

## Contextualizing theology: A look at the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua and the evangelical response

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**Abstract:** Drawing on contextualization literature, this paper seeks to evaluate the impact of contextual theology from a Latin American perspective. Bevans' (2002) Praxis Model of contextual theology sets the conceptual framework used to evaluate the evangelical response to the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua. The case study provides an example of how Bevans' Praxis Model can be applied by looking at the manner with which the evangelical and the catholic church have responded to the sociopolitical upheaval in Nicaragua. The literature on contextualization highlights how theologizing is inextricably tied to culture, that contextual theology is necessary to effectively communicate the truth of the Gospel in varying cultural contexts, and that the issues of syncretism and the plurality of theologies can be effectively addressed.

**Key Words:** Contextual theology; contextualization; social engagement; Evangelicalism; Nicaragua; Politics

### Introduction

While some have approached contextual theology with suspicion (Fluegge 2017; Stetzer 2017), others are engaging it more optimistically (Kraft 2016; Hiebert 1994; Kim 2004; Escobar 2003; Padilla 2019). The latter, some missiologists, anthropologists, and theologians, have expressed the importance of contextual theology given the very real implications to the work in the Christian missions, Christian expression and understanding, and spiritual practice (Olagunju 2012; Bevans 2002; Reddie 2018; Pachau 2017; Rodriguez 2008). Other theologians have also voiced their support for a contextual theology that affirms the notion of Imago Dei (Yeh and Tiéno 2018; O. E. González and González 2014; J. González 1996; Elizondo 2000, 2006; Estrada 2015; García-Johnson 2009). Current writings on contextual theology include, but are not limited to, socioeconomics (Wuaya 2008), gender (Kamaara and Wangila 2009), and ethnocultural (Wu 2014) perspective. However, a lack of diversity in the cultural contexts where theological discourse is being developed still exists.

This paper contains three major sections. First, I provide an overview of Bevans' (2002) models of contextual theology. More specifically, this section highlights the praxis model of contextual theology as a viable model for assessing the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua. The second section is a direct application of the praxis model to the Nicaraguan context amidst the sociopolitical upheaval of 2018. It is here that the Evangelical response is compared to its Catholic counterpart. By this, I hope to evaluate the impact of contextual theology from a Latin American perspective, interpret the role of lived experience in the midst of Nicaragua's sociopolitical upheaval, and analyze the intersection of ethnocultural identity and Christian theology. Lastly, I situate the dialogue of contextual theology within a broader theoretical analysis concerning theology and culture.

### Data and Method

This paper makes use of the praxis model of contextual theology, developed by Stephen Bevans, who Irvin (2020, 20) described as "one of the most important voices in world Christian

theology in our generation.” This is done by first providing a brief overview of all five of Bevans’ models, with a brief pause on the praxis model.

The data from this study stems from two sources, the author’s personal experience and literature, including academic works and news articles. As for the former, the author is of Nicaraguan descent whose family and friends lived through the sociopolitical crisis described in this paper. Additionally, the author’s network consists of members of the Evangelical and Catholic community in Nicaragua, which are perspectives presented below. An interaction witnessed by the author is used as a case study. Regarding the various news articles, they were written from within the Nicaraguan context and with a particularly critical perspective, which is a unique source of information and perspective given the suppression of freedom of speech within the context.

Two comments are imperative to highlight at this point. First, it is necessary to note that not much is available within formal academic research on this topic. Therefore, much of what was available to me at the time of writing has been limited to news articles and personal experiences. Second, given the current sociopolitical reality in Nicaragua, much of what has been written and voiced that contains any trace of criticism towards the government has been censored by them. That being said, news articles, though often evaluated as particularly biased, have been a welcomed source that critiques the sociopolitical crisis that Nicaragua and its people have experienced.

### **An Introduction to Bevans’ Models of Contextual Theology**

A brief overview of Bevans’ model is necessary to set the stage for the rest of the paper. Irvin (2020, 21) acknowledged that Bevans’ work “has ranged widely across the fields of historical and dogmatic theology. His global perspective has been one that embraces the multiplicity of local contextual methods and experiences, connecting them not only with one another but with the history of Christian traditions through the ages.” It is from this perspective that Bevans (2002) developed his models of contextual theology, which are: 1) translation model, 2) anthropological model, 3) praxis model, 4) synthetic model, 5) transcendental model, and 6) countercultural model. Each model he presents has important contributions that allow theology to be effectively contextualized to an appropriate cultural context. For the purpose of this paper, a brief description of each will suffice given the number of works that already exist on the models and their use (Thomson 2009; Yakubu 1996; Kim 2004; Dei 2019).

### **The Translation and Anthropological Models**

The translation model adapts and accommodates liturgical practices in culturally appropriate and comprehensible ways. The anthropological model approaches contextual theology from a creation-oriented perspective. It is convinced that the “context with which human beings adhere and the experiences they garner within the context are generally good” and “is about human person, his or her fulfillment within the Christian community” (Olagunju 2012, 43).

