Dingolayin’

Theological Notes for a Contextual Caribbean Theology

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A GUIDING METAPHOR

In Trinidad and Tobago, to “dingolay” refers to any activity that is undertaken with spontaneous, joyful, and carefree abandon. It assumes a disposition of pride, a lack of calculated or cautious self-awareness, a desire to be provocative (but not offensively so), and results in a freedom conferred by an intent focus upon the inner-logic of the activity itself—whether dance or music. In all senses of the word, it requires one to give oneself fully to the activity, and in such a way where onlookers are either drawn into the activity themselves, or judge it as evidence of madness. Originating from the French colonial heritage of the twin islands, it refers most literally to that which is flung about in a crazy or carefree fashion.1

1. See Mendes, Cote Ci Cote La and Winer, ed., Dictionary of the English/Creole of Trinidad and Tobago. Though not fully responsible for the definition of “dingolay” developed here, I am indebted to both of these authors for their work in preserving the language and culture of Trinidad of which the term “dingolay” is a part.
PART 1: CONFIGURING CARIBBEAN THEOLOGY

This essay will draw upon the idea of “dingolay” to suggest a mode of theological reflection that results in a deeply contextualized theology that is distinctively Caribbean, while also having, in and through that contextuality, a universal reference. Drawing upon themes in the Christian theological tradition of the church, such as the created order as contingent, the human creature as a cultural being created in the image of God, and God as triune Creator, the essay will suggest that the development of a Caribbean theology is not only a contextual necessity, but a theological one.

Ashley Smith knows how to dingolay, and knows how to teach others to do the same. His life and ministry continue to witness to this fact. Though I only know Ashley Smith through his writings (and a brief lunch while attending a conference in his honor at Jamaica Theological Seminary in 2010) those alone are reason enough to make such an assertion, not to mention his many former, and deeply appreciative, students who now honor his legacy by dingolayin’ themselves: in classrooms, churches, and through their research and writing.

Real Roots and Potted Plants: Reflections on the Caribbean Church, a book published by Ashley in 1984, was most frequently cited as a defining point in the lives and work of many I met at the conference. At the time it was published, and even to this day, it stands as a provocative collection of essays addressed to the church in the Caribbean. It is no surprise that this provocation disturbed many, but had a magnetic effect on others (laypersons, church leaders, and educators) looking for a more biblically based, non-dualistic, theologically informed, and socially relevant faith that could put down deep roots in the unique soil of the Caribbean context while also transforming the sandscape of the islands, making them a place for human flourishing and, in the process, a witness to the grace of God in Christ. It is no doubt the work of someone who discovered, personally and intellectually, the deep logic of the gospel of Christ, and began to develop it in a confident and carefree fashion, regardless of the social taboos and theological boundaries others believed he was violating.

That confident abandon, characteristic of those who dingolay, can be seen from a simple survey of the Table of Contents, starting with “Christ, the Hope of the Caribbean,” and continuing with subjects and categories, bound together in a provocative fashion, that many in church circles, both then and now, both in the Caribbean and around the world, would have perceived to be not only unfriendly to the gospel, but the antithesis of it. What has faith to do with economics, and the church with social justice? How can the gospel inform social development and how does it implicitly critique

2. A. Smith, Real Roots and Potted Plants.
political oppression? Who talks about the social responsibility of the church as if it were a gospel imperative on equal footing with the task of evangelization and witness? Ashley Smith does, and in so doing he draws together categories that are essential, not only for the development of a biblical theology, but a Caribbean theology. Provocative indeed! That provocation, and the reconciliation of categories formerly understood as enemies that gives rise to it, continues in another slim volume entitled *Emerging From Innocence: Religion, Theology and Development*, where he has the audacity to include gender equality, education, and health to the list of subjects that are a proper concern of the church and theological reflection. To this reader it seems clear that for Ashley Smith gospel and context cannot be conceived apart from one another without severe damage to both.

