though this discussion requires more extensive consideration than is possible here, my contention would be that the separation of spirituality and theology implied in this comment is unduly artificial. At what point does "spirituality" cease and "theology" begin, in Kelly's many and varied works? While it may be that his theological methodology and many of the sources of his theological work derive from traditions far beyond Australian shores, nonetheless he does undertake his theological work with a willingness to include the context of Australian life as one of the sources from which insights and experiences are gained and within which his theological formulations must make sense. To this extent at least, Kelly is engaged in exploring the contours of an Australian theology.

13. Kelly refers to the "eight functional specialities" of Lonergan's method in his article, "Whither 'Australian Theology'?", 196, and outlines these in Tony Kelly, "Theology in an Australian Context", in Victor C. Hayes (ed.), *Towards Theology in an Australian Context* (Bedford Park: A.A.S.R. Publications, 1979) 29-37. The primary source for his deliberations is Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972), esp. chapters 3, 5 and 13.

effective: to indicate the transformations of world, society and culture that such meanings inspire.¹⁴

How does systematic theology seek to achieve these objectives? Kelly's answer is: By developing analogies and models, by inter-connecting the mysteries of faith and by relating to the ultimate in human liberation and fulfilment, in its individual, collective and cosmic dimensions.

To explain this method further, Kelly has offered a table which identifies eight elements or processes in theological reflection and four kinds of intellectual activity. This entire methodology Kelly calls "a framework of collaborative creativity". The numerical sequence in the table suggests the process for theological reflection, while the central terms, set out in bold, indicate the four types of intellectual activity involved.

Elements in Theological Method

1. Research	EXPERIENCE	8. Communications
2. Interpretation	QUESTIONS FOR INTELLIGENCE	7. Systematics
3. History	REASONABLE JUDGEMENT	6. Doctrines
4. Dialectic	DECISIONS	5. Foundations

In his own application of this approach, Kelly has sought to draw upon what he calls "limit situations" in Australian culture. One of these is the experience of suffering, another is our experience of the land, and a third is the situation of the indigenous peoples; a fourth our experience of isolation, and so on. These elements of our situation, which "re-search" can identify through literature, art and so on, represent "dreaded outer limits" of our experience. At these points, Australians don't know where to go, Kelly argues. We find these things very hard to handle and, most characteristically, we don't actually talk about these things. We are, he says, a soul in silence. It is not that we never mention these things: in one sense they are talking points, but in another, deeper sense, they are the subjects of embarrassed silences. Kelly's objective is to alleviate this tongue-tied state, by helping us to work through these silences, so that we can have "a new imagining", a new level of feeling, which he calls "having a heart", and eventually work towards communicative meaning, in an Australian (Christian) spirituality.

Geoffrey Lilburne's survey of recent approaches to Australian theology notes significant differences in approach by Catholic and Protestant authors.¹⁵ One of the distinguishing features concerns the approach of each to "foundations". Lilburne sees Catholic theology,

14. Kelly has offered a helpful description of these different but inter-related functions of meaning in theological work, in his book *An Expanding Theology: Faith in a World of Connections*. (Newtown, NSW: E. J. Dwyer, 1993) 82-87.

15. The following paragraphs briefly outline sections of Lilburne's argument in "Contextualising Australian Theology".

exemplified by Tony Kelly and shaped by the methodology of Lonergan, as an illustration of the modernist “turn to the subject”. Kelly seeks to map Australian experience, through describing a range of “limit situations” in which human beings are called to deeper self-understanding and thus to pose the question of God. Yet it is precisely here that Lilburne sees the absence of “the distinctive contours” of the God of the Bible in Kelly’s thought. There is, he says, far too much of the emerging consciousness of the “authentic self” and too little of the positive self-revelation of God. Furthermore, the spirituality and “self” envisaged in Kelly’s approach is too much “minted” by the history and culture of other places. Lilburne calls for a greater openness to dialogue with “the history and culture of this place”, in its “genuine otherness”. It is in this dialogue that he sees real hope for a contextual Australian theology. If we can desist from the inappropriate resort to other cultural and historical frameworks, while attending more appropriately to the self-revelation of “the God of the Bible”, we may encounter that greater “emptiness” in which the presence and otherness of God may be known.

At the heart of his argument, Lilburne rightly identifies the issue of the relationship between faith and culture as a defining element in the methodology for a contextual theology. It is here that he finds Karl Barth’s theology the most helpful source, finding “methodological clues” in Barth’s later work in particular. Barth’s early theology stressed the “absoluteness” of God’s Word, in critical resistance to various “contextual” elements, such as the German Church’s engagement with National Socialism. Nonetheless, Lilburne sees here a rhetoric which presupposes human culture.

Barth’s rhetoric of absoluteness is concerned to establish a *priority* rather than to suggest that there is no place at all for human culture in faith or theology. On the contrary, Barth’s clearest explanation of his theological method, in *Evangelical Theology*, explains that theology engages with human life and thought as “subordinate presuppositions”. Lilburne follows von Balthasar’s finding that Barth saw human existence, faith and reason as elements to be considered in theological work, but never the primary subject matter.¹⁶ In other words, theology can and must pay due attention to the cultural context in which it works, and may do so when it allows the priority of God’s Word to govern its consideration of these things. Even more, Lilburne observes, cultural forms have “a different priority and integrity” which precedes theology, in the sense that we must use these elements in order to apprehend the Word of God. This presupposition, however, is never allowed a *theological* priority.

