

EMOQ

JANUARY-MARCH 2025 | VOL 61 #01

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The Arts & MISSIONS

Collaborative Contextual Theology: Lessons from Thailand

Contextualizing theology is challenging, and discernment is needed to know the difference between biblical truths and cultural beliefs. Local and outsider perspectives can benefit these discussions. A three-step framework used by the Thai Christian Thinkers group offers helpful guidance on how to do this well.

I am more of a practitioner than an academic. Maybe it's because of my engineering background that I like to make things simple and see things work. For decades there has been a persistent challenge from evangelical quarters regarding the need to do contextual theology.

As a cross-cultural missionary working alongside the Thai, I also recognise this need.¹ But I have not seen much implemented on the ground. At the same time, I've had the opportunity to teach "Contextual and Asian Theologies" for

the AGST Alliance (a consortium of seminaries in southeast Asia of which Bangkok Bible Seminary is a part). As I taught the various models for doing contextual theology,² they all appeared complex and difficult to implement.

A small group of Thai leaders and I are a part of a group called "Thai Christian Thinkers." In response to these complex models for contextual theology, we developed a simple but effective approach we have started to use here in Thailand.



Thailand - In a remote Lahu village, a woman prays during a Sunday morning church service.

PHOTO BY MARC EWELL, COURTESY OF WGA.

For decades there has been a persistent challenge from evangelical quarters regarding the need to do contextual theology.

WHY?

The reason for doing contextual theology can be explained by observing the two overlapping circles seen in figure 11.1. The left circle represents a *biblical truth* (e.g. sin, repentance, prayer, giving, God, etc. as the Bible reveals it). The right circle represents the *understanding* of that truth within a given culture.

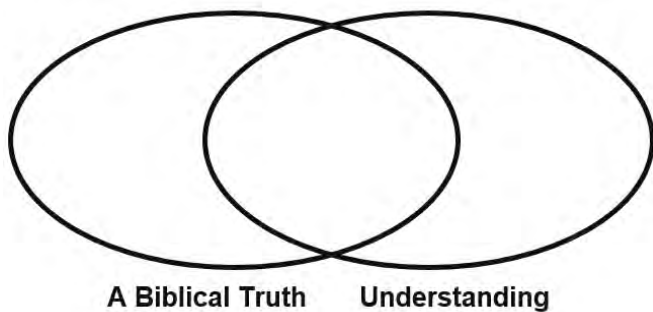


Figure 11.1 – Biblical truth and the understanding of that truth in culture.

We can break the diagram down into three sections as in figure 11.2. Section A includes parts of a *biblical truth* that are understood correctly. Section B are the parts of a *biblical truth* that are missing from understanding. Section C represents the misunderstandings that are thought to be true but are not according to biblical truth.

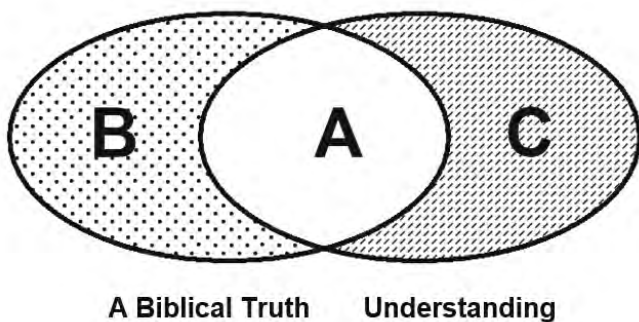


Figure 11.2 – A biblical truth understanding.

Parts B and C require special attention when teaching biblical truths. Aspects of the truth in the B section that are

missing from the understanding will need to be emphasised and explained more clearly. Misunderstandings in the C section will need to be exposed and explained why they should be corrected. Each culture will have different B elements and C elements stemming from prior religious belief, philosophy, worldview, and values.

Take, for example, communicating the biblical truth concerning *sin* in the Thai Buddhist context. While most Thai individuals grasp that sin can encompass actions that harm others (part of the A section), they often overlook its fundamental nature as an offence against God. This missing element will need emphasising as part of the B section. Additionally, due to Buddhism's five precepts, they may perceive killing animals as sinful as well. Therefore, this non-biblical element will need clarification as part of section C.

When Christian teachers, preachers, and writers endeavour to make biblical truths more understandable within their culture, they are actually *doing* this much needed task of contextual theology. As they seek to make the two circles overlap as fully as possible, they are bringing people more and more to the actual truth as revealed in the Bible.

WHO?

Who are the most suitable individuals to engage in theology within a specific context? For sure local Christians, who best understand their culture, should be the primary people doing theology in their context. If we use technical terms first introduced by SIL linguist Kenneth Pike, local Christians are the *emics* (or cultural insiders). They are able to *feel* the problems and issues arising from the culture within which they have been raised.

But we should also include the *etics*. These are cultural outsiders who have integrated sufficiently enough to understand the dynamics of that culture. While not being able to *feel* the same as those who grew up within the culture, they can often *see* or *identify* issues or problems more clearly or more objectively.

