Theology in Context: A CASE STUDY in the PHILIPPINES

Foreword by Dr. Russ Turney
AUTHOR’S PREFACE

All theology is theology in context (FLEMMING 2005). From the biblical writers onward, all theology is written with a particular worldview in mind. From the subjects with which the biblical authors dealt, as well as the ones which they omitted, their writings reflects the context of their intended audience. The theologians that followed them have done the same throughout church history. The various creeds, for example, reflect the theological milieu in which they were written. Reformation theology reflects the life and times of Medieval Europe. The list is endless. Western theology, particularly from America, dominates the current scene, at least in the Philippines.

The question, then, is not so much as whether theology is written in context, but which context does it reflect? When theology written for one context crosses cultural boundaries some issues important to the receptor culture are not deal with, while other issues, important as they may be in the sending culture, are not important to the receptors. The situation in the Philippines, where my wife and I live and serve, is a case in point. Virtually every textbook used in the theological training institutions that I know of here comes from the West and reflects that point of view.

A couple of examples will suffice. In the 18 years I have served in the Philippines, I have yet to meet a Filipino atheist, making the arguments for the existence of God, which are critical in the Western context, wasted ink. On the other hand, when I was writing my doctoral dissertation, of which this is this book is the published version, I consulted my Bible college systematic theology textbook to see if it
dealt with what the Bible has to say about the dead coming back to life—which is a big issue here. Not surprisingly, nothing was mentioned except for the resurrection of Jesus. Sadly, most Filipino writers and missionaries working here have also not engaged this and similar issues to any great degree, at least not in writing. Most of the contextual theology here has been done from a Roman Catholic perspective. In my opinion, there is a critical need for the scholars and writers within the evangelical community to write on the biblical issues relevant to this context. This book is my own modest attempt to contribute to that effort.

I would be glad to hear from you. You can reach me through my personal address, dave.johnson@agmd.org.

Dave Johnson, D-Miss
Daraga, Albay, Philippines

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If this book is readable at all, it is so because of my wife, Debbie’s, patient and thorough editing. To her I am deeply thankful. I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Kay Foundation of the Asia Pacific Theological Seminary (APTS) for approving this project to be published by the APTS Press. My thanks also go to all of those who helped in any way with the original doctoral dissertation from which this is drawn. Since they were thanked by name in the acknowledgments of the dissertation itself, I shall not repeat their names here. My thanks also go to Jhen Arro, who did the copy editing, and to my friends at ICI Ministries in Manila, who did the layout and cover design.

More than anyone else, however, I am thankful to Jesus for giving life purpose and for allowing Debbie and I to have had some many wonderful years of ministry in the Philippines. I hope we have many more.
DEDICATION

To Debbie, my beloved wife and soul mate.
God gave me his best when he gave you to me.
Dave Johnson and I first met around 30 years ago when he was a student at Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri and I was serving as Youth Director for the Southern Missouri District of the Assemblies of God USA. Later we connected in the Philippines, where we had moved to begin our missionary career and he began making short term evangelism trips. There we saw Dave grow in his vision for missions, his evangelistic ministry and his spiritual life. He eventually moved to the Philippines in 1994 where he met Debbie, his wife, and they have continued serving effectively there since that time. Their ministry continued to expand as they led a Bible School, planted churches, and served as mission coordinator for a large team in the Philippines. Dave also completed a doctoral program and led a team that translated the Full Life Study Bible (aka Fire Bible) notes and articles into the Tagalog and later Cebuano languages of the Philippines. This Full Life Study Bible is used regularly by several thousand pastors and church leaders in various denominations and church groups across the country. It is one of the leadership tools which have profoundly helped the Church understand the Holy Spirit and know how essential He is to our spiritual life.

If those accomplishments were not enough, Dave wrote his first book Led By the Spirit: The History of the American Assemblies of God Missionaries in the Philippines. Others had talked about doing this, but his proactive approach to life determined that it was time to take action and an excellent book was the result. We have seen Dave’s writing skills continue to sharpen and influence others on a broader level. His commitment to excellence has inspired him to write articles on topics like leadership, spiritual disciplines, setting and reaching goals,
discipleship and vision. He is always pushing himself to do better and by example inspires others to follow.