16. Here Lilburne refers to Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972).

Whereas “a place for the scrutiny of human culture” can be seen in Barth’s later work, thus modifying his earlier rhetoric of absoluteness, Lilburne insists that this scrutiny maintains the freedom of God’s Word as the determining element in all faith and theology. The rigorous study of the context and forms within which we may attend to God’s Word must never mean that we try to determine or limit what the Word has to say to us. Here Lilburne is especially concerned to reject any suggestion of *correlation* as a method for contextual theology: “no attempt is made to correlate the Word with features of context in any way that places limits on what the Word might actually have to say”.¹⁷

By recognising both the integrity of culture and the priority of God’s Word, theology can preserve its proper identity *and* speak contextually. Paradoxically, Lilburne suggests, this approach might offer a way forward for a genuinely Australian theology, in which a proper attention to the “silence” of this land may well evoke a sense of the mysterious presence of God. As a theological method, this does not involve the study of our culture as such, but rather a willingness to wait in silence, attentive to the coming of God’s Word.

At this point I wish to observe that I find the categorisation of approaches as “Catholic” or “Protestant” too sweeping and not always helpful. In particular, it is not helpful to suggest that all significant work by Catholic scholars towards an Australian theology has been shaped by Lonergan’s method. The work of Denis Edwards, for example, arises from a quite different approach. Similarly, Protestant theology is by no means as monolithic as Lilburne seems to imply, and many scholars would resist the implication that Karl Barth is the definitive representative of their approach. Nonetheless, these concerns about the categorisations within Lilburne’s survey are not our main concern here.

Tony Kelly’s article “Whither ‘Australian Theology’? A response to Geoffrey Lilburne” was written as a response to Lilburne’s contentions about his own work and about theological method. Kelly observes that there is much difficulty in identifying “the context” and suggests the need to discover the context, in a much more open “conversation”, such that “the hitherto voiceless can become participants in a larger conversation”.¹⁸ He is, I think rightly, concerned about any attempt to silence, through a prescriptive theological or cultural method, the many voices of our culture and context.

Addressing Lilburne’s questions about the “self” constructed in his work, Kelly rejects the suggestion that his interest reflects the post-Enlightenment “turn to the self”. “I suggest it is more than that; namely a release of the subject from the truncation and mutilation inherent in the post-Enlightenment context, into the full dynamics of what self-

17. Lilburne, “Contextualising Australian Theology”, 358-59.

18. Kelly, “Whither ‘Australian Theology’?”, 196.

transcending subjectivity involves.”¹⁹ Then follows a discussion of what constitutes authenticity of the self. Kelly says his theology seeks a spirituality in which the self is not focussed upon its own “self-enclosed substance” but is self-transcending, in “a movement from below to what exceeds all human grasp, even as it impels the reaching towards it”.²⁰ Thus his work for an Australian theology seeks those elements which reflect this “upward-moving” self-transcending impetus: “The identification of the upward movement of self-transcendence at work in our culture points to certain features of the contextualisation of theology in Australia: how might theology identify, clarify and confirm such a movement?”²¹ While Kelly acknowledges the Word of God as transcendent, he sees theology as exploring and clarifying the ways in which a local and diverse culture might express the “universal salvific design” of God’s self-communication in Christ. Kelly’s purpose is to affirm both the transcendence of God’s Word and the possibility of authentic experience of self-transcendence, identifiable within a local context and culture. It is, as he sees it, the task of a contextual theology to identify and clarify the points at which these two realities coincide.

While Kelly concludes his article with an invitation to his “esteemed Protestant colleagues” for further contributions to the conversation, it would appear that in fact the conversation has stalled. It seems that the differences in approach, especially as they have been formulated in Lilburne’s analyses, may prevent further constructive inter-change. Were this to be the case, it would be most unfortunate, all the more so if the division and separation is drawn along Catholic and Protestant lines (whatever we mean by that!). In what follows, I propose a means for unravelling some of these divisions and for reconsidering some of the ways in which this debate itself has been constructed.

In responding to the debate thus far, I suggest that we attend to a dialectic which has been set up, especially in the ways Lilburne presents the issues, in relation to the nature of God and our knowledge of God. Every approach to theology and theological method is undergirded by an apprehension of God. As Paul Tillich put it, “The theologian enters the theological circle with a concrete commitment.”²² This means the theologian engages with the task from a position of some (perhaps only implicit) belief or commitment to the faith on which that theology reflects. Tillich himself was careful not to define this in terms of some kind of orthodoxy: Unless you believe exactly this, this and this, you can’t be a theologian. My contention is that whatever approach or method we adopt in theology, that method already implies some things

19. Kelly, “Whither ‘Australian Theology’?”, 201.

20. Kelly, “Whither ‘Australian Theology’?”, 202.

21. Kelly, “Whither ‘Australian Theology’?”, 203.

22. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1 (London: Nisbet, 1953) 12.

about the character of God and the means of our knowledge of God. Method in theology is not theologically neutral. In the two approaches we have been considering, one of the crucial issues concerns the nature of God's self-revelation.

Lilburne follows Barth in a major stress upon God as Revealer. It is only through God's self-revelation, as the Word of God in its three-fold form (as Jesus Christ, in scripture and as preaching) that we can know anything of God. There is a strong emphasis on the priority of this knowledge of God over other indications or forms of experience of God. Kelly, on the other hand, argues from our experience as human beings. In the various elements in culture, we can derive some knowledge of God, albeit, as Kelly sees it, for Australians this knowledge is frequently a knowledge-in-absence or in silence, a void which calls out for some heart, some imagining, some voice. Nonetheless, Kelly has a much more affirming approach to human experience in its own right as a source for theology.