### **The Praxis Model**

The topic at hand calls for a brief evaluation of the praxis model. Because the praxis model emphasizes the liberation of the poor and oppressed as revealed through the Bible, it resembles liberation theology and *misión integral* (integral mission). Consequently, there are aspects of the model that shed light on institutional and political corruption and its effect on the marginalized and underrepresented of a society. The value of this model lies in the fact that contextualization looks very different compared to the general experience in the West, the U.S. more specifically. Fluegge (2017, 64) commented that those living the U.S. “have lived in such a

thoroughly Christianized culture that there has little perceived need for contextualization.” This could not be further from the truth. Contextualization in the Western context is still necessary.

Furthermore, the goal of this model, argued Olagunju (2012, 46), is “to find what God is already doing in the culture rather than to communicate God’s eternal message within the cultural context.” In other words, the praxis model acknowledges the ongoing care God has for His creation, especially amidst corruption and injustice found in some contexts such as certain countries Latin America. Dei (2019, 13) described the model as one that “emphasizes social change as a function of the articulation of the message of Christianity within different cultures.” Reddie (2018, 138) evaluated this model from a Caribbean context and claimed that it “most reflects the central concerns of Caribbean theology” and that it is “an approach that [emphasizes] faithful action for social change.” The praxis model provides a lens through which the theologian in Latin America can evaluate current realities. Pachuau (2017, 360) explained that “Locating different forms of contextual theologies between ‘Experience of the Past’ context and ‘Experience of the Present’ context, [Bevans] outlined the different models based on their orientation either to the past or the present experience.” The praxis model’s orientation to the present experience is necessary for the Nicaraguan context.

### **The Synthetic, Transcendental, and Countercultural Models**

The synthetic model balances the importance and accuracy of the Gospel message through traditional theological formulation and the role of cultural context. The transcendental model, according to Olagunju (2012, 48), is “the model of the existentialist.” Bevans (2019, 84) described it as a “a call to do theology as honestly as possible—as a person of faith and as a person aware of one’s cultural identity.” The transcendental model also has an emphasis on the means of revelation embedded in human experience, “one’s own religious experience” (Bevans 2002, 104), before the means of revelation through Scripture. Finally, the countercultural model is described by Bevans (2002, 117) as a model that “takes context (experience, culture, social location, and social change) with utmost seriousness.”

Olagunju (2012, 53) evaluated each model and concludes that “all theologies have some limitations, and that any good theology must be open to criticism from other points of view” and asserts that in any case “there is but one gospel among many cultures, each of which might develop its own theological reflection.” In other words, the content remains the same while the contextual realities, process of interpretation, and dissemination differentiates.

### **Theology and the Nicaraguan Context**

Latin American history is replete with events of political tensions and economic crises (Kirkpatrick, 2016; Miguez Bonino, 1975; Sobrino et al., 1994). Therefore, it is no surprise that some theologians have written and articulated theologies that help Christians process such realities (Gutiérrez, 1990; Miguez Bonino, 1975, 1983; Reddie, 2018; Zúñiga Escobar & Gómez Zúñiga, 2017). Beyond being mere philosophical articulations of certain truths found in the Bible, Latin American theologies address the contemporary realities Christians faced in their context. In many cases, these realities included war, revolutions, social and political turmoil, and fights against injustices.

### **A Brief Overview of the Nicaraguan Context**

Nicaragua is a microcosm of the diversity found in Latin America. Culturally speaking, it contains diverse ethnocultural backgrounds ranging from indigenous communities (Miskito, Sumo, Rama people), to mestizos (mixed heritage between indigenous and Spanish), to Afro-

Caribbean (Garifuna). Linguistically, while Spanish is the main language, various indigenous languages are still present, such as Miskito, Sumu, Rama, Garifuna, and creole English.

Nicaragua's religious landscape is made up of a majority Catholic population with clear growth in the evangelical Protestant community. Schäfer, Reu, and Tovar (2017) claimed that Nicaragua is "among those Latin American countries with the highest percentage of religiously active people" (p. 94). The Pew Research Center (2014) reported Nicaragua as one of three Central American countries having half of the population identifying as Catholic and only 40% Protestant. More recently, it has been found that Nicaragua has 58.5% of its population identifying as Catholic compared to 23.2% identifying as Protestant (CIA World Fact Book, 2016; Watch, 2016). Schäfer, Reu, and Tovar (2017, 111) commented, "In spite of the dominant trend in the academic literature to emphasize Pentecostal growth, the Catholic Church is characterized by high levels of public credibility, different revival movements, deep roots within society (e.g., Acción Católica), and Charismatic mobilization."

The Christian faith in Nicaragua has served as a moral compass, helping strengthen families and society at large (Méndez, 2019; Sierakowski, 2020). In his mix-method study, Sierakowski (2020) argued that the Sandinista political party gain followership, in part, to address the country's moral decay. Many joined the Sandinista movement because of the "Christian perspective gained at parochial schools" (Sierakowski, 2020, p. 113). The Christian faith brought a moral lens through which Nicaraguans interpreted and challenged the Somoza dictatorship in the late 1970s, which led to the civil war (Reed & Pitcher, 2015; Sierakowski, 2020). The student-led protests of April 2018 now serve as a contemporary example for assessing the impact that politics has on theologies in Nicaragua.

