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Challenging Contexts

A Study of K.P. Aleaz's and Sathianathan Clarke's Contextual Theologies, and a Reflection on the Need for Intercontextual Dialogue

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1. Models of contextual theology

In his 1992 book *Models of Contextual Theology*, Stephan B. Bevans gives an overview of different approaches to the challenges arising from the vastly different contexts Christians and Christian theologians find themselves in. Moving beyond the insight, which over time has turned into a platitude, that any theology is contextual, Bevans explores approaches to theology which are guided by a clear consciousness of the demands which the context makes on the theology. In practice this happens primarily in contexts which are dissimilar to the European context (or we could add middle class male) which throughout history has been the context from which the dominant theology in most churches has come.

In his book Bevans outlines different models for contextual theology. In brief, these models can be placed on a spectrum form "right" to "left" in which the "translation model" is on the right extreme, and the "anthropological model" is on the left extreme. The former is characterised by its emphasis on the "core" or "essence" of the gospel as given and unchangeable, and its consequent primary concern of finding ways of rendering this core in a new context, that is translating it into a new language and symbol system. The most radical model, the "anthropological", takes the given culture as its starting point and explores how God is understood to be present in the life of the people. It has little concern with traditional doctrines of the church, and understands Christianity to be "about the human person and her or his fulfilment".[1] Bevans stresses that one's "basic theological orientation" gives guidelines as to what models one can fruitfully pursue, and shows that the anthropological model in particular requires a "creation-centred" theology.[2] That is, the theology must affirm the divine presence in the created world rather than its total corruption since its primary concern is to identify how God is present in any culture and context.

Somewhere on the spectrum between these two, and a little closer to the latter, Bevans finds the "praxis model", which we may generally label "liberation theology". Its starting point is a given culture, but the primary concern is to be with the oppressed and marginalised of that culture, and unlike the anthropological model it is intrinsic to the praxis model that the practitioners seek to change and challenge aspects of the given context. However these two models may often to a large extent overlap.

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Many discussions only explore the arguments "for" or "against" contextual theology. Bevans moves one step further and facilitates a discussion of the various models of contextual theology one can apply in a given context. In this paper I venture beyond this and explore not the choice of model, so much as the choices which identify the context. I will argue that the context in most cases is not wholly "given" but to a certain degree a result of choices made by the theologising subject. These choices are in themselves worth theological scrutiny. I will examine two distinct theologians, K.P. Aleaz and S. Clarke, whose works can be subsumed under Bevans radical "anthropological model". In both cases the field of theology is more or less limited to christology. Both theologians are from India and have India as their context,and the works I examine have been published in the last couple of years. Still their theologies are markedly different.

K.P. Aleaz presents a christology which he claims on no point contradicts the important Indian philosophical system Advaita Vedanta, and thus contributes distinctively Indian understandings of the central christian message, though his conclusions are highly challenging for traditional Christian doctrines. As challenging appears Sathianathan Clarke's suggestion for an interpretation of Christ's presence among the Paraiyar community, when he suggests that the drum used at religious festivals best represents Christ. I will show that for neither theologian is the context "given" but a matter of a series of choices and presuppositions. My contention is that this is the normal state of affairs since "pure" cultures as presupposed in Bevan's models are close to non-existent, and that this is an essential insight to any creation-oriented theology. Towards the end of the paper I will venture to suggest some guidelines that should be kept in mind when one apporaches any context, and as such do not arise from the context itself. The main thesis of the paper however is that the need for these guidelines does not come from outside of the created world but on the contrary is a result of serious engagement with it. Like Aleaz and Clarke my starting point is the immense value and importance of the created world and God's presence in it. Serious engagement with this world reveals the difficulty in defining a context, the polyvalence of cultural and religious expressions and the hybridity of most possible "contexts". In other words, the starting point for a radical contextual and creation-centred theology itself leads us to acknowledge the challenges to this type of project and the need to make choices to which there are no given answers in any single context. As a consequence we are led towards the necessity of dialogue between our different contexts.

One of the most important aspects of contextual theologies is their reading of the Bible in their particular context. The theologians I compare in this paper focus little on this aspect. Instead attention is on a more general interpretation of the Christian faith. One might call this a "reading" of the Christian tradition which is relevant in the context, and reflection on how this is converted into practising Christianity. Focus on contexualisation, then, draws attenion to the "language" of the context. By this is implied the entire structure through which thoughts are not only transmitted, but come into being. The worlds of myth, of philosophical understanding, of systems of symbols and metaphors have to be examined.

Ideally, according to the anthoropological and praxis models, the theologising subject, the theologians, are ordinary Christians of a particular context. The role of the trained theologians, those who have studied theology as an academic discipline, should be, as Bevans puts it, that of a "midwife".[3] When I refer to theologians in this paper, I generally mean the trained theologians. They are those who through books and articles give expression to theology which is readily accessible. But I fear that they most often, despite claims to the contrary, play

very central roles in the creation of contextual theology. This certainly is the case with the theologians examined in this paper, a point to which I will return later.

1.1 The Indian context

The approaches to theology examined in this paper both come from India, as does the inspiration to undertake the study of them. It is one of the contentions of this paper that describing India as the context of these theologies is highly insufficient. However, the Indian society as a whole has certain features which are important to all theologies stemming from the country. First there is the religious sense, whose major characteristics are at the same time plurality and the dominant position of Hinduism. Secondly there is the social situation characterised by widespread poverty and caste divisions.

Christian theology in India has had to come to terms with the religious situtation in the country. In one way or another it has related to Hinduism. Some theologians have taken very critical approaches, inspired by Karl Barth's view of religions. More prominent has been a cautious openness, represented by for exanple Devanandan, which assumes that God is present also in Hinduism, but that the ultimate goal of engaging with this religion is to convert its followers to Christianity. Inspired by Bonhoeffer and others, one trend, including for example M.M. Thomas, saw secular society and ideologies as more important interlocutors. In almost all dealings with Hinduism, however, Advaita Vedanta has been seen as representative for Hinduism and for Indian thought. Thus, when contextualisation or "indigenisation" has been on the agenda, this is usually the "language" the symbol and metaphor system to which theologians have turned.