I suggest, however, that these differences reflect other crucial elements in the doctrine of God implicit in the two approaches. It is not only a question of revelation. It also concerns the doctrine of God as creator and as redeemer. Is God known first of all as redeemer, including redeemer of the creation, or is God known as creator, who also redeems the creation? Crucial here is the question of whether we see the creation, as we experience it, as "fallen" and therefore inherently subject to sin and unreliable as a source for our knowledge of God. This seems to be implicit in Lilburne's approach, deriving from the Calvinist heritage of Barth's thought. For all Barth's celebration of "God's good creation" and the sovereignty of God in God's covenant commitment to the creation, he was nonetheless unswerving in his insistence that we cannot and must not rely upon our own experience or any form of social, psychological or philosophical study of human experience as a basis for theological understanding. It is not going too far to say that for Barth and Lilburne we cannot rely upon the created order as such to provide us with knowledge of God. Only in the light of God's Word can we see the creation *as* "God's good creation".

Tony Kelly, on the other hand, does not operate with these assumptions about the inherent sinfulness and untrustworthiness of all our experience and of cultural elements and expressions. But this is not to say, as Lilburne seems to imply, that Kelly regards our experiences as offering equally valid and informative revelations of God as the presence of God in the person and mission of Jesus, for example. On the contrary, Kelly offers a methodology for bringing these elements, along with other "intellectual activities" into the theological process. The difficulty I see (in agreement with Lilburne) is that Kelly's method seems to give equal significance to the various elements and processes he indicates, whereas Lilburne wishes to stress the priority, in his case

the *exclusive* priority, of God's self-revelation as a source and criterion for theology. Lilburne's nuanced exposition of Barth's position here is helpful. Barth does not insist that culture and experience have no place in theological work. Indeed, in one sense they are presupposed in all theological work, insofar as language and thought-forms are a precondition of any thinking and experience. But in the self-conscious *method* of theology, these elements are not to be given precedence over the self-revealing activity of God. Here God is in control of theology, not the theologian. God speaks for God-self and theological method must be "determined" by that self-revelation. Lilburne's objection to Kelly's method is that it does not afford this priority to God's self-revelation, but rather permits the theologian, as a self-defining subject, to define and order the material or content of theology. Kelly has attempted to explain that this is not his intention. He claims that theology can point to movements of self-transcendence without claiming to have created or controlled those movements. Here theology operates as a "witness" to what God is doing in the present context, in much the same way as Lilburne and Barth see theology as witness to the presence of the Word of God. In both instances, the real difficulty lies with the question of how this witness can be validated or authenticated.

While I would generally agree with Lilburne's emphasis on the priority of God's self-revelation as a source for theology, I think there are a number of crucial difficulties with his position. As I have already indicated, I am not convinced that it has to regard culture and experience as inherently suspect, but this is not an issue I wish to pursue here. More pertinent to the discussion of theological methodology is the question of how Lilburne's approach to contextual theology would see the task of critical evaluation of its own (or other) theological formulations.

If we follow Lilburne's advocacy of a Barthian method for contextualisation, what critical criteria would apply in the evaluation of such a theology? It seems that Barth would allow that the Word of God is the ultimate criterion for theology, by which all of its cultural expressions, reasoning and elaborations must be evaluated. To be sure, other criteria also might apply, such as the coherence and clarity of the language, the consistency of specific statements with one another. In the end, however, the question of the adequacy and appropriateness of a theological argument is not determined by these considerations, but by the question of whether this theological statement really is a response to and elaboration of the actual Word of God to humankind, in this place and time.

There are two difficulties here, however. First, given the priority of the Word of God, from what position could any theologian or community of faith make the determination that this or that theological

statement does indeed represent the Word of God to us? As Stephen Sykes has argued, Barth's theology seems to allow the theologian no "independent" ground or basis on which to make such a judgement. The result would seem to be an inevitable circularity in theological argument, perhaps a claim to self-authentication.²³ Whether this is a vicious circularity, however, depends on the position we take in relation to "foundations" of human understanding. The appeal to divine self-revelation through God's Word, as the pre-rational basis of theology, may be a "non-foundationalist" position, insofar as it does not claim that all people everywhere share this assumption and can evaluate their understanding by reference to this knowledge. Thus, Barth (or Lilburne) might respond to Sykes by arguing that theology makes the humble claim that its assertions and formulations have no independent status or authentication, but can indeed only be validated within the context of God's Word. The consequence of this defence, however, is to imply that there are some people who have received or know this Word, while there are others who have not, even though they may seek it or wish to receive it.²⁴

A second difficulty, however, concerns those elements which Lilburne calls the cultural presuppositions of theology. While Barth and Lilburne reject any form of correlation, by which cultural and linguistic expression of human existence are recognised as mediating forms of the Word of God, the question remains how the Word of God is to be apprehended. The insistence that the Word is independent of cultural forms, placing the latter in a secondary order of priority, seems inconsistent with the recognition that of necessity these cultural elements are logically or cognitively prior, in our apprehension of that Word. As John Locke argued, so long ago, even the judgement that something is revealed by God is in fact an exercise of our reason.²⁵ We cannot separate divine revelation from the cultural forms in which it is apprehended. As a result, it seems that at least some cultural or contextual elements are inevitably involved in theological activity, and it seems difficult to separate them from the "Word of God". Though God's Word may be "theologically" prior, as Barth insists, epistemologically that word comes to us in culturally mediated forms. Whether this acknowledgment is damaging to Barth's method is precisely the issue in Lilburne's paper. He believes that Barth was able to make this admission without abandoning his overall insistence of the priority of

23. Stephen Sykes, "Barth on the Centre of Theology", in Stephen Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies in His Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979) 17-54.