### **Contextualizing Theology has Real-World Implications, Today**

Theologizing looks different from one context to the next. This is why Bevans' (2002) models of contextual theology are so useful. For example, Miguez Bonino (1975) used Liberation Theology to inform the sociopolitical engagement amidst Chile's political upheaval. In setting the stage for his theological discussion, Miguez Bonino (1975, 61) argued that "Latin American theology of liberation is beginning to emerge (as all theology?) after the fact, as the reflection about facts and experiences which have already evoked a response from Christians." Like Miguez Bonino's reflection on the situation in Chile, the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua illustrates a clear opportunity for the contextualization of theology using the praxis model. The following is a brief reflection on the sociopolitical upheaval in Nicaragua and the task of contextualization in this context.

### **The Crisis in Nicaragua Presents an Opportunity for the Use of the Praxis Model**

April 18, 2018, marks the day the people of Nicaragua openly voiced their discontent with the 11-year authoritarian rule of Daniel Ortega (Salinas 2018). Ultimately, this upheaval was due to a social security reform that Ortega issued that called for an increase in taxes for current contributors and a legal tax for retirees (Chamorro 2018). Within five days of the student-led protests against Ortega, the number of dead had risen to 45 (Robles 2018). The current number of deaths since the manifestations started is unclear. For example, as of September 24, 2018, the Human Rights Association of Nicaragua reports 1,303 missing and 512 dead, while CIDH (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights) reports the death toll of 322 people ("La ONG ANPDH Eleva a 512 El Número de Muertos En Nicaragua" 2018). Nonetheless, the crisis affected the entire country. Education stopped, roads were blocked, commerce ceased, and life as Nicaraguans know it, came to a stark halt.

Catholics and Evangelicals have reacted differently to the sociopolitical crisis. The former's approach is visibly more contextualized than the latter. The evangelical community has voiced their concerns over the mistreatment of the protestors and have given a voice to the families mourning the deaths of their loved ones. In fact, in one particular event, the Assemblies of God in Nicaragua issued an official statement clarifying their affiliation with a pastor by the name of Jorge Rashke, who publicly defended Ortega, which is not the Assemblies of God's position ("Iglesia Evangélica de Nicaragua Desautoriza a Pastor Que Defiende Al Gobierno" 2018; Cruz Medina 2018). By doing this, the Assemblies of God made it clear that they do not support Ortega, even though the denomination had a pastor who did. However, not much is heard on behalf of the evangelical community outside of efforts contained within the church walls.

Similarly, the Catholic community has openly expressed their disagreement with Ortega and the mishandling of the crisis ("La Iglesia Católica Denuncia La Persecución En Nicaragua Por El Régimen de Ortega" 2018). Although both, the Catholic and Evangelical church, have voiced their concerns within Nicaragua's sociopolitical crisis, the Catholic church has proven to be more socially active. Leopoldo José Brenes Solórzano, a Nicaraguan Roman Catholic cardinal and Archbishop of Managua, has received much attention by the media for his involvement in peaceful protests, speeches, and opening the cathedral's doors to people affected by the violence (González Espinosa 2018). His involvement has been within and outside the church walls.

The evangelical community has focused less on the sociopolitical realities of the crisis. I witnessed an interaction between two pastors of Nicaraguan background - one living in the United States, let's name him Rodolfo, and the other living through the crisis in the country, his name will be Pedro. Rodolfo was verbally reprimanding Pedro for his apparent lack of commitment and lack of courage. The judgment was also against the pastors that were more concerned with praying than being physically available outside of the church walls, such as joining protestors or aiding the families in the community. Pedro, the pastor living in Nicaragua, defended himself by explaining that only those who are experiencing the crisis are able to properly discern the necessary form of engagement. He deemed it more appropriate for the pastors, himself included, to be spiritually available for the congregations and their family and friends, especially for those who mourned the death of someone. Finally, Pedro also cautioned Rodolfo against outsiders placing any judgment on those who were actually living through the crisis.

From this interaction, two points of tension are clear. The first is the inability on behalf of Rodolfo to sympathize with Pedro. As noted by Pedro, it is often easy for those outside the struggle to comment and place judgment. Only those living in the context understand the fear, danger, and cost of living out their faith outside of the church walls. Failure to sympathize with others perpetuates ideological and theological imperialism. Hiebert (1994, 57) wrote and reminds Christians that "the colonial era engendered arrogance and segregation. Few Westerners took other cultures seriously or sought to understand them in their own terms. Many saw themselves as superior to the peoples they met." Rodolfo's judgement was an act of superiority. Rather than placing judgement, inquiring what informed the actions taken by Pedro would have been more productive and would have generated dialogue. Bevans and Schroeder (2004, 348) argued that "[m]ission today should first and foremost be characterized as an exercise of *dialogue*." They argue that one engages with God's mission not simply by serving but by also learning. Furthermore, Bevans and Schroeder (2011, 59) argued that "[m]ission as dialogue is the ministry of presence, of respect." Hence, Rodolfo's criticism was met with Pedro's quick defense; Dialogue dissipated. Additionally, a deeper historical understanding of the development of



Christianity within the Nicaraguan context would help Rodolfo situate religious behavior amidst the protests.