2. Christian theology and Advaita Vedanta : K.P. Aleaz

It is no coincidence that K.P. Aleaz's latest book is called *Christian Thought through Advaita Vedanta.* His project is neither to "indigenise" Christian thoughts or theology into advaitic thinking, nor to look for "a hidden Christ" in Advaita Vedanta. His project is to think Christian thoughts *through* the Advaitic system, to fully accept Advaita, and then explore Christian thoughts through this mindset. This, of course, is not just a philosophical pastime, but arises from his conviction that Advaita "has an enduring influence on the cultural life of India"[4], and indeed "directly or indirectly represents the culmination of God's self-disclosure to Indians".[5] Therefore it must be the thoughts through which Indians approach Christianity.

Most of Aleaz's book is an overview of other Christian Theologians who have taken Advaita as their starting point, beginning with Brahmabanhav Upadhyaya (1861-1907). Throughout the presentation, and in the chapter "The Endeavours of the Present Author" Aleaz contributes his own views which are the object of this study.

If one were to use traditional Christian theological concepts, what Aleaz sets out to do is to provide a "theocentric Christology". However Aleaz avoids the term Christology, presumably because this is a term too heavily dependent on the Jewish tradition with their expectation of a Messiah or "Christ". In Aleaz's view "Christ" as a description of what Jesus was does not resonate with Indian thoughts.[6] The same goes for the traditionally important term "Son of God".[7] Instead of the term "Christology", Aleaz sets out to explore a "Jesuology" through Advaita Vedanta.[8]

It follows from Aleaz's starting point in Advaita Vedanta, which in many respects is in radical opposition to the dominant thought systems in which Christianity has developed in the

West, that many of the ideas belonging to traditional church doctrine are in for attack. Aleaz finds that the universal message of Christ "was distorted through fettering it in cast-iron dogmas of innate vileness of human nature, the 'scape-goat' and the 'atonement', physical resurrection and the second advent, earthly kingdom and imminence of the Day of judgement, which are purely sectarian in their scope."[9]

We see that the ideas Aleaz wants to discard are the doctrines which point, directly or indirectly, to Jesus himself as the agent of salvation. For this Aleaz substitutes an understanding of Jesus as pointing away from himself, to the Ultimate Reality—that is "God the Father" in traditional Christian thought, or "Brahman" in Advaitic terminology.[10] Aleaz's "Jesuology" makes a distinction between "the person of Jesus" and "the function of Jesus", but as in all understandings of Jesus the two are closely related. Jesus is understood as a human being with the human characteristics recognised by Advaita Vedanta. Thus all five elements are found in Jesus, he has five sense-organs, five motor-organs in addition to mind and intellect.[11] This would seem to constitute Jesus as "true human" in traditional church doctrine. But Jesus is also "true God", in the sense that Brahman is present in his person. This can be described in various ways, of which the essence is that in Jesus, who is not only *Jiva,* that is an individual human being but a *representative jiva,* we recognise that Atman is identical with Brahman.[12] This means among other things that Brahman is the experiencer in Jesus.

This understanding of Jesus is not in essence different from the Advaitic understanding of human beings, *jivas*, in general. Thus human beings can understand the relationship between humans and Brahman, and consequesntly understand their true Self, through Jesus.

This is the primary function of Jesus : "to show us the Supreme Brahman which is Pure Consciousness, as the Witness and Self of all."[13] Through various Advaitic concepts Aleaz shows that Jesus "reveals", "proclaims", and is the "manifestation" and "affirmation" of various aspects of the Supreme Self. Jesus' liberating achievement is to show "the eternally present human liberation".[14] This liberation is "the cessation of bondage" which is reached through a true knowledge which leads to a "dissociation of the Self from the senses and the elements".[15]

2.1 *Christianity through advaita vedanta critically assessed*

The thoughts of Aleaz, Samartha and others who want to understand Christianity through Advaita Vedanta make valuable contributions to the Christian theological enterprise. Not least important are some of the criticisms of the Western tradition and the bold pointing out of the fact that even central terms such as "Christ" and "Son of God" are metaphors whose meaningfulness will vary with the context in which they are used. The Indian context requires rethinking of the traditional Christian metaphors, and these theologians deserve credit for showing willingness to undertake this task in an unprejudiced fashion. I will return to some of the problems related to the Indian context shortly. First it is necessary to point out some general problems with the thinking of Aleaz and those who share his understanding. I will not go into the problems various "orthodox" theologies may have with Advaitic thinking, but try to indicate some problems coming from this theology itself.

Aleaz argues for a "pluralistic inclusivism" in the field of theology of religions, and Samartha appears to take a similar position. This should in principle mean that Advaitic thinking is one out of many equally relevant approaches to Christian theology. This is not always the

impression given. On the contrary their arguments tend to turn quickly from a claim that Advaita is relevant in the Indian context, to a more universal claim of superiority. Aleaz asserts for example that Advaita Vedanta "corrects the misinterpretation of the meaning of Jesus caused by the Christian Church"[16] Samartha's chapter, "The Unitive Vision of Advaita" in *One Christ—Many Religions,*[17] is another example. Here Advaitic thinking is hailed for its ability to unify different strands of thought and religious and political thinking. The subtle implication of this, however, is that Advaita is above these different traditions and philosophies, as the unifying element. This again means that thoughts that stand in direct opposition to Advaita cannot be accommodated, and that for instance dualistic thought systems are excluded from this great unitive vision. This is a position one might justifiably take, but it contradicts claims of being truly pluralist.