If asked, Ashley Smith would no doubt say that these concerns arise from being a thinking, feeling, informed Christian person living in an environment where these issues impact every aspect of human life. Thus, they are impossible to ignore if one is to maintain any sense of the biblical witness or Christian integrity, not to mention human compassion. True enough. My suggestion in the remainder of this essay is that ultimately it is not context that forces upon us the need to dingolay a contextual theology, whether for the Caribbean or anywhere else. A contextual theology does not arise, nor can it be sustained, ultimately from a desire to be relevant or practical or compassionate, although these are important motivations. However, I think we can add an additional layer of justification for the kind of theological dingolayin' that has characterized Ashley Smith’s work—a theological layer that underlies the explicit witness of the Bible and its imperatives to care for the poor, pursue justice, and embody mercy. These theological themes form a framework that ultimately makes a contextual theology not simply a practical concern, but a theological necessity.

Stephen Bevans, in his revised and expanded edition of *Models of Contextual Theology*, notes both external and internal factors that he believes make contextual theological reflection a necessity for the church. The internal factors mentioned by Bevans are the most overtly theological, as they make explicit those dynamics that are central to the inner-logic of the Christian faith itself. Among those noted by Bevans are the incarnational nature of Christianity, the sacramental nature of reality, the personal nature of divine revelation, the inclusive catholicity of the church, and finally, the tri-unity of God. It is the final theological imperative mentioned by Bevans that I would like to develop at greater length in this essay, believing it to

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3. A. Smith, *Emerging From Innocence*.

be the theological basis upon which the other imperatives mentioned by Bevans are based. I would also like to suggest that his assertion of the sacramental nature of reality is ultimately rooted in a doctrine of creation as contingent, and that an additional theological imperative for doing contextual theology may be found in the Christian doctrine of the human person as created in the image of God.

My argument will be that the tri-unity of God, the contingent character of creation, and the human person as a creature in the image of God form a network of relations that are both enabled by human cultures and contexts and stand as the basis for the continual transformation and production of culture. The cultural reality that emerges from this network of relations can be described as a deeply contextualized, embodied reflection on the identity of God, the purpose of creation, and the vocation of the human person in the midst of God’s world that ought to foster human flourishing and divine shalom. Our reflection on God, and our action in the world in response to God, draws upon this network of relations producing, by necessity, a contextual theology, thus making contextual theology not a optional hobby for the theologically inclined, but the only kind of theology that honors this triune God. To avoid contextual factors in our reflection upon God is to somehow respond to a God that is not triune, who has not gifted to us a contingent creation, nor created us in his image. It is to absolve ourselves of our role in God’s creative work in the world and for the world. If we make these theological affirmations (and most of the Christian church does) then we are also implicitly affirming that theologies that seek to describe and identify this God must do so critically aware that contextual factors are a necessity in this task. Removing them as factors of interest or concern endangers the identity of the God they seek to bear witness to. What is required then, is a theology that is explicitly aware that contextual factors are a positive necessity if it is to talk about God in a faithful manner. That requires the church to say not only some very detailed things about context, but also some very detailed things about the God who works within it. Context alone does not a contextual theology make.

IS CONTEXT ENOUGH?

In surveying the work done on the development of a Caribbean theology one is surprised to find much talk about the subjects of church, of context, of gospel, of liberation, but very little material reflection on God per se.5

5. There are legitimate reasons for this, particularly since in the early days of the development of a Caribbean theology church folk were struggling simply to legitimate
Could this be the Achilles heel that has thus far slowed the development of a truly Caribbean theology—that as eager as we are to develop a Caribbean theology, we have stepped back from actually saying some material things about the God who values context and comes to us in the midst of it? That context, while important, is not enough to sustain the creative theological reflection necessary for the development of a truly Caribbean theology.

Even Clifford Payne's essay in Idris Hamid’s *Out of the Depths*, entitled, “What Will A Caribbean Christ Look Like,” promises to move us from generic statements about God and God’s concerns to more concrete statements about the Christ who comes to us clothed not only with the gospel, but also speaking with an identifiable accent. There is no doubt that this move from the general to the specific is a move in the right direction, but even when considering the particularities of Christ himself, Clifford Payne simply tells us that the Caribbean Christ will still be recognizably European, progressively Black (in terms of social experience, not simply skin pigmentation), will owe something to India, and will resist “ghettoization,” in that Christ will not be content to be a tribal deity, of the Caribbean or anywhere else, even though coming to us in very particular forms. Though each of these statements carries theological assumptions, those assumptions are not clarified. Context is left to carry the burden of telling us about God, of doing theology. One wonders if this is a sustainable position to be in as a Caribbean theologian who wants to ultimately talk about God, and not simply context.