Pedro, on the other hand, is facing an opportunity to present the Gospel in a more effective and contextualized manner, which is the second point of tension. The praxis model may help close the gap. Bevans (2002, 73) argued that this model's "key presupposition [...] is the insight that the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing." In other words, it is ortho-praxis. Social media in Nicaragua is saturated with individuals expressing their discontent with the evangelical community. Often times, these individuals compare the evangelical's limited involvement – praying and holding vigils ("Evangélicos Combaten Crisis de Nicaragua Con Oración" 2018) – with that of the Catholic community's involvement – leading marches, calling for dialogue between the government and the people, and being in the midst of the violence ("Iglesia Católica Insiste En Diálogo En Nicaragua" 2018; Selser 2018). Bevans and Schroeder (2004, 348) argued that it is until theology is contextualized, and one is able to engage with cultural and contextual realities, that God's people are able to see the "depths of God's unfathomable riches." Similarly, Hunter's (2010, 247) theology of faithful presence calls for Christians to be faithfully present and "committed in their spheres of social influence, whatever they may be." Therein lies Pedro's opportunity to utilize the praxis model as a lens to discern his role in sharing and living out the Gospel in his context.

Bevans' (2002) praxis model is useful in helping discern appropriate ways of engaging the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua. Bevans (2002, 63) wrote, "[T]he praxis model [...] focuses on the identity of Christians within a culture as that culture is understood in terms of social change." In Pedro's context it is clear that social change was necessary and being actively sought by the people. Furthermore, this model creates theology using "reflective action" and contributes to the "course of social change" by taking into account "present realities and future possibilities" as opposed to strictly adhering to classic texts or classic behavior (Bevans 2002, 63-64). To this, Olagunju's (2012) comparison between embedded theology and deliberative theology adds depth. He argued that embedded theology "rests at the subconscious level" and is "intrinsic and is communicated by praying, preaching, hymn, singing, personal conduct, liturgy, and social action or inaction, and virtually everything else people say and do in the name of their Christian faith," while deliberative theology pushes beyond and addresses the "natural," often "unquestioned" and "deeply rooted theological givens" (Olagunju 2012, 37). In a Latin American context, Nicaragua included given its colonial history, it becomes imperative to question standards, religious and otherwise. Estrada (2015, 346) highlighted Fernando Segovia's view that, although a praiseworthy goal, being an impartial and objective reader through the "adoption of scientific methods and the denial of particularity and contextuality," this goal is "naïve and dangerous." Estrada (2015, 346) agreed with Segovia's argument that this approach, "remained inherently colonialistic and imperialistic because it expected all critics to interpret Scripture from a Eurocentric perspective." Similarly, Padilla (2019, 157) argued that it is not possible to understand nor to communicate the Gospel "sin referencia a la cultura" (without reference to culture). This is the danger of viewing the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua through a lens other than a contextual one. Doing so would risk assessing the situation without questioning the subconscious approach to how one theologizes and, consequently, how one engages.

The praxis model informs engagement with the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua. Bevans (2002, 73) argued that for those using this model, it is clear that Christianity "must work against such oppressive structures not just by seeking to change certain features, but by seeking to supplant them completely." The effects of this crisis need to be the pressing cultural questions

guiding theological discourse within the Nicaraguan community, as Kraft (2001) has already pointed out. Additionally, the words of Miguez Bonino (1983, 55) ring true to the Nicaraguan context: “Latin America is not a secularized continent in which religion plays only a marginal role [...] a consideration of the religious factor in political decisions [...] must be part of any adequate analysis of the past, present, and future in Latin America.” Christians are also able to clearly perceive the needs of the poor and the oppressed by keeping in mind Olagunju's (2012) insights on the praxis model. Without a proper model that lends itself to understanding the people's realities, Christians cannot adequately present the Gospel. The praxis model also operates through reflective action – “It is reflected-upon action and acted-upon reflection” (Bevans 2002, 65). Given this, theologizing through the praxis model is a matter of contributing relevant thoughts and actions concerning a Christian way of living in a context and its needs. One can find many examples in Scripture that inform engagement (Psalm 82:3), God's deliverance (Exodus 13; Luke 4:18), and social justice (Isaiah 1:17; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9-10; Proverbs 31:8-9). The effective communication of the Gospel during this social upheaval calls for a contextual theology.

The people of Nicaragua cannot interpret a Gospel that they cannot relate to during their country's crisis. The Gospel they are presented must be contextualized. For example, someone being told that God is love amidst the violence and chaos will seek to understand it by expecting the person presenting the Gospel to express God's love in a way that they understand – through action and solidarity. When this is not done, the Gospel message falls on deaf ears. In this season of sociopolitical disruption, the Nicaraguan people understand love through action - by someone walking with or supporting them in the peaceful protests. It is a matter of “liberation and transformation,” which is “the only way that men and women can fulfill their call to be genuine children of God” (Bevans 2002, 73). Simply adhering to the “natural” or “unquestioned” truth about the Gospel without questioning its applicability to the Nicaraguan context results in what (Padilla 2019) referred to as a photocopy of Christianity, which is an uncritically transplanted theology. It is a Christianity separated from the realities people are facing. It is an obsolete theology.

### **Theologizing is Inextricably Tied to Culture**

The contextualization of theology within the Nicaraguan political context presents a concrete example of the intricacies required to live out the Gospel. In an attempt to provide more generalized understanding, the following sections engage the topic of contextual theology in a more theoretical manner.