24. These difficulties are discussed at greater length in my critique of Barth's theological epistemology, in Frank Rees, *Wrestling with Doubt: Theological Reflections on the Journey of Faith* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 65-71.

25. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (First published, 1690) Everyman's Library, Vol. 332 (London: Dent, 1961); Vol. 2, Book 4, Ch.18, "Of faith and reason and their distinct provinces".

God's Word. My contention, however, is that Lilburne has not made out a coherent distinction between this position and the method of correlation. In the latter approach, theology seeks to draw upon cultural and contextual forms in an intentional response to God's self-revelation. There is no pretence that God's self-revelation can be apprehended or articulated independent of the cultural forms and challenges of theologians and their specific context. On the contrary, theologians draw upon those cultural elements in order to formulate their understanding of that self-revelation. This approach does not, I argue, breach Lilburne and Barth's concern for the theological priority of God's self-revelation. Rather, it may preserve that priority and allow it to have a dynamic place in the continuing activity of theology.

THE METHOD OF CORRELATION RECONSIDERED

Here I would like to explore the usefulness of Paul Tillich's method of correlation as an approach to contextual theology. To begin, it is necessary to present Tillich's approach in a little detail, for while the term "method of correlation" is widely known and associated with Tillich's name, the method itself is not well understood.

Tillich's approach to theology arose from a conviction that in the modern period two elements of our lives which, in his view, eternally belong together have become separated: religion and culture.²⁶ The method of correlation sought to demonstrate that these two elements are not ultimately separate but rather derive their life and meaning from a common source, namely the power of being, or the ground of all being, that is, God. Tillich's theology of culture was an attempt to show that all life has its origin and meaning in God, and in so doing Tillich hoped to "save" some valuable religious concepts from what he saw as their increasing irrelevance and impending death.

In his own work over a life-time, Tillich sought to apply this method in a number of different ways, yet all basically expressing the same convictions. First, as we have seen, Tillich began with what he called a "concrete conviction" of faith, even in doubt; and that meant for him belief in Jesus Christ as "the centre of history". A second crucial element in Tillich's approach was what he called "boundary existence". Living "on the boundary" is the best place to derive knowledge of God. He once said that as a theologian it was important for him to remain a philosopher, and as a philosopher it was important for him to remain a

26. In his Foreword to the collection of essays, *Theology of Culture*, Tillich wrote, "the problem of religion and culture has always been at the center of my interest. Most of my writings – including the two volumes of *Systematic Theology* – try to define the way in which Christianity is related to secular culture." Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) p. v (The third volume of Tillich's *Systematic Theology* was published in 1963.)

theologian.²⁷ In seeking to introduce his thought to American readers, he described his chosen position on the boundary between various cultural groups, including between theology and philosophy, the church and the university, religion and culture. As a pastor, he had spent much time with university students and with industrial workers, in both contexts discussing questions of theology and philosophy. Throughout his life, he was well versed in contemporary art and approaches to psychotherapy and spent much time relating to groups interested in these areas and relating theological ideas to their insights.

Tillich was convinced that all of culture is theologically significant and meaningful. It was this conviction that gave rise to his method of correlation. To grasp this method for explaining the theological meaning of cultural elements, however, we need also to take note of Tillich's idea of cultural and religious symbols.²⁸ I will not attempt to explain Tillich's concept of religious symbols here, except to say that for Tillich the various ideas, rituals and activities of our social and personal lives all participate in what he described as "ontological depth". There is a dynamic power in all things, which he generally described as the "power of being". Music, art, religion, politics, and many other expressions of our experiences and ideas all reveal to us something of this depth and they variously disclose this meaning and significance. Some elements do this very effectively, while others are quite opaque. Those which connect us with the power of being are effective symbols. They call forth a response from us and enable us to relate to the unconscious and non-literal meanings implicit in our situations. When a symbol ceases to have this power and evoke this kind of response it dies, even if the activity or idea continues. Furthermore, the most effective symbols not only put us in touch with the realities in which they participate, Tillich says, they also disclose to us their own limitations as symbols. That is, symbols have a self-negating capacity. They function as symbols *and* they show us that they are symbols, not the "reality" itself.

Another crucial element in Tillich's method was his conviction that the ontological depth of all things, the "power of being", is God. On this basis, he believed that to engage with the ontological significance of any cultural element was to relate to or in some way apprehend the reality of God. The purpose of Tillich's method of correlation was to show how this is so and to allow this process to shape the articulation of Christian doctrines. By this method, he said, theology "explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers

27. Paul Tillich, *On the Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), esp. 46-58.

28. The most succinct presentation of Tillich's idea of religious symbols is found in Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957) 41-54. For other sources and an indication of critical discussion of Tillich's concept of symbols, see Rees, *Wrestling with Doubt*, 79-81.

in mutual interdependence".²⁹ In order to do this, theology "formulates" the questions implied in human existence or "the human predicament" and it expounds the "answers" implied in the divine self-manifestation.³⁰ Thus, the method of correlation requires specific attention to two sorts of "datum". On the one side, theology addresses the existential concerns of human life, such as our quest for freedom, our experiences of fear, anxiety, hope and so on. This analysis of experience is not, however, a psychological or sociological study. It is made "under the impact of revelation", so that what theology is seeking is the "depth" or ontological significance of these aspects of experience and culture. Thus theology sees in these experiential concerns deeper questions about the nature of being and the reality on which our lives are founded. Here it is crucial to note, with Langdon Gilkey, how crucial to Tillich's theological method was the element of divine revelation. Indeed Gilkey argues that Tillich's theology was based on the conviction that in numerous ways the divine life is continually being disclosed to us.³¹