Theo Witvliet, in his *A Place in the Sun*, notes that only marginal progress toward a distinctively Caribbean theology had been made at the 1985 publication of his survey of liberation theology in the Third World. His observations occurred after Idris Hamid and others began “troubling the waters” with symposia dedicated to exploring the reasons behind the absence of a tradition of theological reflection that took the Caribbean context seriously. However, Witvliet observes that those who search the essays the task itself, and articulate to others the uniqueness of their context and the necessity to address it. It seems that their work has succeeded, and that now the thick descriptions of the Caribbean context we do have (from anthropologists, sociologists, politicians, artists, and theologians) need to be allowed to feed back into the articulation of a theological vision for the Caribbean that has distinctive things to say about God and the Christian tradition, that in turn will enrich the global Christian community and nourish the work of the Christian community in the Caribbean. The reflections of Ashley Smith and Dieumeme Noëlliste are suggestive exceptions to this trend. See Ashley Smith’s works already mentioned above, as well as Noëlliste, “Transcendent but Not Remote,” 104–26.

produced for these symposia are “likely to be weighed down, willy-nilly, by the impact of the almost monotonous litany in which the charges against neo-colonial mission are constantly repeated. The negative element of criticism still predominates to such a degree that it is hardly possible to go on to the development of new forms.”8 The critique of colonialism is still present in more recent works, and rightly so, since colonialism continues to reach forward from the past to exert its presence in ever new forms. It continues to be a powerful force economically, politically, and culturally, in shaping the Caribbean context.

However, putting colonialism in its place does not a Caribbean theology make, and those interested in the development of a Caribbean theology know this. Their throats cleared of obstructions rooted in the past, Caribbean theologians have something to say, and something to contribute to the Christian theological tradition from the unique soil of the Caribbean. New forms have been explored, and the positive particularities of the Caribbean context articulated and appropriated. Some of these appropriations and explorations have been published,9 but the majority have been explored through on-ground, praxis-based experiments that revolve more around the church than the academy, the true context for theological reflection and dingolayin’ in the Caribbean, although also one of its main barriers. And yet, reflection upon, and articulation of, context, whether the historical context of the past, or the cultural context of the present, still seems to be the central preoccupation of many doing Caribbean theology today.

Perhaps the kairos moment facing the Caribbean church is to continue to keep the global Christian community aware of the negative powers of colonialism and the positive particularities of Caribbean culture, but also to contribute to the expansion of the theological tradition of the church through some theological dingolayin’ that births metaphors, dynamics, and truths that could not be discovered or articulated anywhere else.10 The Caribbean church need not piggy-back upon theologies crafted in other contexts, such as liberation theologies originating in Latin America or Black

8. Ibid., 105–6.
9. One thinks again of the work of Ashley Smith, as well as that of Kortright Davis, Noel Erskine, David and Aida Spencer, and George Mulrain, as well as the other contributors to this collection.
10. I am thinking here of my wife’s home of Trinidad, where hybridity rules the day when it comes to race, religion, food, music, and language. For instance, what other environment could have given birth to the music of chutney, not to mention the broad varieties of calypso found throughout the Caribbean? If in music, food, language, and other areas, why shouldn’t equally distinctive theological forms emerge from this region; forms that are as creative, vibrant, joyful, resistant, and as prophetic as the gospel itself?
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theologies emigrating from America, as helpful as these reflections may be. But the Caribbean church does need to speak a little less of the particularities of context, and more about the particularities of the God who identifies himself through it.