Theology is not created in a cultural vacuum. Hence, theology has the ability to speak into social, cultural, and political realities such as the political upheaval Nicaragua is experiencing. Padilla (2019), writing from a Latin American context, claimed that effectively interpreting and presenting the Gospel requires a deep sensitivity to cultural factors. This sensitivity applies to the interpreter and the person receiving the message. In other words, contextualization includes the task of theologizing. Additionally, Kraft (2001, 234) argued that the “academic discipline we know as Christian theology is a part of a culture. It is amenable, therefore, to analysis from an anthropological or cross-cultural point of view.” Acknowledging this reality helps avoid the inappropriateness of the degree of “culture-boundness about Christian theology as it has been developed and is taught” in the West (Kraft 2001, 235). Such “culture-boundness” is prone to ignore what Padilla (2019) referred to as implicit theology, which is a lived theology, rather than an academically formed, found in Latin America. Furthermore, Padilla (2019) argued that the influence of individualism found in the West has clouded the social dimensions of the Gospel.

Kraft and Padilla's arguments point to the particular western theological hegemony that theological discourse is currently under. Tanner (2010, 40) argued that typical to the generation of theologians she places herself in is "a willingness to make constructive claims of a substantive sort through the critical reworking of Christian ideas and symbols to address the challenges of today's world." Her perspective makes clear that the construction of theology, its purpose, is ultimately found in formulating and applying "Christian ideas and symbols" to what people in a particular context are facing today. Liberation theology, for example, has this approach. Gutiérrez (1990, xviii) claimed liberation theology has a "twofold fidelity: to the God of our faith and to the people of Latin America."

The tension between culture and theology has been written about in the works of Hunter (2010), Niebuhr (2001), Tillich (1959), and Van Til (2001), to name a few. In addition, Nehrbass (2016) argued that part of the disparity between culture and theology comes from the fact that our general understanding of theology does a poor job in describing how theologians come to develop theology. In other words, current efforts in creating theology, and our limited understanding of the process, do not take culture into account. These efforts merely take concepts and ideas and formulate new understandings of theological discourse. It is, for the most part, methodological, which means cultural dynamics, for the most part, are not taken into account. This creates a challenge for theology to be practical, dynamic, and applicable across various contexts. The dominant theological works are based on presuppositions concerning one's understanding of dominant concepts and philosophies native to the dominant culture. Yeh & Tiénou (2018, xvii) write, "It seems that some people try to pit theology and culture against each other, as if culture 'taints' theology." Therein lies the challenge of arguing that the process of doing theology should not be pit against culture. Rather, effective theology must take culture into consideration. Theology must take culture into account if it is to be properly explained, interpreted, and applied. This is where orthodoxy meets orthopraxis.

A deeper understanding of culture sheds light on the chasm between culture and theology. Kraft (2001, 236) explained that "not only do the biblical and historical data with which theologians work come from other cultures, the world at our doorstep is increasingly multicultural in its makeup." Nehrbass (2016, 45) argued that the "integrated nature of culture highlights how virtually every cultural innovation is at some point a social, political, economic, and at its base, even a theological issue." Van Til (2001, 207) adds that culture is beyond simply the material realities or human achievements, it is also "a spiritual enterprise; it is a struggle in the realm of truth and the realm of ideals." Furthermore, Niebuhr's (2001) typology outlining five views about Christ and culture further elaborates the tension between Christ and culture. For the scope of this paper, it suffices to summarize his fifth view – Christ the transformer of culture. In short, Niebuhr (2001, 196) argued that a culture that is transformed by Christ is "what human culture can be," mainly that it can be a "transformed human life in and to the glory of God." I suggest that included in the scope of Niebuhr's cultural purview is theological discourse. Additionally, Hunter's (2010) analysis of Conservative, Liberal, and Neo-anabaptist's engagement with culture highlights the disparity in how pockets of Christianity engage with culture. It is out of this place of dissension regarding how Christians should engage the culture around them that a theology of faithful presence is birthed, that is God's call to "believers to yield their will to God and to nurture and cultivate the world where God has placed them" (Hunter 2010, p. 253). Even this call to be faithfully present is limited in scope given it is evaluated and written for a North American audience. Therefore, all cultural innovations, including theological discourse given its inherent spiritual components, are subject to Christ's



transformation for the sake of His glory.

Missiological insight helps theologians view contextual theology in positive light. The contextualization of theology is an important aspect of effectively sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and an effective way of deconstructing the theological hegemony the West has on the creation of theological discourse. Costas (2005) and Escobar's (2003) works are examples of the extent to which contextualization needs to be done. It is a global necessity. Kraft (2001, 236) explained that theologies “are usually presented and passed on as final products to be adhered to or criticized as if they were timeless formulations, relevant once and for all for all people in all cultural context.” He continues to argue that an anthropological insight can help theology as the strength of Anthropology is in understanding culture (Kraft 2001). He furthers his argument by claiming that “theologians need to know as much as possible about such things as the patterning, integrating, and channeling influence of culture on every aspect of human thinking and behavior” (Kraft 2001, p. 237). Furthermore, van den Toren & Hoare (2015, 78) added that an “evangelical missiological reflection on contextual theology will help develop models and methods for doing contextual theology that western evangelical theologians and ministers may be more comfortable with than some of the dominant models available in the western theological training.” Doing theology without taking culture into consideration lacks the necessary application efforts that help contextualize theology appropriately to a given culture.

