

## **UNIVERSAL PARTICULARITIES?**

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Contextual theology has been in existence for aeons now. When people engage with prevalent cultures like modernity and post-modernity, or some third-world socio-political realities such as political oppression, economic imbalance and gender imbalance, they are essentially engaging in contextual theology.

At the outset, it is crucial for the theological thinker to acknowledge that all theology is contextual. Every theology necessarily arises from some immediate context or situation which warrants a reflective exercise and thereafter effects a thoughtful theological response. This is true even for those theologies we now accept as normative.

Of course, there are those who continue to revel in the glory of universal and timeless truths. It is, needless to say, a much safer position in which to stand. Many of us come from such traditions that "fossilise" what we think to be universal. However, even if we conceded to the validity of the position of timeless universality, there's an inclination to forget that our articulations of that which is universal themselves aren't universal. The reasons for refuting the universality of these articulations are multiple:

Firstly, these articulations are encouched within a cultural reality. To begin with, the fact that language needs to be employed for these articulations already points to the inherent validity of this argument. Secondly, our articulations are never exhaustive of the universal in its entirety. We are but mere humans articulating our cognitive understanding and subjective experiences of the divine within the confines of our intellectual perceptivity. We must never allow our intellectual loftiness to pander to timelessly universalising that which we have constructed using finite intellectual material. Thirdly, an engagement with contextual realities often (if not always) necessitates the theological thinker to re-examine what he once thought was universal.

In other words, we cannot escape the particularities of our theological contexts. A theologian must - at all times and in all places - engage in the theological enterprise as a contextual exercise.

Now, it is at this point that we begin to face some strange demands from those who fail to acknowledge the inevitability of the contextual exercise - they mandate that a universal apologetic has to be constructed in order to establish the legitimacy of the contextual exercise! The irony of it is this: such a demand itself arises out of a certain cultural predisposition (which they, of course, fail to realise).

The contextual theologian must hold his nerve and not pander to playing the same game, lest he gets stuck in a cycle of universalistic hegemony. He must not attempt to "evangelise" the theological universalist by trying to play by the rules of the latter's game. He should keep speaking a language the other understands, but not start speaking the language of the other - and this statement is itself to be understood, no less and no more, contextually.