

Review Article

**A monumental, analytical Tribute to
David J. Bosch – a Bridge Building
Theologian in the African
and Universal Context**

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Tiina Ahonen: *Transformation through Compassionate Mission. David J. Bosch's Theology of Contextualization* (Schriften der Luther-Agricola-Gesellschaft 55), Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society 2003; 280 pp. ISBN 951-9047-65-4

In 2003 Tiina Ahonen published and defended her doctoral dissertation at the faculty of theology, University of Helsinki. The dissertation is a partial fulfilment of her doctoral training in the Department of Systematic Theology, where her work was partly linked to the Gospel and Cultures' project of the Helsinki University.

Both the approach and method of research employed in the dissertation place it within the framework of systematic theology, and the way in which the author proceeds in her analysis can be taken as a model for systematic analysis. The purpose of her study is "to analyze David Bosch in an intercultural theological perspective", with a focus "on Bosch's theology of contextualization" (p.18). Her means of doing this is by examining a) the contextuality of his articulation of Christian faith, b) his motives for contextualising, c) his responses to methodological challenges posed by other African, Asian, or Latin American theologians, and d) the practice of his particular method of contextualisation (p.18).

In addition to availing herself of oral interviews with people who knew David Bosch, Ahonen has collected and studied a wide range of material, unpublished as well as published, relating to her overall focus on *contextual theology*. Her bibliography consists of an impressive fifty pages (p. 226-275), whereof the first sixteen pages (p. 226-242) are articles and books, written (or edited) by David J. Bosch.¹ A full chapter is devoted to “David Bosch’s texts and contexts” (Chapter two, p. 40-82), where his European heritage and affiliation with the mission of the Dutch Reformed Church are shown to be reflected in his theological writings. According to Ahonen the rest of Bosch’s written contributions may be categorised as reflecting on various aspects of missiology as a theological discipline, as promoting the abolition of apartheid, and as furthering a global perspective of theology of mission. Here her presentation gives a necessary overview over Bosch’s writings in light of his historical and situation contexts. This, then, serves as a motivating background for her choice to focus on Bosch’s contextual theology. In doing so she has made a conscious and wise restriction, delimiting herself and not dealing with other, equally interesting and relevant aspects of Bosch’s theology, such as missiology in the broad sense, and the relevance of Bosch’s thinking for practical church life (p.19).

Although it would have been possible to find many interesting and relevant topics in Bosch’s theology to subject to in-depth research, the focus Ahonen has chosen is both fruitful, highly relevant to his theology, and sufficiently limited for her to carry through. It also opens a new field of study into Bosch’s written contributions which has not been covered by other works dealing with his theology. Although Ahonen makes use of the whole range of Bosch’s rich literary contributions, she draws predominantly on that material which he wrote in the latter part of his life (1970-1992), since it was only then that the contextualisation debate gained momentum.

¹ The material written or edited by David J. Bosch are subsumed under the heading ‘Sources’, with the following sub-headings systematising the different kind of materials included: ‘Unpublished writings (p. 226-228), ‘Monographs’ (p. 228f), ‘Contributions in books and journals’ (p. 229-241), ‘Study guides’ (p. 241), and ‘Edited works’ (p. 241f). The writer would have done well, though, in adding Bosch’s name to each of the categories of sources on p. 226-242, as it is not stated explicitly on p. 226ff that the author behind these is David J. Bosch. However, since his works are the main source for the dissertation, and the introduction has expressly divided Bosch’s writings into five categories (p.18), the reader will be unwise to guess that they come from the hand of another author.

Before setting out on her task, Tiina Ahonen starts by discussing briefly different approaches to the concept of contextualisation, and she categorises Bosch's approach to contextualising as fitting a dialectical/synthetic model (p. 39). Ahonen sets out to show that in order to understand Bosch, one must see him as a bridge builder, who in his theology wished to learn from seemingly contradictory viewpoints and sought means to develop "something that is acceptable to all standpoints" (p.39). She shows, in fact, that Bosch aimed at developing a contextual theology which avails itself of the best in both traditional Western theology and in contextual theologies developed by Africans, Asians and Latin-Americans of the twentieth century. This he could do by maintaining firmly both the universal and the contextual character of God's revelation. According to Ahonen, Bosch was troubled by "the mutual inconsistency and exclusiveness between various contextual theologies, since this is bound to endanger the life of the church as the new community that transcends the diversions of humankind" (p. 222).