In Kortright Davis’ excellent and widely cited work, *Emancipation Still Comin’*, the author cites Burchell Taylor, who defines a Caribbean theology as one that is “both reflective on and responsive to the particularities of the Caribbean context in the light of the Word of God.”¹¹ This is an accurate and concise definition, and if the past work of developing a Caribbean theology has been (rightly) concerned with articulating “the particularities of the Caribbean context” then it would seem the future of the project would need to spend an equal amount of time isolating and developing the “particularities” of the “Word of God,”¹² and what that Word affirms about the identity and action of God. From beginning to end it suggests that this God has designed contextuality into creation (and made creation the context for our relations with him), and placed human persons in the midst of creation to shape and direct its many potentialities in such a way that they bear witness to God and by so doing enable the flourishing of the created order God has graciously brought into being.

However, just as important as emphasizing the need to give proper attention to both particularities of context and particularities of divine identity and purpose, is the need to make sure that both are related in a healthy and mutually modifying dynamic. Without a dynamic of mutual modification, where gospel transforms context and context informs gospel, a truly Caribbean theology that enables human flourishing will not emerge, nor will there be a universal witness and reference for any context-specific embodiment of the gospel.

Now, with this as a goal, what theological resources are there in the Christian tradition to enable the church in the Caribbean to dingolay a distinctively Caribbean theology? There are, no doubt, many that could be drawn upon, but I would like to explore three theological notes in particular that together may help us sound an authentic Caribbean contextual theology.


¹². My understanding of the “Word of God” here is broad, and not limited to the Bible *per se*, although it most certainly includes it. Karl Barth referred to the “three-fold form of the Word,” and it is in roughly that sense that I understand the phrase. The Word of God comes to us “incarnate” in Jesus of Nazareth, “written” in the pages of the Bible, and “preached” in the teaching, preaching, and liturgical witness of the Christian community.
NOTE #1: THE CREATIVITY OF THE TRIUNE CREATOR

_A contextual theology is a theological necessity because the focus of our theological reflection is the triune God of Jesus Christ._

Affirming the particularity of the triune God is the first step in affirming and protecting the particularity of the human creature and the importance of the role of context in theological reflection. The particular God that we come to know through the biblical witness identifies himself contextually, and in terms of a very specific story, involving persons, plots, events, symbols, rituals, and problems that, while having universal reference, are very different from the contemporary stories, rituals, and symbols we use to organize and interpret our lives. Why is this so? Why does God employ the wanderings and musings of a collection of Near Eastern tribes, and, even more specifically, the life and words of a Palestinian Jewish male speaking with the accent of a Nazarene, to mediate to the world his identity and desires?

It certainly is not because God wants to reach the widest audience possible as quickly as possible, or that God was concerned with expediency and efficiency in carrying out his plans. That seems clear from the outset of the biblical story, where the future of the human race is dependent upon the judgments of a single human pair, the flourishing of creation upon their activity as stewards, and the story of the God of creation upon their limited cultural symbols, finite memories, and selective obedience. It is a story of starts and stops from beginning to end, and yet the character and purposes of God come though clearly as the story unfolds. There is something about particularity and context that reveals the identity and will of God in a way that contextless, universal, generic, and abstract declarations simply cannot. Again, why is that?

From the story we have, it would seem that God could not have done it any other way. God’s self-identification and self-giving move from the particular to the universal, from the one to the many—not the other way around. Adam and Eve stand in for the entire human race. Abraham for Israel. The church for the world. Jesus for all creation. The life of the many are constantly implicated in the existence, identity, and actions of the one or the particular. This dynamic runs like a red-thread through the narrative of Scripture, suggesting strongly that God’s concern for context is rooted in God’s very being and the very nature of the created order. God’s concern for context and particularity is personal and material, not simply instrumental.