The importance, even priority, of revelation in Tillich's method is not always recognised. Without this element, however, the method of correlation is subject to several criticisms expressed by Neil Ormerod, who follows Robert Doran in claiming that the method of correlation fails to recognise "the radical incompleteness of the human sciences to analyze the present situation properly without some input from theology which provides higher-level controls of meaning".³² Tillich's approach does not, as Ormerod contends, see the elements of a cultural context as existing discretely and separately from the tradition of faith. Nor does he seek to give one part of reality (the Church or theological tradition) a position of privilege as the locus of revelation, thus creating a dualism between revelation and other aspects of culture. On the contrary, Tillich's contention is that theology seeks to articulate the inter-relationship of elements which appear to be separate but are ontologically united. Consequently, each part of Tillich's system has two sections: one which raises a dimension of human existence, the other which responds to it theologically: Reason and Revelation; Being and God; Existence and the Christ; Life and the Spirit; History and the Kingdom of God.

Finally, in recognising the central (but not exclusive) place Tillich attributed to divine revelation, it is also important to note that in contrast to Barth Tillich contended that the "receiving" or human side of

29. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, 68.

30. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, 70-72.

31. Langdon Gilkey, *Gilkey on Tillich* (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 73-78.

32. Neil Ormerod, "Quarrels with the method of correlation", *Theological Studies* 57/4 (1996), 707-19, see esp. 715. Robert Doran's critique of the method of correlation, which is based on his appropriation of Lonergan's method, is found in Robert Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

the revelatory disclosure is crucial. Whereas Barth placed all his emphasis upon the divine activity and priority, Tillich said that this so-called "dialectical" theology was not dialectical enough.³³ Without the "receiving" side, there is no revelation at all. As a consequence, human apprehension of God's self-giving is an essential component in revelation and the method of correlation seeks to spell out the significance of God's revelation as received and apprehended in a particular cultural or existential context.³⁴

In seeking to draw upon Tillich's approach as a possible methodology for a contextual Australian theology, there are a number of critical issues to note. First, from its inception there have been those who see Tillich's approach as inappropriate because, as has been remarked, he claimed to understand the world better than it knew itself. This observation suggests that in the correlative activity, the theologian exercises a position of superior insight and perhaps control. The theologian, by virtue of the commitment of faith and the priority given to divine revelation, determines in advance the significance of cultural elements and experiences. Their meaning is determined not by their own inherent concerns but by the theologian's concerns. On the basis of these criticisms, one proposal has been to modify the idea of a method of correlation to call it a method of conversation.³⁵ Most of the elements of the method of correlation described above can be retained, but the metaphor of conversation allows that cultural and experiential elements have their own voice in the theological activity. This proposal has the virtue of humility, while permitting also that its participants may speak as people of faith (or not of faith). It has, also, the advantage of allowing religious doctrines and ideas to speak in their own right as well. Tillich's concept of the symbolic significance of all cultural elements, including religious doctrines and rituals, has a reductionist impact upon those elements. In his method, the Bible and the doctrines of the church do not speak in their own right. They have a place only as they are "explained" within the correlative activity. Concepts such as "God as Lord" are interpreted, and some are explained in a quite diminishing

33. Paul Tillich, "What is wrong with dialectical theology?", *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935), 127-45.

34. Here it has to be acknowledged that as a thoroughly modern thinker, Tillich did not see himself as a contextual theologian, working in a particular context. He saw himself as a "modern" man, grappling with what he thought were universal human dilemmas and existential experiences. To this extent, though he sought to be attentive to the cultural context of his theology, he was not aware of the situatedness of this thought and experience.

35. The suggestion that we modify Tillich's idea of a correlational theology towards a more conversational approach has been made by Geoffrey Wraight, in his unpublished Master of Theology Thesis, *Contours of an Australian Christology*, (Melbourne College of Divinity, 2000). A more general sketch of a conversational theology can be found in Frank Rees, *Wrestling with Doubt*, Chapter 7, and in Frank Rees, "The Word in Question: Barth and Divine Conversation", *Pacifica* 12/3 (1999), 313-32.

manner. If, however, the method of correlation is undertaken as a genuine conversation, perhaps enlisting some of the spirit of Tony Kelly's "collaborative creativity", all participant voices in the conversation are permitted their own self-expression and are subject to critique and questioning by others. As a consequence, the theologian may draw inferences, conclusions and affirmations from the process. But in no sense are these theological conclusions *the* explanation of what everyone means or of all that everyone means. Theology thus has its own legitimate voice without removing from other elements in culture their place in the continuing conversation.

There is much to welcome in this approach to theology. I value the recognition of the spiritual or religious meaning of all of life and all elements and experiences in culture. This approach resists the separation (either by religious motivations or by secularising forces) of religion and life. There may be some problems in Tillich's philosophical formulation of the idea of God as the ground and depth of all being, all experiences and so on. He never satisfied those who critiqued his concept of religious symbols. But there is much to be said for a humble affirmation of the presence of God in all aspects of our experience without presuming the meaning and significance of that presence. To approach our experience in this openness, seeking God's presence and responding to God's invitation in all situations, is much more appropriate than to presume in advance that we know where God is, what God intends or wills or may be doing. To *seek* God's presence and the meaning of God's call, rather than to impose from outside or above some assertion of divine presence or proclamation, is much more in tune with the Christian virtues of humility and service, incarnated in Jesus and with the character of God indicated in his teachings.