A different question relates to the interface between the Advaitic Christian thinking and the tradition of the Christian community. Aleaz attempts to create a "Jesuology". His vocabulary and thought forms come from Advaita Vedanta, but his Jesus must come from a different source. The identity of this source is never stated explicitly. The Christian Bible would be the obvious guess, and to some extent this is no doubt the right answer. Aleaz talks about Jesus laying down his life, preaching the Kingdom of God and thus pointing away from himself to the reality of the absolute. This understanding of Jesus must come from the Synoptic Gospels, though the narration of the life and death of Jesus never gains any prominence in Aleaz. A question which might be asked is how Aleaz can distil the important features of Jesus out of Gospels so much part of a Jewish tradition which he so strongly disapproves. This question, by the way, is a relevant question to many theologies. Some will reply that the true Jesus is found through historical research. This is not an option for Aleaz, since historical critical research comes from a very different approach to history and reality from the one Aleaz propagates.

The same problem of separating different parts of a tradition arises from Aleaz's emphasis on "Jesus' pre-existence"[18] and his nature as truly human and truly Brahman[19]. The former might be taken directly from the Bible, though the emphasis on this aspect of Jesus belongs to post-biblical doctrinal developments.[20] The two natures of Jesus, however, is a doctrine not to be found in the biblical material. To Aleaz it is very important, and we see that he relies heavily on parts of a tradition of which he is generally very critical.

At this point two important comments must be made. One is that the understanding of all individuals *(jivas)* as partly Brahman and partly *maya* (illusion) is an Advaitic thought, and as such requires no extra-Advaitic inspiration. It is the heavy focus on Jesus as the perfect example of this general truth which suggests dependence on the doctrine of the two natures of Christ.

The other more important point is this : No consistent theology can pay equal respect to all aspects of the Christian tradition and all its doctrines. If for no other reason at least because tradition itself is not consistent modern theologies have discarded parts of tradition, kept other parts, and developed many parts to fit new hermeneutical situations. Though some will see this as a problem, that is not my contention. The problem which Aleaz and others face is that they do not stand in a tradition of continued development, but make a bold attempt at transplanting certain feautres (some would say fragments) of one tradition into a completely different tradition. To a certain extent this is the challenge of all "contextualisation", and I am going to suggest that this process requires explicit criteria to guide the many choices which have to be made. In

the case of the advaitins the problem appears particularly difficult. First because they make a very radical break with traditional Christian teaching on points that are often seen as essential to the Christian message, but more importantly because this happens without basis in a living Christian community, a church, in which Christian doctrines should usually develop under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

I just pointed out that Aleaz draws on the Synoptic Gospels without narrative material explicitly. This corresponds with a more general tendency in his thinking to downplay history and concentrate on the eternal nature of things. This is seen for instance in how Jesus as the incarnation of the Absolute in history loses importance to his "affirmation of the eternally present liberation".[21] The contextual basis for such an approach is provided in *The Gospel of Indian Culture*, where Aleaz claims that the important question to the Indian mind is "what is the true nature of the world of things which confront us?". This stands in opposition to the questions guiding Western thought since the Enlightenment which are rather about how things work (in modern science) or how to work on things (in modern technology).[22] So it is the Indian context which leads Aleaz to focus on the nature of the Divine and of Jesus rather than their activity in history. Indeed, it is only through a deepened understanding of the Absolute that liberation can take place, since "liberation is the cessation of bondage and not the production of any fresh results."[23] I am not suggesting that the traditional condemnation of Hinduism, and Advaita Vedanta in particular, for not showing any interest in history is justified.[24] However, I venture to ask if not much is lost of the traditional understanding of Christianity if the biblical narratives disappear. Religion is in most traditions about more than a true understanding of the nature of things, and often finds expressions in stories told and retold and in some form of cult, both of which witness to some form of involvement of the deity in the world. As an example, the myths related to the most important avatars of Vishnu, Krishna and Ram, are told and retold and are important to many Hindus.

We are thus through posing these more general questions to Aleaz and his way of thinking, nearing the issue of the Indian context, and the Christian Advaitin theology as a relevant contextual theology in India. One of the major insights presented by these thinkers relating to the Indian context, is their emphasis on the connection between religion and culture in India. Whereas the relationship between the two in the West is sometimes even understood as one of (potential) opposition, the cultural and religious life of India cannot be distinguished. This does not mean that Indian culture is linked to one particular religion, for example to Hinduism. But the Indian mindset is such that religion and culture are inseparable. Indeed this insight so evident in India has universal application, and is considered by Aleaz as one of the "gospels of India" to the rest of the world.[25] There are many religious traditions in India, and they all have a stake in India's culture. Thus it is impossible to relate to India's cultural expressions without relating to its plural religious thoughts.

Aleaz argues for the need for contextual Christian theologies to link up to religious thoughts already present in India, and then sets out to understand Christianity through one such system, Advaita Vedanta, as we have seen. This is where one serious question has to be asked: why Advaita Vedanta? Aleaz understands Advaitic thinking to be the dominant mode of religious thinking in India, and the one that unites all the plural religious expressions.[26] Ironically, this is exactly the point where genuine pluralism disappears out of view, which is also the case with the Neo-Vedantins. The writings of Samartha and Aleaz elaborating Advaitic thinking abound with expressions indicating that this is *the* contribution to religious thinking from India. Even

the "important convictions" making up the "Indian Christian self-identity" which Aleaz identifies contain primarily thoughts closely linked to advaitic thinking, including the conviction that Atman and Brahman, humans and God are one.[27] The work of most Indian Christian theologians and for that matter most Indian Christians, who to a large extent subscribe to more traditional Western conceptions of Christianity brought to India by the missionaries, attest to the falsity of this claim. That is not saying their understanding is better, but their views must be taken into account when one defines the self-identity of Indian Christians. However this is not true only for Indian Christians, but for Indians is general. Advaitic thinkers have made up an intellectual elite, and partly as a consequence of this they have been able to present Advaita as the dominant Indian thought system. If dominant, however, has anything to do with numerical strength of support, this claim is unfounded.[28] They are the thoughts of an important elite, but not of the majority of the people, be they Christians or not. In more moderate forms the claim of these thinkers is not that Advaita Vedanta as a philosophical system is the context of all Indians, but rather that its basic ideas permeate most of Indian thinking.[29] This claim is more difficult to repudiate, but two points may be made: First, there is no doubt in Indian philosophical and religious tradition thought systems that are not only not-Advaita, but clearly oppose basic Advaitic principles. Examples of this are dualistic systems found in the Bhakti traditions of Hinduism. Admittedly these are less influential, but their existence should not be overlooked. More important is the fact that Aleaz's (and Samartha's) thinking does not only presuppose basic ideas such as non-duality, but makes extensive use of an elaborate philosophical system, including its host of Sanskrit terms as we have seen above.