Contextualizing theology allows theologians to address pressing cultural questions that are traditionally not addressed by western (academic) theologians. When theology does not address the pressing matters that constrain human flourishing, such as the sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua, it becomes obsolete. Volf and Croasmun (2019, 11) argued that “Christian theology has lost its way because it has neglected its purpose.” God’s highest concern, they claimed, is the “flourishing of human beings and all God’s creatures in the presence of God” (Volf & Croasmun 2019, 11). The current dominant (academic) theology is also a contextualized theology – a western theology. Hence, it can only address the pressing cultural questions of a western context. This makes the works on contextualized theology of Miguez Bonino (2002), Gonzalez (1990), Conde-Frazier (2015), Elizondo (2003) and Escobar (2003), to name a few, so necessary. Kraft (2001, 345) explained that the questions addressed by western theologians “are very often quite different from the questions being asked” by people in villages in Africa, Asian, and Latin America. The current dominant theological discourse is created and perpetuated in the ivory tower of the West. It is disconnected with the majority of the world’s social, political, and cultural realities and crisis. It, therefore, cannot communicate the Gospel effectively and meaningfully to the cultures outside of the West. It cannot effectively speak to the pressing questions from within a particular context.

### **Contextual Theology is Necessary to Effectively Communicate the Gospel**

Contextual theology is concerned about the accuracy of the message and the effective interpretation of it. That is to say, how one understands theology will inform their involvement or lack thereof, with their social, cultural, and political realities. In the case of sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua, this means an understanding of one’s theology will determine one’s response to the crisis. Ott (2015, 44) claimed that the goal of contextualization is the “faithful communication of, reflection upon, and living out the Christian faith in ways appropriate to specific contexts.” In other words, the Gospel must be interpreted for a specific context. Kraft (2001, 344) claimed that the task of theologizing “always involves interpretation.” He went on to argue that all “human interpretation is done from the point of view of the interpreter. A given Christian theology is, therefore, an interpretation of Christianity from a particular point of view” (Kraft 2001, 344).

Olagunju (2012, 40) noted “that the meaning of contextualization differs depending on the emphasis placed upon scripture and the cultural setting.” Hence, one method of interpretation is not a one-size-fits-all. Padilla (2019, 173) explained that without explicit attention to the role of culture, western missionaries have set the expectation that the task of extracting the message of the Gospel is a simple extraction and presentation, “sin más ni más” (without further ado). Wanjala (2016), writing from a Ugandan context, argued that contextual theology is a necessary component, a pillar, in achieving the church’s mission on Earth.

Furthermore, it is imperative to acknowledge both the creation and the interpretation of theology. Kraft (2001) made a distinction between the two perspectives. He writes, “But the task of interpretation is not complete when the original materials are understood by the scholar. The message that God communicated in those ancient times and places must be interpreted in such a way that is properly understood and responded to by contemporary people in contemporary times and places” (Kraft 2001, 344). The task of theology is not simply to understand the original cultural context but to also translate the message in such a way as to ensure impact on contemporary culture. This argument has been developed wonderfully by Sanneh (2009) from the perspective of biblical translation. Olagunju (2012) also deemed it necessary to bridge two definitions of contextual theology. He merged Chris Ridgeway’s thoughts outlining that contextual theology is about “adapting theology to be relevant to a particular context” with that of Enoch Wan, a Chinese theologian, that states “[contextual theology] is derived from the dynamic relationship between gospel and culture, between ‘cultural relevancy’ and ‘theological coherence’” (Olagunju 2012, 40). Culture, therefore, is an imperative aspect of the task of theologizing.

Contextual theology advocates for agency in the formulation of theology. Theologizing is more than the formulation of biblical truth by one group for the distribution to others in different cultural contexts. In order for theology to be effectively formulated and adopted, theologizing must be done from within the culture. Tiénou (1982, 51) argued that “contextualization is the inner dynamic of the theologizing process. It is not a matter of borrowing already existing forms or an established theology in order to fit them into various contexts. Rather contextualization is capturing the meaning of the gospel in such a way that a given society communicates with God. Therein theology is born (p. 51). The expectation of imposing an already established theology on others can be described as ideological (or theological) colonization. On colonization, Recinos (1989, 74) reminded the reader that the sixteenth-century “conquest and colonization of the so-called New World resulted in the greatest concentration of dehumanizing labor ever known in the West. Roughly 70 million Amerindians and 40 million Africans were scarified on the altar of North Atlantic economic expansionism.” Furthermore, Yoder et al., (2014, 151) argued that for “Christendom, the link between empire and mission, or between cultural colonialism and mission, is normal.” They argue that the negative connotation associated with missions is due to the fact that “for many years Christian mission was intertwined with the march of Western empires across the rest of the world” (Yoder et al. 2014, 7). Jennings (2010) made the clear connection between cultural colonialism and theological colonialism by tracing the history of the Christian imagination through the late medieval period. For example, he describes José de Acosta Porres’ contribution to Spanish colonialism by binding “the economic circuit to Christian teleology through what he claims to be the work of the Eternal Lord, who enriched the land with mines as a preparation for the gospel, a *praeparatio evangelica*, to create the possibility of colonial desire” (Jennings 2010, 92). As an outcome, his theological contributions created space for the idea that “God is responsible for colonial desire” (Jennings 2010, 92). Hence, the effects

of colonialism are still felt today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They are present in the creation and advancement of theological discourse.