We might, of course, suggest otherwise, and assert that God’s concern with the particular, with context, with culture, is indeed instrumental, and
not rooted in any necessity of God’s being, or the structure of the created order. That is, we might claim that God comes to the human creature in terms of the particularities of their biology and culture simply because we require it, not because it is required of God himself, or that it has any significant role to play in the fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation. Thus, we might argue that if God wants to say something to human persons, God has to come to human persons on their own terms, whether he is a particular enthusiast of human culture or not. Culture is simply a socially constructed coping mechanism for finite creatures and is of no abiding interest to God. And since there is no such thing as a generic human speaking a universal language, God accommodates himself to the particularities of our context in order to accomplish an instrumental goal: to communicate with us and to reconcile us to himself in a way that is tangible, powerful, and communicable. Once that instrumental task is accomplished, we might claim, the importance of culture and context is relativized. It enables communication and revelation, but itself is not a by-product of God’s work in the world. It is a human necessity, not a divine one. Culture and context enable the mediation of God’s work, but are not the end goal of that work. God’s work in this case would ultimately transcend context; it does not give rise to it, nor does it ultimately endorse it. This would suggest that true knowledge of God should strive for an objectivity that is ultimately incompatible with particularity; that a “contextual theology” is an oxymoron.

This very approach, however, is itself a deeply contextual understanding of the task of theology, and one rooted specifically in the context of Western modernity. It not only colonizes other cultures who do not share this vision of knowledge, it colonizes God by insisting that God has no ultimate interest in culture or context, and that the further we get from the particularities of culture, the more accurate and devoted our understanding of God. This seems highly unlikely for a number of reasons, but I will only take the time to concentrate on one theological reason: the God of the Christian confession is triune. Particularity and relationality are essential features of

13. However, the mechanisms of our global economy are busy constructing just such a generic human. It seems that the vision of the generic human that may prevail is one where we are fundamentally consumers whose mother tongue is English.

14. Liberation theologians of all varieties have been chafing against this modernist epistemology for some time. Kevin Vanhoozer, in an excellent essay on theological method in the global church, articulates the dynamics well, in noting that we don’t want to decontextualize God or engage in “theological ethnification.” In the former, God is universalized, and belongs to no one in particular, while in the latter, God becomes a tribal deity with no universal reference. Both are errors that any theological method needs to be aware of. Vanhoozer, “One Rule to Rule Them All?,” 85–126.
God's very being, not simply instrumental conventions employed when it comes time to deal with human persons. If this is the case that God is triune—and the majority of the Christian church has confessed so for centuries—then it would suggest that the only kind of theology that can faithfully bear witness to this God's identity and will is a contextual one. In addition, contextual theologies not only mediate to human persons knowledge of God's identity and will, they themselves are manifestations that the will of God is being fulfilled and advanced, for they provide a kaleidoscopic witness to the identity and creativity of God, the nature of that God's work in the world, and the manifold scope of human stewardship over creation.

Four things, I think, can be said about the importance of the tri-unity of God for our theme: 1) It is the basis for the identity of God; 2) it is the basis for the creativity of God; 3) it is the basis for the identity of creation and the human creature; and 4) it is the basis upon which the Christian community finds the confidence, freedom, and creativity to dingolay new forms of culture that bear witness to God and enable the flourishing of creation. I’ll comment on each of these ideas briefly.

That God is triune is the most fundamental, and the most distinctive, claim the Christian community can make about the God to whom it bears witness. The inner-logic of the Christian faith is rooted in this claim, even if the term and the dynamics it describes are absent in explicit form from the biblical witness. The idea of the Trinity itself emerged as a result of some very creative, contextual, theological dingolayin’ in the fourth century by those in the church who had to articulate clearly (in the face of confusions both in and outside the church) the nature of their faith in Jesus of Nazareth, and their claim that references in the Bible to a Father, a Son, and a Holy Spirit were references to not only one God, but one God whose very being and identity was grounded in the mutual relationships between three distinct divine persons. The God of the Christian faith did not “play mas”\(^{15}\) by appropriating differing masks and costumes as the context demanded (one for Father, one for Son, and one for Spirit), but was in fact three distinct persons who, through these three different identities, identifies himself as the one God. In the face of such mysteries it took a great deal of confidence and personal creativity with the conceptual tools offered by the Christian tradition and classical culture, to formulate the distinctive idea of God that the Trinity refers to. It was a concept of God that placed the relational dynamics of particular persons giving and receiving in love at its center, a love

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\(^{15}\) An expression used in Trinidad to refer to those who participate in the annual Carnival celebrations by assuming the identity of a group, or some other person (a political or cultural figure) or thing (an animal), specifically by putting on costumes of all kinds and “masquerading” along with others in a procession of street dancing.
Eternally shared among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and generously and personally extended to all creation in a trinitarian chain of embrace and affirmation. That God is triune says important things about the role of contextuality and sociality in the theological witness of the church.