The use of Sanskrit in Aleaz's expositions deserves special attention. All theologies depend on a language, a symbol system. Aleaz depends on Sanskrit terms extensively, when he elaborates his theology in English. He suggests that the ideas can be expressed better in this language than in any other, and claims that certain Sanskrit terms also give a better Christian understanding of central concepts such as "creation" than do its Latin or English counterparts.[30] The point here is that Sanskrit, like Latin in the West, is nobody's mother tongue, and known only by a small intellectual elite. Admittedly it is the mother of Hindi, but the two are far from identical. Further even Hindi is only spoken by a minority of Indians, and if we go to the Christians in India, the majority are Tribals and South Indians, whose languages are only indirectly related to Sanskrit. If these profound theological contributions from India can only be fully understood in Sanskrit, it is hard to see how this theology can be genuinely a contextual theology for India today.

Neither Aleaz nor Samartha makes any attempt at justifying their rather universalist claims on behalf of this particular thought system, and they appear to assume that their choice is self-evident. I have tried to make the point that it is not. Still it might be possible to argue that the Advaitic system is a good choice for a contextual theology to link up to. For certain purposes, for instance dialogue with the Hindu Brahmin elite, I believe that to be the case, but in other fields it appears to have important shortcomings.

3. Christianity and dalit traditon : Sathianathan Clarke

Sathianathan Clarke's work on the Paraiyar community in Tamil Nadu is like Aleaz's, very much concerned to be contextual. But the theologian's engagement with the context is very different. Clarke first worked as a church minister and later did field work among the Paraiyar communities.

Clarke is anxious to point out that though his knowledge of the community he studies is based on his own experience, his approach is one from the outside. He is not himself a Dalit, his background is not even from the agrarian community. His background for undertaking the study is his long standing involvement with the Paraiyar community.

Clarke's approach is guided by his awareness of the differences between various "contexts" in India, and the distinction between different caste communities. He takes great care to emphasise that his findings relate to this particular community only. On the other hand, his suspicion is that some of his findings are relevant for larger sections of the oppressed communities in India, for instance the centrality of the drum in religious practice.[31] Further the Paraiyar community makes up about 60 per cent of the Dalit population of Tamil Nadu, that is over six million people out of a total state population of about 60 million. Thus his chosen village may be seen as representative for the larger Paraiyar community, which again may be taken to represent the Dalit population of the state.[32]

3.1. *The Paraiyar context*

Concerning the social and economic situation of the Paraiyar, it suffices here to state they are marginalised in both respects : As untouchables they have to live outside of the main caste village and are excluded from certain sides of social interaction with the caste Hindus, for instance interdining, and for this and other reasons they belong to the poorest sections of society, doing menial jobs and achieving low levels of education and health.[33]

The social and economic exclusion of the Paraiyar in the village Clarke studies, is mirrored in their religious life. The village goddess, Ellaiyamman[34], does not belong to the orthodox Hindu pantheon, the feasts they observe are often different from those observed in the caste Hindu village[35], and for these they do not rely on the Brahmin priests, as caste Hindus do.[36] The main function of the village goddess is to protect the boundaries of the village, and ensure harmony within.

Clarke's contention is that the Paraiyar's religion shows many signs of being subversive to caste Hinduism, though it moves within the same sphere of myths and symbols. An example of what he calls "Emancipatory Mythography" is the myth of the genesis of the goddess. An elaborate myth establishes among other things that the goddess' body is from a Brahmin woman who had her head replaced by that of a Paraiyar. Thus the experienced order of things is reversed in the goddess: The Paraiyar head rules the Brahmin body.[37] The thrust of the myth is unmistakeably Paraiyar, whereas its central motif, the changing of heads, is wellknown from caste Hindu myths.[38]

For his contextual Christian theological enterprise, however, Clarke chooses to focus more on the function and symbolic value of the drum rather than the goddess. The Paraiyar are closely associated with the drum for several reasons : The drum is made from cow hide, and thus unclean for the caste Hindus and consequently must be manufactured and handled by the untouchables only. At the same time the beating of the drum is compulsory at certain inauspicious occasions, particularly funerals, of caste Hindu life, and the Paraiyar are then called in to beat the various drumbeats that are required. In the religious life of the Paraiyar community the drum is even more important than for the orthodox Hindus, and the drum is there for all occasions, both the joyful and those relating to death and lamenting.[39]

Through an elaborate study of the various uses of the drum, Clarke concludes that the drum can be seen as "a dominant aniconic Symbol of the Text of Resistance and Emancipatory

Activity".[40] The gist of this is in short that the drum is the medium through which the Paraiyar get in touch with the divine, and the divine meets the people. It also symbolises a central feature of their communal identity, gives them pride in something which is detestable to the general society, and is an integral part of their suffering as well as their joy.

To explain how the drum can acquire this central position in Paraiyar religious life, Clarke emphasises another aspect of their religiosity: orality. The Paraiyar's culture is an oral culture. Absence of literacy is the obvious immediate cause of this, but it is a question of more than lack of education. According to orthodox Hinduism the lower castes and the untouchables did not have access to the Vedas. Not only should they not touch or come near the books, but even listening to the words read aloud was prohibited. Thus the Paraiyar were excluded from the sacred word of the religious tradition even if they acquired the skill of reading.