In chapter three she shows that for Bosch there is a fruitful tension between the universal and contextual aspects of theology. On the one hand God's revelation in history shows a universal compassion for humanity, a compassion, which critically challenges humanity to change and through transformation to live in reconciled harmony with the will of the Creator. His compassion is concretised by Jesus Christ, the suffering servant, who creates the one, new community. As the body of Christ the church is called in a special way to live as an eschatological community with a compassion for historical transformation. Since Christian faith is intersubjective, the community of believers cannot be reduced to pure introvertedness but must live out its faith in appropriate respect for others.

In chapter four Ahonen continues to demonstrate that Bosch advocates the critical role of the gospel, as the gospel is the good news against the bad. Thus Christian theology is inevitably contextual and critical, since it must both relate to and analyse concrete, historical and cultural settings, and look for whatever wrongs that must be righted. According to Bosch this can best be done by a fruitful interaction between *theoria*, *poiesis*, and *praxis* in theology. Through this interaction, theology may not only focus on liberation, but equally have as its goal a creative transformation. This will bring theology in harmony with the gospel itself, whose aims comprise both.

For Bosch the concept of incarnation is a highly important and relevant tool for contextualising theology (chapter five). In his writings he holds that the inculturation process is incarnate. As such it is also critical and transformational, since the gospel is not only culture affirming but also culture critical. Moreover, the gospel itself opens for intercultural and transcultural dimensions. For Bosch, therefore, each instance of inculturation is incomplete without a wider, intercultural perspective. Liberation is for all humanity and theology cannot therefore be limited to seeing only the need for liberating some, or a group of people (5.2). In his view the strength of many of the contextual theologies is the particular attention they pay to problems and challenges in given contexts. Their weakness is that they often fail to add an intercultural perspective, since any theology must also account for its universal implications and relevance. He does not want to replace an old (Western) imperialism in theology with a new one – whether Black or Latin American theology (p. 176). This demonstrates the way in which Bosch balances off the contextual perspective with the intercultural or universal. According to Ahonen it also demonstrates “that Bosch’s approach in respect of contextual theologies is clearly dialectical” (p.185).

In order to demonstrate Bosch’s approach to contextual theology, Ahonen devotes a short chapter to two examples of contextualisation: the encounter with traditional African religions, and the encounter with contemporary Western culture. As elsewhere in her dissertation (5.3) Ahonen points out the key role, which the metaphor of the grain of wheat plays in Bosch’s theology. The old has to die in order for the new to rise to life. In the encounter between African religions and the gospel, Bosch holds that a certain continuity exists on the deeper or existential level (albeit not on the ontological or conceptual level), where “the traditional God allows himself to be ‘taken over’, transformed by, and transcended in the scriptural God” Thus Ahonen finds that Bosch’s approach “implies both assimilation and transformation” (p.199). She concludes therefore that the continuity held by Bosch “between the old and the new (human and divine, traditional and scriptural, culture and gospel, context and text) makes his theology differ from Barthian Protestantism” (ibid.). In dealing with Western culture Bosch is, according to Ahonen, aware of its character as “thoroughly secular and radically anthropocentric” (p. 207). He also questions the dichotomy in the West between revelation and nature, which he traces back, not only to the Enlightenment, but to Greek antiquity (p. 208). As an alternative he attempts

to combine *theoria*, *poiesis* and *praxis*, by expanding rationality and by bringing in the religious dimension (p. 209). A tension between science and religion must prevail, however, since trust in God automatically challenges the powers of anti-gods (ibid.). Ahonen then goes on to show Bosch's attempt to propose a mission, which offers an "alternative culture", with a focus on ecological issues, challenging hedonism and denominationalism. Their common denominator is the eschatological ethos of the new creation (p.214f).

In the final chapter (seven) Ahonen sums up the findings of her research. This she does on the solid basis of the previous chapters, and without going beyond what her sources or detailed analysis allows for. She finds that Bosch was contextual in many respects: he challenged the nationalistic missionary understanding of the Dutch Reformed church by proposing instead to "link the always-relevant Jesus event to the future of the promised reign of God for the sake of meaningful initiatives of the present" (p. 217); he challenged contextual theologians for not being sufficiently aware of the critical, transformational and intercultural nature of the gospel, and for adhering to a one-sided way of practising theology. Instead he held that in order to be truly contextual, theology must also be incarnational and context-relevant (p. 220f). At the same time the universal thrust of the gospel calls theologians to avoid mutually excluding contextual theologies, and to focus exclusively on a this-worldly definition of salvation (p. 221f). Therefore, in Bosch's theology, the kenotic and compassionate marks of the gospel will not fail to make its imprint on theology in any context, and cannot lose its eschatological orientation if it is to be true to the gospel.

The author and the Theological Faculty of Helsinki University are to be congratulated for this fine piece of academic research, and for its readability!