Theology, a field often overlooked by some concerning the effects of colonialism, is not an exception. Some of the efforts in contextual theology are a response to the effects of colonialism in a given culture. Take Liberation Theology, for example. Badillo (2006, 182) explained that Latino Catholicism became very dynamic as illustrated by the 1968 meeting of Latin American bishops CALEM, Consejo Episcopal Latino Americano (Latin American Episcopal Council), in Medellín, Colombia, where they “attempted to apply Vatican II precepts to the problems of societal inequality evident throughout Latin America.” It was then that Gustavo Gutiérrez and other theologians “reevaluated the Bible and church doctrine and called grassroots communities to fight for social justice and challenge hierarchical and rigid structures of the Church” (Badillo 2006, 182). The works of Boff (1978), Escobar (1978), Gonzalez (1990), and Padilla (1985, 2012), to name a few, came out of the period. The reevaluation of how the Bible is read and understood called for a different approach to developing and living out a Christian theology that challenged the established and dominant western theology. Given this reality, it is not too far a stretch to say that Liberation Theology generated theological agency by contextualizing their theology within their social and cultural context.

Furthermore, Zerpa de Kirby (2018, 157) evaluated the impact of religion, Catholicism and Pentecostalism more specifically, on life in Latin America. He claimed that religion in Latin America has served as a “propulsor” (propeller) of unity and integration within a society and as an instrument of legitimation of social structures. Similarly, Recinos (1989, 77) argued that popular religion such as Catholicism, Spiritism, Pentecostalism, and the Christian base communities represent “an undercurrent in Latin American society that has incubated the liberation sentiments of the dispossessed masses.” As senior pastor, Recinos had to move away from a dominant view of theology that was less applicable and impactful given the sociocultural realities of its congregants. He understood that in order for the gospel to truly be understood, one must take the social, political, economic, and cultural realities into account. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis cannot live in isolation from one another. They must be so intimately connected that they influence each other.

### **Issues of Syncretism and “Theologies” can be Effectively Addressed**

A major hurdle that theologians and missiologists face with contextualizing theology is the risk of syncretism. In the context of Nicaragua’s political disruption, this means some may have the fear of the church submitting to a purely humanistic or political effort. Hence, engagement can be placed on extremes. On the one hand, there is the purely spiritual view of the real, concrete, and historical realities. On the other, there is the tendency to approach this same reality in such a way that God is practically non-existent. Therefore, syncretism, in the current Nicaraguan context, may be evaluated through the lens of politics – the marrying of political parties with Christian truths. It is a conflation of cultural values – that of political parties – and Christian truths. It is a Christianization of cultural values.

Missiologists are often concerned that contextualization will result in syncretism (van Engen 2016; Malone 2018; Shaw and Burrows 2018; Yong 2002). Speaking from a Latin American context, and through the lens of Catholicism, Zerpa de Kirby (2018, 159) defined syncretism as “una fusión o combinación de los elementos de la religión católica con sistemas de creencias y practicas africanas o indígenas (o las dos)” (a fusion or combination of the elements of the catholic religion with African or indigenous (or both) belief systems and practices). Similarly, Olagunju (2012, 39) defined syncretism as the “blending of Christian beliefs and

practices with those of the dominant culture so that Christianity loses its distinctiveness and speaks with a voice reflective of its culture.”

Kraft (2016, 22) explained that there “are great risks involved in attempting to promote a Christian faith that is culturally and biblically appropriate and an insider thing,” and further claims that the risk for syncretism “is always present.” Furthermore, Hiebert (1994, 84), in an outline of seven implications of contextualization, wrote, “[A] call for contextualization without a simultaneous call for preserving the gospel without compromise opens the door to syncretism.” The redemptive and salvific truth of the Gospel is at stake. However, when contextualizing theology is done in a careful manner that upholds biblical truth and honors God’s plan through His son Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, syncretism can be avoided. Contextualizing theology to fit a given culture does not necessarily mean giving up biblical truth. On the contrary, it is honoring God’s sovereignty within the context.

In addition to syncretism, the possibility for the existence of theologies rather than a single and dominant theology concerns some. The broader context of the conversation taking place in this paper is situated within the issue of a lack of Latin American perspective in theological discourse. This is a perspective that would effectively speak into circumstances like the one Nicaragua is facing. Padilla (2019, 160) claimed this concern is visible in the response of Western theologians to the contextualization of theology from the Latin American experience. He claimed that acknowledging the subjective element within the task of interpretation is “demasiado incómodo” (too uncomfortable) for those who wish to equate their own theology with the Word of God. Hiebert (1994, 59) explained that Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson called “for the planting of indigenous churches that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating,” which did not face much resistance from the field of theology. However, the voice of resistance was heard after the 1970s when a fourth “self” was proposed – self-theologizing. Hiebert (1994, 58) explained that this fourth “self” deals with the question on whether or not “churches in other cultures have the right – even the responsibility – to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own historical and cultural contexts.” Without facing these tensions, one cannot move towards meaningful engagement with the reality of theologies.