The distinctive features of oral culture are important in Clarke's reasoning: Orality roots people in the here and now. The past and the future both are "less accessible", as the word cannot exist outside of its present bodily existence. Analogies are more important than "strict logic", and people are generally less inclined towards abstract speculation. To counter the misconception that this suggests a "pathological" strain to oral cultures, Clarke prefers to put these ideas in a discourse of "emphatic and participatory" oral culture and "objectively distanced" literate culture.[41] Lastly, the absence of written sources to refer to in the community's social and religious life makes their practice more open to ambiguity and plurality. Stories which are told and retold are more easily adjusted to the needs of the occasion, and there is no "objective" text to refer to in order to establish the "true" rendering of tradition.

3.2. Christian theology in the Paraiyar context

The larger part of Clarke's work deals with the religious practices of the Paraiyar who are not Christians, and may appear to be a work of anthropology rather than theology. However, the entire endeavour is aimed at reaching a basis on which contextual Christian theology can be built. Citing Clodovis Boff he states that his starting point is the marginalised people's experience.[42] Thus his theology, or rather his Christology which is the primary concern, takes direction from the context of the Paraiyar. This is how Clarke can venture the challenging suggestion that to the Paraiyar Christ is the drum. He explores his tentative Christology along two lines; the "expansive pole" which is the pan-historic and pan-geographic side of Christ, and the "constrictive pole", which is Christ bound up with the life of Jesus of Nazareth.[43] As should be apparent, he starts with the former.

Through an understanding of Christ in this dimension as "(a) the Pre-existent countenance of the immanent God that (b) consistently draws creation towards 'the human and the humane' in (c) the gestalt of emancipatory resistance and reconciliations", Clarke is able to identify Christ among the Paraiyar as the drum.[44] Through securing for the community their identity, through subverting the imposed social order, through presence in the midst of suffering and pain, and through leading the people to a renewed humanity the drum represents the presence of Christ among the Paraiyar. This, however, would not be Christian talk about Christ if it did not also relate to Jesus of Nazareth.

On the constrictive pole of Christology Clarke depends on yet another presupposition central in liberation theology, namely that understanding the praxis of Jesus is more important than understanding his nature.[45] In other words. function takes priority over ontology.

Ontologically the drum could never represent Jesus, but regarding function it can. The function of Jesus which Clarke chooses to give priority in the Paraiyar context is "Jesus as deviant", as outlined by Bruce Malina and Jeromy Neyrey.[46] Jesus was primarily together with those "out of place", and he deliberately upset the social structure in order to radically challenge it. Also along this pole Clarke sees the drum as the best sign of Jesus in this particular Dalit community.

An understanding of Christ along these lines is open to considerable ambiguity. Clarke is fully aware of this, and sees it as another important feature for a contextual Christology.[47] As the entire culture of the Paraiyar is marked by ambiguity and polyvalence, a relevant christology should have the same characteristics. Christ as drum is an open and unending understanding which gives room for plurality. This plurality, concludes Clarke, again provides room for other understandings of Christ, not least the understanding of Christ as Logos which by no means loses its importance in Christian discourse.[48]

3.3. Christian Theolgy in the Paraiyar context critically assessed

Giving a critical assessment of Sathianathan Clarke's work is more difficult than examining K.P. Aleaz and advancing some critical remarks. Clarke calls his entire project "an attempt", and this attempt only seeks to be relevant for this particular context, and though he hopes that it can be relevant beyond this and in other subaltern communities in India, among other Dalits and Tribals, the relevance of his theology to the particular context cannot be evaluated from any other standpoint. As I was unable to voice any opinion on whether Aleaz's theology corresponds to a relevant understanding of Advaitic philosophy, I am for as obvious reasons barred from having an opinion on Clarke's interpretation of the Paraiyar religious life. I will, however, try to look more closely at a few points which relate to his method and presuppositions.

One of the most central "doctrines" of liberation theology is its starting-point from the poor and marginalised. This refers to the context, and also to the subjects developing the theology. This is not the case with Clarke's work. The context is that of the marginalised, but the theology is entirely of Clarke's own creation. Of this he is fully aware, but it should still be pointed out. In the introduction to his Christology chapter Clarke even gives the disclaimer that his Christology is only effective if it survives the verdict of the Dalit and Dalit-identified Christian communities of India.[49] This, I believe, is a very true assessment, but the uncomfortable question remains: What is the likelihood of this happening. I will return to his question presently.

The reason for Clarke's not presenting a theology which has a basis in the Paraiyar community itself is that he has chosen a village for his research where there is no Christian community. This again comes from his fear or experience that Christian Dalit communities are so influenced by traditional ways of Christian thinking, which have come to them through the dominant communities, that their original Paraiyar culture is diluted.[50]

Robert Deliége's more general anthropological study from another Paraiyar village gives some hints as to what the result might have been if the Christian Paraiyar's own theology were to be reflected. In "his" village the majority were Roman Catholics, and lived peacefully alongside the Hindu minority. Their relation seems to have many similarities with that described by Clarke. Deliége describes a village with two village goddesses, Mariyamman, the Hindu goddess, and Arockyai Mary, the Virgin Mary. Though they are distinct, they serve many of the same functions of defending the village borders *et cetera*, which are similar to that of Ellaiyamman.[51] Concerning Jesus, Deliége notes: "Jesus is not a popular figure among the

Christians, who speak little of him, and have difficulty in situating him in the world of the gods. For some, as he is the son of Mary, he is inferior to her."[52]

In his description of the function of the village goddess, Clarke more than suggests that she too could be a starting point for Christology in the Paraiyar context, but stops short of this because it would be too contentious, and instead opts for the drum. It is tempting to suggest that among the Catholic Dalits at least, a liberation Maryology drawing inspiration from the goddess would resonate better than a Christology. This would however have consequences for the wider Christian theology which falls outside of the present study.