On this basis, I suggest that a more carefully developed and nuanced form of Tillich's method of correlation, or a method of correlative conversation, is also more challenging and inviting. This conversation calls for imagination in addressing our context, not just analysis and explanation. All too easily explanation seeks to "explain away" and analysis leaves everything as it is. With Robert Schreiter, I contend that contextual theologies need to have a liberating or transformative impact upon their situations.³⁶ They need to do more than describe or map a cultural context. This liberating task, however, calls for imaginative proposals and thus for conceptual risk-taking, and indeed for risk-taking in the praxis of the faith so conceived. It is not sufficient to engage in the kind of correlative thinking which seeks similarities in content of ideas. This I call the "this-goes-with-that" approach to correlation. In the Australian context, for example, there has been some interest in relating Christian ideas of atonement with ANZAC Day.

36. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, 14-15, and 91-93.

There is a common element of sacrificial death. While this may have some significance for a contextual theology, I think it requires considerably more than a superficial focus upon that element before any theological significance can be derived. The same needs to be said for the alleged similarity between football and religion. There are many sociological similarities, but a contextual theology needs to address something more like what Tillich called "ontological" realities.

The kinds of imaginative reflection and formulation which I believe are necessary here resemble Tony Kelly's efforts to identify a series of "liminal" situations in our experience. This effort is very similar to Tillich's proposal that theology should address the existential issues in culture. To identify such issues or elements is not necessarily to claim a position of superior insight or a God's-eye view. Rather, this can be done in terms of a proposal in the context of a conversation, inviting response and critique.

BEATING ABOUT THE BUSH:
SOME ELEMENTS FOR A CRITICAL CONVERSATION

As an initial response to the preceding sketch of a method for contextual theology as a critical conversation, we might ask just what are the fundamental issues, questions and motivations by which Australian culture and life is presently shaped or with which it is grappling? In recent years I have considered that there are three clusters of issues in our national life and cultural movements which can be identified and which invite theological reflection. I do not, in identifying these, suggest that they are exclusive to Australia, nor that this is an exhaustive list, nor that these issues are felt by or resonate with every person. I do, however, suggest that these are issues which are crucial in our current situation and which, in various ways, are shaping our life as a nation.

Each of the three issues I wish to identify is clustered around a fairly simple-sounding question or questions:

- Who are we and where do we belong?
- What have we done and what should we do?
- What is our destiny, or what is our life is for?

In old-fashioned theological terms, these might be called the questions of our origin, sin and destiny, but I find these categories inadequate to express all that I intend here.

The first cluster of questions concerns identity and community and therefore the issue of *belonging*. There are numerous ways in which this question is expressed or is presented to us in our current situation. It can be seen in the question of reconciliation with Indigenous Australians, in the question of our relationship with the land, or the debate about multiculturalism, or about our heritage: British law, cultural elites,

the importance of mateship or ANZAC day or the bush mythology, and so on. The very recent development of an aggressive xenophobia, evident in Australia's policy towards asylum seekers, shows how deeply these issues reach and how insecure we are in our identity as a nation.

The second cluster of questions concerns our *freedom and responsibility*, including questions about morality and social obligations. Again there are numerous elements in our culture through which these issues emerge, including the question of an apology to the Indigenous people, in relation to the separation of the "Stolen Generations" and many other matters relating to responsibility for past events and policies, and perhaps also to convict origins. In a different direction, there are issues of environmental responsibility to future generations. Other issues here include a general resistance to moral authority, and to all formal claims to authority; paternalism towards women, support for the underdog, and a claim to egalitarian values.

The third bundle of issues I see as expressing the question of the ultimate worth or *destiny* our lives. What do we live for, and what is worth dying for? Clearly there is a close relationship between this question and the second bundle of issues. Here, we can identify the tension in our culture between materialism and intellectual values. While we have a strong commitment to education, we resist any "purely" intellectual interest, seeking instrumental benefits from such pursuits. Other indications of our sense of what is worthwhile are seen associated with the value of work and just wages. But we also value leisure and fun, and sport is a dominant value in many expressions of Australian life. Sporting champions are called heroes. There is also a strong commitment to a form of family life. On the other hand, there has been a general resistance to any form of grand vision for the nation as a whole. We value our privacy and our individuality and it is from these things that we draw our sense of what is worthwhile.

Having proposed these questions and aspects of our cultural context as those about which I suggest a correlative conversation needs to proceed – the task has, I think, hardly begun – I would like very briefly to suggest what I presently see as a crucial element in a theological formulation emerging from such a conversation. It seems to me that a crucial theme in our current situation is the way we relate to that which we perceive as Other. It seems we are afraid of those who are different, or we seek to dominate the land and its resources rather than learn to live with the land and its inherent limitations upon our growth and greed. God is, in many different ways, the Other. Learning to relate to and live with the Other is also a pathway to living with God. Is God an Other to be feared, or is God (like the land) both the object of our fear and our enticement? Is God a welcoming friend or a threatening, forced companion on our journey? I suggest that an exploration of our

relationship with God as the inviting other, both different and welcoming, may also find many resonances with personal, social and historical issues in our contemporary situation. What I have sketched here in a few sentences is simply to illustrate the directions in which I would suggest a correlative conversational approach to an Australian theology might presently be developed. The challenge now is to begin the conversation, in numerous contexts and situations.