It not only suggests certain truths about the of identity and nature God, but also about the creative activity of God, in that God acts according to God’s nature, not according to theoretical possibilities based upon abstract attributes. Divine omnipotence, for instance, just looks different when we consider its meaning from the vantage point of a crucified Jewish male, as opposed to the vantage point of Aristotelian metaphysics. We hinted at this above, in noting that God’s concern with context is rooted in personal and material factors, not instrumental ones. Theoretically, according to abstract conceptions of divine power, knowledge, and presence, God could have created a world free of contingency, risk, diversity, and limitation, but simply did not want to. If that were the case, then the shape of the created order would be determined more by our conceptions of libertarian freedom, as applied to God’s choosing and willing, than by factors rooted in the very identity and being of God as the triune Creator. The truth is, we know God through the concrete actuality of his particular works, and those works, both general and special, are congruent with a God characterized by relation, particularity, grace, forgiveness, love, freedom, generosity, and abundance. The particular has a unique power to reveal in a way the generic does not, because the triune God is a God of particularity and relation, of story and plot, of harmony and dissonance, and has brought into being a created order characterized by the same.

Theologies that attempt to identify such a God by recourse to abstract generalities bear an ambiguous witness, if not a hegemonic one. The particularity of God’s identity as Father, Son, and Spirit, and the particularity of God’s engagement with the created order (both of which are grounded in the biblical witness), critique any attempt to define and identify this God in a way that excludes or marginalizes particular persons, events, contexts, and cultures. The theological work of the church should not seek to minimize or obliterate these characteristics, but to incorporate them into her theological reflection and witness. After all, the God we seek to bear witness to was not ashamed of our weak, finite, and culture-bound humanity, so why should we seek to outdo our master by crafting theologies that assume that divinity, rightly described, transcends contextuality?

16. Some of these attributes are rooted more in human desires for comfort, control, and cultural validation than God’s self-giving and identification in Jesus of Nazareth.
Perhaps the most profound, and concrete, evidence of God's dynamic nature, and deep connection to creation and context, is that this triune God became both Creator and incarnate. No doubt, these possibilities existed before being realized through God's actions, but nevertheless, this is a God who enacts profoundly new things, and does so by involving the created order, and by doing so, redeems it without displacing it. God, in God's very being, does not experience creation and context theoretically, but practically, in becoming Creator and becoming Incarnate. This suggests that there is a qualitative difference between theoretical knowledge of God and knowledge that is based in praxis and experience, and that experience, of creation and context, is a form of praxis-based intimate knowing that cannot be had otherwise. Can the church, again, as student and disciple, be above her master in this regard? This fact would seem to make not only deep exegesis a necessity (as it forces the interpreter of the Bible deep into the linguistic and social particularities of the text), but contextual theology as well.

That God is triune also has important things to say about the nature and identity of the created order God has brought into being, and the human creature entrusted with its care and cultivation. We will develop these two areas of Christian thought below, so it will suffice at this point simply to point out this connection. The tri-unity of God, the contingency of creation, and the creation of the human person in the image of God are all of one fabric, in that the created order and the human creature are what they are by virtue of the fact that they have been brought into being, not by a generic, merely monotheistic God, but by a triune God. True, there is a qualitative difference between Creator and creation, but that ontological distinction, while serving to preserve the freedom of God and the particularity of creation, does not undermine the deep continuities between them. The Scottish Reformed theologian T. F. Torrance gets the balance right when he says that "the reason for the creation is theologically traced back to the free, ungrudging will of God's love to create a reality other than himself which he correlates so closely with himself that it is made to reflect and shadow forth on its contingent level his own inner rationality and order." I will explore more on what these connections mean for understanding the nature and identity of creation and creature below.