Clarke circumvents the Christian Paraiyar communities because he feels that their brand of Christianity departed too much from their original religious practices, primarily because the church leaders have discouraged the continuation of their "heathen" traditions. This may be regrettable, but it is a given fact. From this a new culture, a "hybrid" of original Paraiyar and Christian practices has emerged, one version of which is described in brief by Deliége. The "undoing" of this, a situation in which the Christian Paraiyar discard the Christian practices, which over a century have become integrated into their life, in order to return to the religious consciousness which Clarke observed and further from there embrace the drum Christology, is at best highly unlikely. It would seem that full acceptance of Clarke's Christology can only be expected in a Paraiyar community which receives Christianity for the first time from a source that is inclined towards Clarke's brand of theology, and independent from the mainline Indian churches. This source does not exist, and if it did, it would be missiologically highly questionable.

The issue of "hybridity" also has bearings on another side of Clarke's argument, that of orality. Clarke's emphasis on the oral character of the Paraiyar culture is highly illuminating and draws attention to the extent to which traditional Christian theology depends on the written Word, and this tradition's shortcomings in certain contexts. Clarke also points out that the growing literacy among the Dalits cannot be discounted, but maintains that the culture is still oral. I am in no position to dispute this, but it is important to underline how strongly the oral culture is under pressure. There is in the Indian society an expressed goal of universal literacy, and the new electronic media has spread rapidly. Television and radio blur the distinction between written and oral, in that they can be used by illiterates, but have the ability to reproduce the past and "objectify" reality. My question, which must remain a question, is for how long it will be reasonable to treat the Paraiyar culture as an oral culture, and if it is not as relevant to look at it as an increasingly hybrid culture with stronger "literate" characteristics. I suspect that the characteristics of oppression and marginalisation will remain long after the pure orality of the culture is gone.

From what I have said, it would seem that Clarke cannot expect to receive the vindication from the Dalit Christian community which he, according to himself, needs. Compared to the ideals (though not, perhaps the actual practice) of liberation theology which he holds high, his theology remains a theoretical exercise. But this does not invalidate his work. This study and creative christology is valuable in many respects: Though Christ as drum might never be accepted *in toto* by the Christian Paraiyar, many aspects of Clarke's work certainly have a potential for inspiring a theology which is better in tune with the Paraiyar life experiences. Rising awareness among Dalits about their unjust treatment and their rights, and the concern with Dalit issues in the churches may soon give rise to a liberation theology among the Paraiyar which can draw inspiration from Clarke's work. In addition Clarke has given a very valuable

contribution to a more principal discussion of the contextuality of theology. His insights reflect back on traditional Word-oriented Christologies, and challenges the tendency to accept elite cultures as defining for all cultures in a geographical area. The latter is the main contribution from Clarke to which I will soon return.

4. Complexity of contextuality

From the analysis of Aleaz and Clarke it should be clear that contextual theology is not simply a question of becoming aware of one's context, or choosing a context. Within a "context" there are certain choices which the theologising subject makes, consciously or unconsciously, and this relates not only to the choice of "model" in the sense presented by Bevans. It is about which perspective to take, or what to look for in that particular context. We saw that both Aleaz and Clarke are firmly rooted in their contexts and fully committed to it. More than the differences in context it is their choice of perspectives that set them apart. Aleaz chooses to take a philosophical and religious system as his starting point and supplier of symbols and metaphors. His choice is the philosophy which is often seen as the dominant in India, but which I have pointed out belongs to an elite. In practice this philosophy has given rise to social involvement, but Aleaz chooses to remain with an individualistic perspective with focus on the believer and God. He is concerned with "liberation", but this is only seen in the individual aspect of achieving salvation or *moksa* through true understanding. From the vast biblical and Christian tradition he chooses to put little emphasis on narratives, the telling of stories. Likewise, and related to this, he gives no importance to the cult or to the Christian community.

That it would be possible to make other choices is evident from the analysis of Clarke's theology. He has consciously chosen a marginalised community, and analyses the context from this perspective. Like Aleaz he has chosen to look at the religious traditions for a "language" or system of symbols and metaphors. (Other Dalit theologians take a more materialist and universalist approach and are branded "liberationists" by Clarke) He has made a choice to disregard the tradition of the existing Christian community among the Paraiyar, but has also made a choice guided by a desire not to alienate them completely when he preferred the drum rather than the goddess as the symbol for Christ's presence.

In the pointing out of the choices that have been made there is no suggestion that there is anything suspect or untruthful in making choices of this kind. On the contrary the material I have analysed shows that this kind of choices have to be made, and the need to make choices comes from the engagement with the contexts, or the created world, themselves. From the above analyses can be distilled three distinct characteristics of the world of possible theological "contexts" which make these choices inevitable.

(1) The multiplicity of contexts within one geographical area:

In Aleaz I pointed out a tendency towards presenting his brand of contextual theology for India, as *the* Indian theology, and I suggested that there are large groups in India that do not subscribe to Aleaz's and Samartha's way of thinking. Clarke's contextual theology is one example of a widely different theology which originates within the geographical area from which Aleaz and Samartha write. But it is not only a question of narrowing down the geographical area, for instance to one part of India, one state, or even a district. The different "contexts" in the form of thought worlds and symbol systems live not only side by side, but totally intermingle. Clarke's Paraiyar community lives on the outskirts of a caste village whose population does

not share the myths and symbols which form the backbone of the "Christ as drum-Christology". Attempting to narrow the geographical area down so that the "context" and the geographical area coincide, would lead to an absurd situation with each hut making up its own "context". Such an attempt would ignore the fact that the "context" at least has to cover the geographical space in which people lead their daily lives, where interaction with other people happens. So when Clarke and Aleaz appear to find different "contexts" within India, it is not simply a question of where they are looking, but what they have been looking for. Apart from certain very isolated areas, there is reason to expect it to be the normal case of affairs that different cultures, which would make up different "contexts" for theologising, live intermingled in the same area.