It remains to identify how such a correlative conversational contextual theology might be guided and evaluated critically. Here I propose a series of "tests" or criteria, each of which invites specific application according to the context, experiences and commitments of those engaged with a specific theological work. These tests might be applied by the proponents of a theology or by others who read, hear or are perhaps open to being persuaded by that theology. To apply these criteria is itself a contextual task. Necessarily, there is an element of generality in my description of these tests. Exactly how they relate to specific forms of theological work needs to be worked out within the correlative conversation of theological exploration.

1. First, a contextual theology is to be judged more successful in its task and formulations if it achieves *clarity* in its purpose and in its expression. (The latter almost always presupposes the former.) If a contextual theology seeks to engage in what we have called a correlative conversational approach, then, those engaging in this conversation need at least some degree of self-consciousness and transparency in this process. A theology which can show what it is doing, when for example it draws upon contemporary art or literature for some of its subject matter, will not pretend that it is dealing comprehensively in the study of art or literature as such, but will acknowledge the character of its engagement with those sources. In so doing, it will be open to comment and critique by other writers and artists, about that material and the significance attributed to them. In this way, clarity of purpose and openness about what we are doing allows the conversation to continue.

2. The second criterion affirms the character of a contextual theology as such. A contextual theology will be judged more successful and helpful to the extent that it *attends respectfully to its context*. This criterion calls for careful attention to the situation in which the theological work is to be done. Here there should be no pretence that we are ever able to achieve a comprehensive or all-encompassing analysis or description of our context. Attending to our context requires acknowledgment of our situatedness and therefore precludes such a "God's-eye" position. Intentional selectivity in focus will be necessary as well as inevitable, and this should be acknowledged. Given these limitations, however, the descriptions and analysis provided in a contextual theology need to be accurate, such that readers and participants can recognise themselves or their community in those descriptions. There needs to be a significant

sense of resonance with the local community, if a contextual theology is to be judged adequate to its objectives. A conversational methodology is much more likely to achieve this purpose than one undertaken by “experts” or without interaction with the people and the cultural expressions of the context. The conversation also provides the means for establishing such resonance.

3. Thirdly, a contextual theology must also satisfy criteria relating to the subject matter of the Christian faith as such. A contextual theology will be judged more successful if it provides a *recognisable presentation of the Christian witness*, that is, if it speaks of the God who is known in Christ and the salvation other Christians also receive through him. Here we return to the difficulties identified in the opening section of this paper. Exactly how the “subject matter” or content of the Christian faith is to be articulated and its formulation evaluated is precisely the issue, at least for many approaches to contextual theology. Whether a specific formulation of Christian theology is to be judged “orthodox” or in some other sense “appropriate” to the Christian faith in its widest sense is itself a contextual judgement. It may also be a matter of considerable institutional or ecclesiastical debate. The questions of institutional and other sources of authority arise here. For some, there are credal or ecclesiastical formulations which need to be affirmed within and by all theologies. For others, there are “Biblical” tests and ecclesial processes for applying these. No community of faith exists without some mechanism of this nature, whether it is appeal to processes, precedents or prelates, to determine whether that community can recognise its own tradition of faith and theology in a proposed contextual theology.

Here we need to return briefly, but crucially, to considerations of sources for theology. Whereas the debate about method for contextual theology has, at least for Lilburne, stressed the importance of the Word of God as the defining ground of all knowledge of God, I suggest that an appropriate attention to the Christian witness also requires a recognition of the activity of God as Spirit. Indeed, Graeme Garrett has rightly argued that biblically the Word and the Spirit are mutually dependent forms of our knowledge of God. Spirit and Word are two aspects of this same reality of the self-revealing God: “Word is the *meaning* of God's power. Spirit is the *power* of God's word.”³⁷ Just as the Word of God continues to make God known in the continuing life of the community of faith, so too the Spirit enables the community to discern God's presence in continuity with the life of Jesus and the witness of the Scriptures.

This process of Spirit-guided discernment is, I suggest, a vital corrective against the exclusive emphasis upon God's Word as the means of

37. Graeme Garrett, “Scripture, Inspiration and the Word of God”, *Pacifica*, 6/1 (1993), 81-99; see esp. 91.

God's self-disclosure. Nonetheless, there is an important priority here, for the Spirit bears witness to Jesus Christ. What I am suggesting, then, is not something in opposition to, or in addition to, Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Rather, the Spirit bears witness to Christ, such that in the present we may be able to discern the self-revealing presence of God in the various formulations, experiences and contextual constructions we call our theologies. The Spirit enables us to discern whether a theology can appropriately be called "Christian".

To acknowledge that each local community of faith does engage in such discernment requires just that: an acknowledgment that we do indeed make human judgements about experiences and situations in which we believe God is actively present. We assert that here God is known, in this way and that. To do so involves risk. Such theological judgements can be wrong, profoundly wrong; they might also be right. We may not know for sure, and at the time we probably cannot know. Jesus envisaged just this difficulty when he promised the community the presence of the Spirit, to lead and guide them as witness to himself and his way. His promise is that the community will not be without a guide (John 14:25-26; 15:26).

The implications of these dynamics, for the critical evaluation and "authentication" of a contextual, conversational theological formulation, suggest that those making such judgements need to attend not only to criteria relating to God's Word but also to the presence of God's Spirit. A contextual theology will be more adequate if it can be judged to be a recognisable expression of the Christian witness of faith, as discerned through Word and Spirit.