Consider the challenge of defining biblical leadership within the Thai context. This issue presents an opportunity for collaboration between Thai leaders and experienced missionary outsiders. The former may be deeply influenced by cultural norms such as patronage, indebted relationships, and seniority. The latter may bring a nuanced understanding of the context without the same emotional ties to cultural norms.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992)
- Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2014)
- Matthew Cook, Rob Haskell, Ruth Julian, and Natee Tanchanpongs, eds. *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization* (Pasadena: World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission-William Carey Library, 2010)
- William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).
- William A. Dyrness, *Learning About Theology from the Third World* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1980)
- Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2005)
- Timoteo D. Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects,” in *JAET* 22, nos. 1–2 (March–September 2018): 49–68
- David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2000)
- Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985)
- Steve Taylor, “A Prolegomena for the Thai Context: A Starting Point for Thai Theology,” in *Evangelical Review of Theology* 29, no. 1 (January 2005): 32–51
- Steve Taylor, “A Challenge for the Thai Church (Patron-Client Relationships),” *Mission Frontiers* (November–December 2014), <https://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/a-challenge-for-the-thai-church>
- Steve Taylor, “Steve Taylor,” <https://bbsthai.org/stevebbs/stevetaylor.htm>
- Jackson Wu, *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2015)
- Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas* (New Delhi: Regnum Books, 1997)

In this scenario, both groups can contribute valuable insights. Thai leaders offer firsthand knowledge of cultural dynamics and societal expectations, providing essential context for understanding local perspectives on leadership. Meanwhile, missionary outsiders bring a fresh perspective, unencumbered by emotional attachments to cultural norms, enabling them to identify potential areas of tension between cultural practices and biblical principles.

By working together respectfully and collaboratively, these two groups can navigate the complexities of cultural adaptation. They can also find authentic expressions of biblical leadership that are both culturally sensitive and free from practices that might lead to indebtedness or dependency. Ideally, both local Christians and locally experienced foreign Christians (e.g., long-term missionaries) can take on the challenge of doing theology together in the local context.

For over a decade, I have had the privilege of being a member of Thai Christian Thinkers. It is comprised of approximately 20 individuals, 80% of whom are Thai. The aim has been to think through issues relevant to our context and write books that will be helpful for Thai Christians and churches.

HOW?

The Thai Christian Thinkers group has already published two main series of books and is currently working on a third. The first series is called “Can a Christian Do This?” It deals with ceremonies in Thai culture.

It proposes a simple mode of operation using four basic guidelines which can be applied to any part of a ceremony: (1) accept, (2) adjust, (3) adapt, and (4) avoid. The first book in this series focused on funerals and has become a very helpful resource to Thai Christians who often need to attend Buddhist funerals.

Another book is on the Thai New Year festival. And an additional book focuses on the Loy Krathong festival – an annual event when a small boat and candle are floated out onto water to thank or appease the goddess of the water.

The theme of the second series is “Questions and Answers.” It covers key

topics such as the Holy Spirit, giving and tithing, and LGBTQ+. Questions encountered in the Thai context are raised and then answered from the Scriptures.

The current third series is about “Communicating the Gospel in the Thai Context.” Its aim is to produce a tool-kit for Thai Christians to be able to better explain the gospel in their context. The main components of the gospel have been broken down into chapters such as: God; man and man’s condition; Jesus, the cross, and the resurrection; man’s response of faith, etc.

Various members of the group are writing a chapter on their chosen heading. Each chapter follows a 3-step approach:

- 1. Problem:** List the problems within the Thai context (i.e., the Bs and Cs in figures 11.1 and 11.2).
- 2. Bible:** For each problem, find enough relevant Bible content to provide a biblical and theological explanation for each identified problem. This may be a combination of several passages.
- 3. Communication:** Since the Bible was written within and for the cultural contexts of its day, this step is about finding relevant and meaningful ways to express the content found in step 2 for Thais living in today’s Thai context.

In step 3, the collaboration of the group is most helpful. Apart from our regular three monthly meetings (normally only two or three hours), we have an annual 3-day retreat near the seaside. These are very special times when we are able to bring together our decades of ministry experience to discuss ways that have been effective, or that could be effective, in communicating relevantly.

Using the chapter on God as an example, we used the 3-step approach in the following way:

- 1. Problem:** The following problems in the Thai understanding were identified:
 - Which God?
 - God has not yet escaped the cycle of birth and death.

- This world has no God or if there is, then God is not relevant to us humans (more radical Buddhists).
- God is *ignorant* (or imperfect) because he created a world full of suffering.
- How can one supreme God be three persons?
- God is the God of Westerners.

2. **Bible:** To answer the problem *a. Which God?*, an emphasis needs to be made on God as Supreme, the Creator, Owner, and Sustainer of all things, for whom all things are created and by whom all things will be judged (Genesis 1:1; Colossians 1:16; Psalm 24:1; Haggai 2:8; Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17; Romans 14:10; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

3. **Communication:** This is the hardest part and is a work in progress. What we've focused on thus far is the Thai understanding and reverence for sacred beings. They also have a strong understanding of hierarchy (with the King at the top). These understandings may be used as illustrations when describing God as Supreme, Creator, etc. and totally *other* from all created things.

TOWARD A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

It is only more recently that Thai leaders have felt the freedom to start to look for contextual ways to communicate

their faith. All recognise that these are early days and, in some ways, experimental.

But the work is being done with the anticipation that we and others will build on what has been started, taking what works and refining it further. Similar to the hermeneutical spiral, each subsequent endeavour should aid the Thai church in attaining a deeper understanding of their faith and communicating it more effectively. ■

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1. Steve Taylor, "Gaps in beliefs of Thai Christians," in *EMQ* 37, no. 1 (January 2001): 72-81.
 2. For example, the contextual theology models suggested by Bevans, Schreiter, etc.



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Thailand - A group of men listen during a church service.