(2) The polyvalence of the context

When one "context" is identified, not as a nation or a particular area, but as people who live within the same area and share a thought world and symbol system, the "contextual theology" for this context is still not a given.The theologising process in this situation would start with looking for the signs whereby God reveals Godself and is known by the people. But as all other signs, these signs are polyvalent, they are nothing unless they are interpreted, and they are open for different interpretations. In Clarke's study there is an interpretative process between observing the use of the drum, and identifying it is as a "dominant sign" in the Paraiyar culture. Another interpretation would emphasise the goddess instead. The polyvalence of contexts accounts for a lot of the variety of theology which is produced in what seems to be the same context.

(3) The actual hybridity of cultures

This is a point which sets most of contemporary cultures apart from those of earlier times. By "hybridity" I mean the fact that most cultures contain influences from more than one tradition. This has of course always been the case in one sense : European Christendom was a "hybrid" of Greek and Hebrew thought, and South Indian culture was a hybrid of Aryan and Dravidian traditions. But in earlier times these amalgamations of cultures have happened gradually, in such a way that people adopted the "foreign" traditions slowly and came to accept them as their own. With modern mass communication the exchange of traditions happens at a very different speed. People are exposed to many different traditions at the same time, and increasingly become aware of the choices they make in this encounter. On a large scale most of the world has a hybrid character in that the culture of the former colonisers has been fused with a more indigenous culture. Increasingly, even in Indian Dalit villages, TV-sets bring images from the other side of the world into people's daily lives, and young people who have had a rare chance to get education return from the cities with thoughts and ideas which must be negotiated with traditional village life. One aspect of cultural hybridity is the volatility of the cultures. Changes happen fast, and what is true today, may not only be untrue in the neighbouring settlement, but can easily be nature for me tomorrow. Those who chew pan-leaves in the village today may be cigarette smokers next year.

In what I have said above, I make no judgements as to the desirability of the things I have pointed out. Especially concerning hybridity one might feel that some of the developments should be countered. Some of the exchanges between cultures, which contribute to "hybridity" smack too much of new-colonialism; they are one-way moments where the south and east take on board aspects of the culture of the north and west. A normative theology could make a point

of countering this tendency, but concerning the understanding of the context in which theology is developed, the fact of the actual situation must be accepted. Even without the vulgar symptoms of "coca-colonisation" hybridity of cultures would be a reality.

One might easily come to see the things mentioned here only as deviations from the normal state of affairs, as nuisances which should be dealt with in extraordinary cases. While the "anthropological model" as delineated by Bevans in his book in its pure form is suitable for cultures which are in very little contact with the rest of the world, the kind of analyses of contexts which I indicate here is required in the great majority of contexts around the world.

Taking this diversity and hybridity of "contexts" seriously is in itself a necessary consequence of the basic assumptions of contextual theology. This is the world as we experience it today. It is created by God, and we have to take it seriously in all its aspects. Further I believe it stems from the plurality which contextual theology also is there to take account of. The plurality in God's creation is not limited to a plurality of geographical characteristics or cultures or traditions, but extends to the level of individuals. Plurality among individuals contribute to such phenomena as different interpretations of the same context and cultural hybridity.[53]

Even a radically contextual theologian must make choices whose answers are not given in the context. It is impossible to give prescriptions as to what are right and what are wrong choices. Based on the material I have presented in this paper, I venture however to suggest three guidelines which should always be kept in mind, though they are in no way exhaustive.

(1) The choices must be guided by a pre-understanding of the Gospel.

It is true that the gospel can only be understood in a context, but it is equally true that it is impossible to make a relevant analysis of a context without a pre-understanding of the gospel which indicates what one should look for. The content of this pre-understanding could for instance be that the world is created by God, and that God cares for this world, and that all human beings share the same worth as they are created in the image of God.

(2) All choice must take into account an analysis of power structures and ask what and whose interests are being served.

This is not equal to saying that any valid theology must take the perspective of the oppressed, which leads to the question whether the gospel is irrelevant for others, but any theology should be aware of its underlying presumptions in this regard, and adjust the claims it makes accordingly.

(3) The theology must be rooted in the church.

This implies several things. Firstly, the theologising subject must be conscious about the church background from which the theology arises. In both Aleaz and Clarke I noted a tendency to circumvent the existing Christian communities. This is not the same as claiming independence from the church. Their theologies draw on Christian traditions, which do not come from their chosen contexts themselves. So they must come from some church connection which the theologians have.

Secondly, the theololgy must be in dialogue with the theologies "bordering on" the context. By this I mean to indicate the need for any contextual theology to be able to talk to other Christians. Since hardly any "context" today is isolated, there will always be other "contexts" with which one is in contact. For a theology to be meaningful, it must never be so closed into one symbol system that it cannot be understood by anyone else. This is close to requiring an

element of hybridity in any theology, But it is not a requirement for a theology in one context to agree with other theologies in the same geographical or "daily life-space". Still there must be openness for dialogue, which requires some common ground. In the concrete case of Clarke's christology, this means that whatever contextual theology is developed among the Paraiyar, there is a need to be able to dialogue with Chrisstian communities of other castes. Not to gain their acceptance, but rather out of Christian concern for other Christians. This is where the Christ as drum-theology taken to its extreme might be problematic if it leaves no room for other Christians to understand the claims it makes.

Thirdly, any contextual theology must be open for critique from the universal church. Again the relationship to "neighbouring" theologies comes in. It is impossible to require of a contextual theology that it should be immediately understood and recognised as a Christian theology by Christians in a context far away. But it should exist on a continuum where theologies are linked together so that none exists only by itself. Again this does not mean that all have to agree, but that in order to be Christian, the theology must be open to dialogue with other theologies, both to adjust its understanding if that is necessary, and to contribute its insights to the rest of "the body of Christ". The opposite of this is sectarianism.