Finally, it is the triune God of Jesus Christ who confers upon the Christian community the confidence, freedom, and creativity to dingolay

17. See in particular the discussion by Torrance in The Trinitarian Faith, 88.
18. The Catholic theologian Karl Rahner used to bemoan the fact that Christians were "mere monotheists" when they had the richness of a triune God to inform their imaginations and inspire their actions.
new forms of culture that bear witness to God and enable the flourishing of creation. To dingolay requires confidence and creativity, but neither of these qualities are ultimately rooted in the human person. Instead, they are ultimately tethered to the God who gifts to us the security and imagination needed to bear witness to God well.

Without this external tethering of our identity, confidence, and creativity, these gifts usurp their proper boundaries and telos, and instead of bearing witness to God (with the flourishing of the human creature as by-product) they assert themselves and by so doing obscure God and subvert the human creature and creation. We base our confidence on ethnocentric arrogance and tether our imaginations and creativity to our own fears and egocentricity, with devastating personal and social consequences. The freedom, faith, trust, risk, and creativity required to dingolay in this fashion arises out of God’s embrace of the human creature, an embrace that is not conditioned upon anything other than the love of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. This unconditioned love liberates the human creature to be what it is (a finite, fragile, and physical image-bearer of the triune God), and to become what it is not yet (faithful, joyful, just, kind, etc.). The triune action of God confers upon the human creature the psychological conditions necessary to dingolay in such a way that the divine freedom and love are embodied in the created order through the agency of the human creature embraced by God and empowered by the Spirit.

A contextual theology can start from any number of points to be contextual, but it is not a theology unless it is bound and tethered to the triune God of Jesus Christ.

With my most important and defining point made, I will treat the other two notes in a much briefer fashion, and with an eye towards further development at a later time.

NOTE #2: THE CONTINGENCY OF THE CREATED ORDER

A contextual theology is a theological necessity because the created order brought into being by the triune Creator is “contingent,” in that it has been created “out of nothing” and as such is a reality that has an integrity of its own, is responsive to the agency of God and humanity, and is meant to reflect, through that agency, the divine design through human designs.

A former teacher at the University of London, the late Colin Gunton, was often fond of referring to the creative activity of the Father as being carried out through his “two hands,” namely, the Son and the Spirit. He is, of
course, indebted to the second century theologian Irenaeus for this metaphor, which reinforces the early importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for understanding God’s creative activity, as well as the nature of the created order that was its consequence. However, the Son and the Spirit are not simply laborers at the behest of the Father, for the Father, the Son, and the Spirit constitute “a fellowship in creative activity” among themselves, a loving communion that is in fact the ultimate basis for the origin of the world, its contingent nature, and its ultimate telos. The particularity of each divine Person qualifies the character of God’s creative activity, as well as the character of created order that is the result of that activity.

Nevertheless, that qualification in place, and staying with Irenaeus’ metaphor, God has created something with his “hands” that we in turn are to manipulate with our own. This is deeply connected to the idea that human persons are created in the divine image, a matter we will address shortly. The reality that God has brought into being has determinate boundaries that suggest design, orientation, and purpose. To ignore, abuse, and violate those boundaries, and to impose a design of our own upon it, is to create structures, social and physical, that subvert the integrity of the created order and undermine the flourishing of creation. To dingolay is not to engage in pure randomness, nor to impose order indiscriminately and insensitively; it is to coax and nurture out of creation an abundance and design that has been placed there by God, and by so doing to find our reason for being, and with that, satisfaction, contentment, and joy. In fact, the freedom found in dingolayin’ is not a freedom of unrestrained movement, but purposeful action, where action in accordance with the divine purpose confers a freedom unattainable through sheer randomness and chaos.

Theologizing in context is part of this coaxing and nurture, in that theologizing of this nature seeks to provide persons with the conceptual tools necessary to rightly understand and orient our relations to God, others, and creation, and out of that right orientation, to engage in right action that produces and sustains justice, wholeness, abundance, and beauty.

What conceptual tools can we use to understand the uniqueness of creation as the context for dingolayin’ a contextual theology? With regard to God, the conceptual tool I have found most effective in theologically validating contextual theological projects is that God is “triune.” With regard to creation, “contingency” is perhaps the broadest descriptor for the unique order God has brought into being as the canvas upon which, and the context within which, our relations to God, neighbor, and creation are constructed and carried out.