4. Taking this criterion further, a contextual theology will be more successful and beneficial if it offers a *comprehensive* account of the Christian witness of faith, and does not focus only upon one aspect, doctrine or element in the people's experience. This may be evaluated in terms of a "check-list" of doctrines or ideas to be included, though this would (I suggest) be a less appropriate way to address this criterion. A more open approach would engage, conversationally, with a contextual theology asking whether elements in other theological formulations find a place in this account. So, for example, we might ask the proponents of an African tribal ecclesiology whether their experience and theology includes something like what we mean when we speak of "the priesthood of all believers". In such a conversational approach to evaluation, it might emerge that a contextual theology does not, in its present form, include elements which others judge to be crucial to the adequacy of any theology. In this situation, we might consider a contextual theology more adequate if it is open to developments in these directions. A theology which is not open to considering and relating to a wider context of conversation and

reflection might be considered less adequate than one which is more limited yet is open to further development.

5. In common with all theological work, a contextual theology needs to be *reasonable*. This requires logical consistency, such that a normally intelligent person who is able to read it can understand what is being presented and might therefore be persuaded by it. To be reasonable does not require that a theology should provide “knock-down” proofs to defeat any possible objections. What is required here is that a person who is honestly open to understanding the argument should be able to follow it and should be provided with good reasons for considering what is proposed. In this sense, the argument should be credible.

6. Following Tillich’s conviction that effective religious symbols are self-negating, I would contend that a contextual theology (indeed all theology) needs also to be *humble* and must be effective in pointing away from itself to the divine life to which it responds. Theology itself is not God. In the terms of the Barthian theology, theology may involve talk of God but it is not the Word of God. A contextual theology may seek to draw upon the local cultural elements which, understood through a correlative conversation, mediate the presence and life of God. But that same theology will be most effective if it also explains or makes clear that these elements in themselves are not God.

The next three criteria I propose relate to the impact or outcomes of a contextual theology.

7. A contextual theology should be judged more adequate if it is *integrative* for the people and cultural situation where it is developed. Here the term “integrative” refers to the impact of this theology upon the life-style of the people. If a theology is integrative, it will have a liberating effect upon people. They will not be obliged to conform to structures, ideas and cultural forms which are foreign to them and imposed upon them. A contextual theology will help people to discover appropriate forms and means of freedom relevant to their cultural situation and its challenges. This does not preclude introduction of elements into their culture and situation. Rather, it requires appropriate contextual work to explain and relate these matters into their situation. Thus, an integrating and liberating local theology will be inclusive, in many different ways. It will not relate, for example, to one sub-group of the local culture (such as one tribe, one caste, one gender) to the exclusion of others. Again, this does not preclude specific focus on such groups; rather it requires that this focus is developed in such a way that it invites creative and constructive relationship with other tribes, social groups, and so on.

8. A similar requirement applies to relationship with other contextual theologies. A contextual theology will be judged more successful if it also *enables further conversation* with other contextual theologies and

other communities of faith, including people of other religious traditions.

Ronald Thiemann has proposed that Christian theological formulations should be "followable".³⁸ This he believes was a characteristic of Jesus' preaching and teaching. People knew what they needed to do, in response to Jesus' teaching. In a similar way, I propose that a contextual theology should be judged more appropriate and successful if it is *liveable*. By this I mean that people are able, in the situation in which this theology is formulated and presented, to identify the character of actions, values and life-style into which it invites them. To this extent at least a contextual theology must be "practical". I would prefer the term "practicable", recognising that there are many factors determining whether people actually carry out a pathway of envisaged action or not, and whether it is successful.

For a theology to be liveable does not require that the life style it envisions must succeed in all its goals. On the contrary, it may call people to a pathway of costly suffering and the kind of "failure" experienced by the crucified Jesus. Furthermore, to be liveable a theology does not have to provide "answers" to all the questions and challenges of a situation. While it must address the dominant issues and concerns of the situation, if it attends respectfully to that context, a theology will most likely leave some questions and further issues yet to be explored. A liveable theology will be one which invites the people to engage with it, in an open-ended conversation and life-style, offering hope that these issues can be addressed.

Here it is perhaps important to add that the drive of many towards contextual emphases in theology expresses a desire for theology to be as much about doing and living as about thinking and writing. This is what the stress on *praxis* is meant to be: an expression of the kind of knowing (of God and ourselves) that comes about when we leave our nets and follow Jesus, so to speak. In an important sense, then, a contextual theology aims at being a living process, *a communal life in and with God, in the situation*. To this extent, we may need (as with every theology) to guard against the tendency to reify our concepts, as if they are the reality we seek. A theology that is liveable places at least as much value on lived experience and discipleship as it does upon the "correctness" of its doctrine.

9. Arising from all the preceding elements, a conversational contextual theology should be judged more successful if it is *fruitful* in the lives of the people, evoking from them creative worship, prayer and further insights into the character of God and their life of faith with God and with one another. There are likely to many ways in which this fruitfulness will express itself. Some local communities will write songs

38. Ronald Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology*, (Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 51.

which articulate and give further shape to their theology. Some will develop new forms of community gathering, while others will engage in political struggles inspired by the conversation between their faith and local context. Local forms of leadership, worship and witness are common expressions of effective contextualisation. A conversational contextual theology is itself one of the first fruits and an ongoing outcome of such an approach to theology.

I look forward to the kinds of collaborative conversational explorations through which an Australian theology might produce such fruit.