Now, he has written this second book. *Theology in Context: A Case Study in the Philippines* is actually the publication of Dave's doctoral dissertation and is a serious reflection on some of the formal and animistic practices of Catholicism that have resulted in Folk Catholicism. His purpose, after many years of research and reflection, is to offer a biblical response to these practices as well as to the worldview that underpins them. Read, be inspired, and come to a deeper understanding of how the Word of God can and must impact Filipino culture.

Dr. J. Russell Turney
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# LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.1</td>
<td>Methods Used</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2.2</td>
<td>Subjects Taught or Recommended</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5.1</td>
<td>A Comparison of Waray and Biblical Cosmologies</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.1</td>
<td>To Whom Do You Pray For Help in Times of Drought and Typhoon?</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.2</td>
<td>To Whom Do the AG Pray For Help in Times of Drought and Typhoon?</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.3</td>
<td>Actions Done Instead of Rituals</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.4</td>
<td>To Whom Do They Pray in Times of Trouble?</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.5</td>
<td>To Whom Does the AG Pray in Times of Trouble?</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6.6</td>
<td>Why the AG Prays to Supernatural Beings</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.1</td>
<td>Reasons for Going to the Gravesite on All Saints’ Day</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.2</td>
<td>AG Reasons for Going to the Gravesite on All Saints’ Day</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.3</td>
<td>Reasons For Not Going to the Gravesite on All Saints’ Day</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.4</td>
<td>Reasons For Going to the Fiesta</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.5</td>
<td>AG Reasons For Going to the Fiesta</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.6</td>
<td>Reasons For Not Going to the Fiesta</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7.7</td>
<td>Reasons Why AG People Do Not Go to the Fiesta</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8.1</td>
<td>Beliefs Regarding Causes of Sickness</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8.2</td>
<td>AG Beliefs Regarding Causes of Sickness</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8.3</td>
<td>Beliefs About Who Can Heal People</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8.4</td>
<td>AG Beliefs About Who Can Heal People</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9.1</td>
<td>Beliefs on How to Protect Oneself From Evil Spirits</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9.2</td>
<td>AG Beliefs on How to be Protected From Evil Spirits</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9.3</td>
<td>Perceived Results of Demon Possession</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10.1</td>
<td>Crop Failure</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10.2</td>
<td>The Holy Spirit</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10.3</td>
<td>Healing</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10.4</td>
<td>Why the Waray Came to Christ</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Assemblies of God Church Member: A baptized adult believer who was at least 20 years old who was attending an Assemblies of God church at the time of the field research.

Assemblies of God Population (AG): Members and adherents of Assemblies of God churches that were selected for participation in the field research.

Contextual Theology: Presenting the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Waray people within their own cultural context and worldview without compromising the message in the process.

Folk Catholicism: A mixture animistic beliefs and practices with formal Roman Catholicism, so as to form an essentially different religion (Schumaker 1984:251).

General Population: Waray people living in the barangays that were selected for participation in the field research.

Religious Belief: A system of convictions concerning the supernatural that are held by a certain group of people.

Adherent: (or sympathizer in the Philippines) An adult or young person that has shown interest in an Assemblies of God church through attending church services or a Bible study who may or may not be born again and has not yet become a baptized member of the church.

Tambalan: A generic Waray term for herbalist, faith healer, spiritist and witchdoctor.

Waray or Waray people: In this study, this refers to the Waray population at large, which encompasses both the GP and the AG sample populations.
The claim made by many that the Philippines is a Christian nation is, at best, only partially true. The reality, as many anthropologists, sociologists and theologians familiar with the Philippine context have attested, is that the animistic practices that predated the arrival of Roman Catholicism continue unabated. From burying good luck charms under one’s house to consulting witchdoctors for healing, the average Filipino’s daily activity reflects a deeply ingrained indigenous consciousness which bears little resemblance to biblical Christianity. Over the last 400 years Roman Catholicism has impacted and changed many of the practices, but the animistic worldview that underpins them remains largely unchallenged.