This is not primarily a theoretical exercise, but a very practical necessity. I pointed out earlier that both Aleaz and Clarke seem to circumvent the churches that are already in place in their chosen "contexts". This may make interesting theologies. But it makes very bad church, since there is nobody in it. Churches do not suddenly occur in a context but are brought there by other Christians, usually as churches in "neighbouring contexts" spread. Relevant contextual theologies must take also this practical reality into account. Equally, if the objective is to "indigenise" the theology of a church which does already exist, its members will never accept a total break with their previous theology. The more conscious contextual theology must develop in continuity with the tradition of the church.

4.1 Extra-contextual givens or inter-contextual dialogue?

One of the major concerns in radical contextual theology and in post-colonial culture studies which have inspired this paper, is the questioning of universal categoires. Because of human plurality faith and traditions vary from context to context, and what is considered relevant varies radically. It is exactly this pluralism which makes it necessary to make certain choices as to how any context is approached. My attempt at suggesting some guidelines implies a presupposition of certain "extra-contextual givens" in any Christian theology relating to biblical narratives, God's relationship to creation and the oneness of the church.

The guidelines suggested here are attempts to indicate some directions in which to look, Since they do not spring from any given context itself, I can only suggest one way of arriving at them : dialogue. My analysis of two radical contextual theologies has demonstrated that lack of dialogue with other theological enterprises are serious shortcomings in both, and indirectly established the need for any Christian theology to develop in dialogue with other theologies. The limits to contextualisation lies in the equally important requirement of dialogue. Through dialogue what appears to be extra-contextual givens are revealed rather to be inter-contextual, developing in the dialogue between the multiple, polyvalent and hybrid contexts. Thus the creation-centred theology leads us first to take the context of any theological enterprise very seriously. Engagement with the complexity of any context, inspired by a creation-centred theology then in turn by necessity leads back to the inter-contextual dialogue.

NOTES

1. Bevans, S. B., *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis, New York, 1997, p. 47
2. op. cit. p. 16
3. op. cit. p. 51
4. Aleaz, K. P., *Christian Thought Through Advaita Vedanta*, ISPCK, Delhi, 1996, p. 1. For this and other thoughts Aleaz depends largely on S. J. Samartha.
5. op. cit. p. 90
6. op. cit. p. 99
7. op. cit. p. 96
8. It should be evident that Aleaz's "Jesuology" does not correspond to the use of the term as relating specifically to a "historical Jesus"
9. op. cit. p. 99
10. op. cit. p. 98
11. op. cit. p. 93
12. op. cit. p. 98
13. op. cit. p. 99
14. op. cit. p. 104
15. op. cit. pp. 104f
16. op. cit. p. 98
17. Samartha, S. J. *One Christ—Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology*, Bangalore, 1992, pp. 122-127
18. Aleaz, K. P., *Christian Thought*, pp. 96-97
19. i.a. op. cit. pp. 93-94
20. The Christian tradition would of course not talk of a "pre-existent Jesus" but a "pre-existent Christ" or second person of the Trinity. This, I believe, is of minor importance at this stage.
21. Aleaz, K. P., *Christian Thought....*, p. 104
22. Aleaz, K. P., *The Gospel of Indian Culture*, Calcutta, 1994, p. 78
23. Aleaz, K. P. *Christian Thought....*, p. 105
24. See for example Boyd, R., *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, first published 1969, second edition 1975, ISPCK, Delhi, 1975, pp. 192-195
25. This is outlined in the first part of Aleaz, K. P., *The Gospel of Indian Culture*
26. Samartha, S. J., *One Christ—Many Religions*, p. 122
27. Aleaz, K. P., *The Gospel of Indian Culture*, pp. 179f
28. Brockington, J. L., *The Sacred Thread. Hinduism and its Continuity and Diversity*, Edinburgh, 1981, p. 4
29. e.g. Samartha, S. J., *One Christ—Many Religions*, pp. 124-126
30. Aleaz, K. P., *Christian Thought....*, p. 16
31. Clarke, S., *Dalits and Christians. Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Delhi, 1998, pp. 142 and 145
32. Clarke, S., "Re-writing the Religion of the Paraiyar" in Robinson, Gnana (ed), *Religions of the Marginalised: Towards a Phonomenology and the Methodology of Study*, UTC and ISPCK, Delhi, 1998, p. 37
33. A more general description of the life in a Paraiyar village is found in Robert Deliége, *The World of 'Untouchables'. Paraiyars of Tamil Nadu*, translated by David Phillips, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997
34. Clarke, S., *Dalits and Christians*, p. 10
35. op. cit. p. 80
36. op. cit. p. 81

37. op. cit. p. 105. The significance of this becomes even g
orthodox Hindu scripture of the Manusmriti which re
various castes (varnas) sprang from different parts of tl
head, the low caste Sudras from his feet.
38. The most well-known example is probably the story al
The story of the genesis of Ellaiyamman is identical wi
villages who go by other names, see Robert Deliége, 7
39. Clarke, S., Dalits and Christians, pp. 109-11
40. op. cit. p. 9
41. op. cit. p. 153
42. op. cit. p. 183
43. *ibid.*
44. op. cit. p. 191
45. op. cit. p. 198
46. op. cit. p. 202
47. op. cit. p. 201
48. op. cit. p. 202
49. op. cit. p. 180
50. op. cit. p. 44
51. Deliége, R., *The World of 'Untouchables* .... p. 267
52. op. cit. p. 266
53. My thoughts are led to the winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics for 1998, Amartya Sen. His major contribution to economic theory has been to make models which take into account the great diversity among human beings. Economic theory has generally assumed humans to be more or less equal, and treated plurality as a nuisance to their models. Sen makes the point that diversity in an integral part of reality and as such must be accommodated in the economic models. It is tempting to see the Indian context as particularly prone to inspire this insight.