Kraft (2016, 5) argued that a “religion cannot be contextualized only adapted” because religion refers to a “cultural thing” that connotes “a system made up of such things as belief in God or spirits, rituals used to express an allegiance to that God or spirit, doctrines, often a holy book or books.” He goes on to posit that biblical faith, however, can be contextualized through a process in which “appropriate meanings may be carried by quite different forms in various cultures” (Kraft 2016, 5). Furthermore, Olagunju (2012, 39) argued that a “Biblically-based theology must form our identities and challenge our syncretisms.” Hence, contextualizing theology is not a matter of creating a religion different from Christianity. It is about the adoption of Christianity by a given culture in culturally appropriate ways that will be well understood, received, and followed. Contextualizing theology calls for this process to take place within and for a particular culture.

## Conclusion

The contextualization of theology is a matter of effectively communicating the Gospel through cultural sensitivity and awareness, which in the Nicaraguan context means acknowledging and engaging the sociopolitical crisis. Given the ongoing nature of the political tensions, it becomes imperative for Nicaraguan evangelicals to contextualize their theology. Schäfer, Reu, and Tovar (2017, 103) claimed that the sociopolitical circumstances in Nicaragua

created religious praxis as “an attractive alternative” that provides “normative orientation in private as well as public contexts.” Furthermore, Zerpa de Kirby (2018, 156) claimed that faith has played an important role in Latin America in generating “una fuente de cambio social” (source of social change). Hiebert's (1994, 99) words remind Christians that “to the extent a theology [is] rooted in Scripture, it contain[s] objective truth, but because it [is] a human understanding, there [is] also a subjective element in it.” One must theologize with an awareness of cultural context. Estrada (2015, 347) explained that all “meaning generated from the biblical text is also influenced and interpreted through a subjectivity that is racial and cultural as well as ideological and theological.” Hence, theologizing cannot be divorced from culture.

Effective communication of the Gospel requires a contextual theology. In the case of Nicaragua, it requires more intentional application of biblical truth toward assessing and acting out the Gospel. Olagunju (2012, 50) stressed the fact that the “non-Western churches can also contribute to the global church by showing the whole church what it is: not a Western religion, but one that has been and is again a non-Western religion.” One cannot theologize effectively if one is bound by outside influences and expectations that limit theological agency. In the case of evangelicals in Nicaragua, effective theologizing must take the sociopolitical crisis into account. Bevans' (2002) praxis model has proven to be a model that can be applied to the sociopolitical turmoil Nicaragua is facing. Theology, after all, is the “application of biblical truths to the situations in which the people [find] themselves” (Hiebert 1994, 99). Furthermore, Estrada (2015, 354) argued that “culture is the foundational role that provides the context and structure within which humans make sense of and give meaning to religious experiences. To remove it [...] is to engage in a kind of docetism that denies the impact of the human ethnocultural dimension and its contribution to our theological understanding.” Effective communication, and therefore effective theologizing, does not happen in a cultural void – culture serves as the basis from which individuals operate. Hence, interpretation must pass through the filters of culture prior to being assigned value and meaning.

The possible issues that rise out of the contextualization efforts should not dissuade theologians. Syncretism and a plurality of theologies are not impossible hurdles to overcome. Hiebert's (1994, 102) claim is useful in addressing the issue of syncretism: “The goal of theology is not simply to apply the gospel in the diverse contexts of human life. Theology's nature also revolves around the goal to understand the unchanging nature of the gospel – the absolutes that transcend time and cultural pluralism.” Thoughtfully contextualizing theology will remain true to the everlasting truth of God's redemption of the world through the death and resurrection of His son Jesus Christ. Yeh & Tiénou (2018) argued that theology should be seen in plural form given the many variances found within a single context. Seeing the truth about having theologies, rather than emphasizing a single theology, addresses the issue of ideological and theological imperialism. The issue is addressed by ensuring there is no single way of viewing God and Scripture, although there is a single, unchanging, absolute truth that transcends time and cultural pluralism.

The ongoing sociopolitical crisis in Nicaragua presents a prime opportunity for the use of Bevans' (2002) praxis model. Bevans (2002) concluded that practitioners of the praxis model would often reread the Bible and Christian tradition and discover many aspects about Christianity and its roots that were not often or previously highlighted. For example, facing the fact that “the Bible itself is a product of struggles for human freedom; that Jesus' message is a message not primarily of doctrines but of structure-shaking attitudes and behavior; that sin must be opposed not by compromise but by radical reordering of one's life” (Bevans 2002, 66). I



suggest these are the very things that one might find as we reread the Bible and Christian tradition through the lens of the socioeconomic crisis in Nicaragua. Additionally, Padilla's (2019, 183) warning serves well as it highlights that a European or North American theology will never be enough to satisfy the “necesidades teológicas de la iglesia alrededor del mundo” (theological needs of the church around the world). The success of how we accomplish the mission of God in the Nicaraguan context amidst the sociopolitical upheaval, as Bevans and Schroeder (2011, 156) so eloquently put it, depends on “how faithful we are to the rhythms of the gospel, how responsive we are to the beat of the present, and how attentive we are to those among who we dance.”

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