My purpose in this book is to first understand, respect, explain and engage this worldview while comparing it to biblical revelation. I intend to show how Christians can impact this worldview through an explanation and demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Filipino within their cultural context. I will accomplish this through studying a particular people group, the Waray of Leyte and Samar. According to most scholars, their cultural similarities with the rest of the lowland people groups outweigh the differences, making the results of this study broadly applicable.

**Background**

My initial interest in the Waray people themselves dates back to 1989 when I heard of their need for the gospel while listening to live
radio reports from the Lausanne Congress that took place in Manila that year. The Waray were described as one of the most unreached people groups in the Philippines at that time. While the situation has improved somewhat, the need continues to be great. I first visited the Waray region in 1992 during a brief evangelistic tour. From 1994-2001, I then spent a fairly significant amount of time among the Waray, ministering as opportunities were presented and writing a master's thesis on their pagan religious practices (Johnson 2000). That research provided part of the background for this study, focusing on the activities of the various witch doctors and sorcerers. It also suggested potential bridges to the gospel from the Waray point of view. These potential bridges include a basic concept of God, divine healing, Christ as mediator and signs and wonders, all of which were looked at more in depth in the research presented in this text.

The goal of this research is to study the worldview and religious beliefs of the Waray people as well as the growth of the Assemblies of God in this region to identify the elements that could be of value in presenting the gospel in a contextually effective manner. The rationale for studying the Assemblies of God was because my commitment as a missionary with that organization is to its growth and development here in the Philippines.

Another reason for studying the Waray was that, to the best of my knowledge, no such contextual theology, liberal or conservative, currently exists. There are Catholic scholars who have written from a pan-Filipino perspective. While these were helpful and were used in this study, they were written from a point of view that calls for cultural accommodation rather than transformation through the power of the Word of God. The body of literature from an Evangelical and Pentecostal perspective that engages the animistic worldview in the Philippines is small indeed. My hope is that this book will contribute to this field.
The development of a contextual theology is important as it provides for the opportunity to express the unchanging Good News of Jesus Christ within the worldview of the people, making it easier for the Waray to understand God’s revelation and to make an informed decision as to whether or not they will become followers of Jesus Christ.

The Waray live on the islands of Leyte and Samar in the eastern Visayan region of the Philippines. They are mostly an agricultural people, growing rice, maize, and many root crops. The 2000 census revealed a regional population of 3,250,195. This does not include Southern Leyte, which is a mainly Cebuano region.

To accomplish the purposes of this study, a number of steps were involved. The backdrop of the Waray culture and worldview was reviewed, based on the literature available, in order to better understand Waray religious values. From the literature, two questionnaires were developed to study the Waray religious belief system. Each question was keyed to a related theological issue. Interviews were also conducted with the pioneer Assemblies of God pastors in the region in order to study the growth and development of the Assemblies of God. The results of the research, along with the literature, were then compared to what the Bible teaches about each theological issue. Missiological principles drawn from Charles Kraft’s (1979:54-57) worldview model of contextualization completed the study in chapter eleven.

A contextual theology, then, is a theology that presents the gospel of Jesus Christ within the worldview of the people while being faithful to the Scriptures. In other words, it is communicated in a way in which people will understand and will not seem foreign to them. In doing so, it validates what is biblical in the Waray culture, allows what is not unbiblical and seeks to transform at a deep level that which falls short of biblical revelation. This study intends to assist in this process.
To achieve the goals of the study, three questions were addressed:

- What are the religious beliefs of the Waray as they pertain to their animistic or folk Catholic practices?
- What were the elements of the gospel that contributed to the growth and development of the Assemblies of God churches among the Waray?
- What comparisons might be made between biblical theology and the religious belief system of the Waray?

The study was also undertaken with the following hypotheses: (1) that the religious beliefs of the Waray are steeped in animism and folk Catholicism, (2) the Assemblies of God grew and developed by preaching the gospel, accompanied by demonstrations of the power of God in healing and deliverance from demonic powers, and (3) that contact points can be drawn between the Waray belief system and biblical revelation that will enable the gospel to be effectively presented to the Waray.

**Information Needed to Answer the Research Questions**

For the development of a contextual theology, I needed to learn the Waray views about God, healing (especially the source), the spirit world, death, supernatural power and causation, and theology of the weather. I also needed to learn the cultural issues that impact and are impacted by Waray religious beliefs. Furthermore, I also needed to know what the Bible says about idolatry, God’s providence, allegiance to God or idols, spirit possession and the supremacy of Jesus name, theology of blessing, Christology as it pertains to Christ’s mediation and the doctrine of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. I also needed to learn the cultural issues that impact Waray religious beliefs. In order to understand the appeal of the gospel to the Waray, I needed to understand the history and development of Assemblies of God churches in this region and focus on what has been preached, taught and practiced to draw people to Christ. Specifically I needed to know how the lives of the Assemblies of God population have been changed as a result of the gospel.
Sources of Information

Books, theses, dissertations and other written materials on the Waray have provided a wealth of information for this study. From these sources I developed two questionnaires and one interview designed to provide the data necessary for answering the research questions.

The first questionnaire was administered by trained researchers to both a randomly selected sample of the General Population (hereinafter referred to as the GP) living in the barangays, which are small geopolitical units and a selected sample of members and adherents of Assemblies of God (hereinafter referred to as the AG) churches in the region. These population samples were determined through using standard procedures for behavioral sciences research. Twenty barangays and twenty-four Assemblies of God churches were selected. Chi-square analysis was used whenever possible to determine if the differences of opinion between the two sample populations were significant.

The AG respondents were further divided into members, adherents and pastors. To be a member of an Assemblies of God church, one has to be baptized in water. Adherents (or sympathizers as they are known in the Philippines) are those who have not yet been baptized and in some cases may not have yet received Christ, but are attending a Bible study, church services, or have in some way indicated an interest in the church.

A second questionnaire was administered only to Assemblies of God people by the same researchers immediately after the respondents had answered the questions to the first questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to study how the gospel had impacted their lives and changed their worldview.

A third research instrument, an interview questionnaire guide known as Questionnaire Regarding the History and Development of the
Assembly of God in the Leyte/Samar region, was an open ended interview with the pioneer pastors who led the way in planting the first Assembly of God churches in the region.

This data was collected, analyzed in chapters five through ten and compared, along with the literature, to what the Bible teaches about each related theological issue. Specific contact points were made between what the Bible teaches and elements of the Waray belief system such as the reality of spiritual power, spiritual mediation, spirit possession, the deity of Christ and other Assembly of God beliefs. I then evaluated how closely related the religious beliefs of the Waray are to the Bible and proposed ways to explain and demonstrate the gospel more clearly to them.

Scope and Limitations of This Study

This study attempted to understand the religious beliefs of the Waray people as they relate to their animistic practices. Specific themes included worldview and spirit world issues, folk Roman Catholic practices that are steeped in animism, supernatural power and issues related to nature. Biblical beliefs that are relevant to these subjects were studied to determine whether the Waray beliefs are similar and how biblical truth can be brought to bear on the lives of the Waray people.

The history of the Assembly of God among the Waray was reviewed with specific attention given to what has been preached and practiced in evangelistic, church planting and discipleship efforts and how the people’s lives were changed as a result.

While many issues concerning contextualization were covered, specific emphasis was given to contextual issues arising from Waray animistic practices because they encompass all areas of life. However, no claim is made here to an exhaustive effort at contextualization. The focus here is on the proclamation of the gospel message and to the initial follow-up process.
Before we can delve into the theological issues, however, we will look into the history of the Assemblies of God in the region. Along the way, we will pick up hints as to how the gospel has impacted and changes the lives of the members and adherents.

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