T. F. Torrance (a contextual theologian in his own right) understands contingency as an idea that flows out of the theological assertion that the created order was brought into being out of nothing, through the sheer freedom, goodness, and grace of God. The created order as we know it need not exist all, and it need not exist in the form that it does. The reality of the created order, and its particular form, are determined by something outside of itself, and that something is the triune God of Jesus Christ.

Because of this contingent relation, Torrance claims that the Creator confers upon the created order a distinctive intelligibility, freedom, and order, which can be ultimately traced back to the one who has brought it into being. The created order is contingent, because all these qualities derive from, and are sustained by, the good and gracious will of the triune Creator. But, beyond that, it is intelligible because the created order can be known by human persons as a reality external to themselves, and with an integrity of its own. Furthermore, it is free, because the created order is not a deterministic system that is ultimately governed by immutable laws inherent within its structure, nor wholly determined by a reality other than itself. And, finally, it is orderly, in that the structure of the created order suggests an overarching design and telos that is reflective of the divine will.

These ideas are rich and suggestive, and deserve further treatment. However, it will suffice, for the scope of this essay, to state that contingency so defined implies two fundamental truths. First, the created order is reflexive or reciprocal in nature. That creation is reflexive or mutually reciprocal suggests that it is a relational, flexible, plastic, and multivariable reality that, by divine design, is open and responsive to divine and human agency.

Secondly, the created order is reflective in purpose. That creation reflects an overarching divine purpose suggests that it is an eschatological reality, bounded and determined by structures that orient it toward a specific design, telos, or goal that ultimately lies beyond its inherent structures to approximate.

Contingency, so defined, has important implications for the development of any Christian theology, but in particular theologies that seek greater theological “space” for the conscious inclusion of contextual elements in

21. These three areas of Torrance’s thought are developed more fully in his books The Trinitarian Faith, Divine and Contingent Order, and The Ground and Grammar of Theology, as well as chapter 2 of my book Persons, Powers, and Pluralities, where the ideas are placed in a broad context for use in a theology of culture.

22. This perhaps sounds simpler than it is, and certainly simpler than Torrance himself develops in his work. One cannot trace the identity of God off the surface of creation. For Torrance, fundamental clues rooted in the revelatory work of God are essential in “tracing back” any connection between the form of creation and its Creator. Nevertheless, a correspondence of some kind can be affirmed.
theological reflection and theologically informed action. The created order as contingent suggests that the created order has been brought into being so that it can be sculpted, coaxed, and stretched toward a determinate end, and that much of this manipulation has to do with divine and human agency, and specifically with the human person whose fundamental task in the created order is to serve as a steward through the creation of cultural forms that approximate, in ever greater ways, the project of creation initiated by God with the creation of the world.

That the created order is “contingent” means that God introduced an interplay between plasticity, multivariability, and determinancy into the very structure of the created order as its inner logic, and this is a key clue as to the fundamental telos of the created order and the vocation of the human creature. These qualities are not incidental to the fundamental purpose of the created order, but in fact constitute the inner logic of that telos, in that contingent things are meant to be sculpted and shaped in such a way that they realize a potential they are not able to actualize without “outside” assistance, and that they reflect that potential in such a way that brings glory to Creator and creation alike. Creation as contingent is meant to be coaxed towards its goal and telos by a triune God who lovingly interacts with it and sustains it, and by its human inhabitants who are meant to bring its multivariable structure to cultural form through their interactions with it. The inner logic of contingency suggests that the created order is a responsive reality so that it can be a reflective reality, reflective of the creative purposes of its Creator, and reflective of the creativity of the creatures created in God’s image.

This also means that the created order will surrender to a number of different designs, sculptings, and interpretations. Some of those will be theological and all of them will be contextual. This is a by-product of contingency, and of the central vocation of the human person as a culture-maker created in the image of a triune God. This brings us to the third theological note we can use to sound an authentic Caribbean contextual theology.

NOTE #3: THE IDENTITY AND CALLING OF THE PRIEST OF CREATION

A contextual theology is a theological necessity because the human creature, brought into being by a triune Creator and entrusted with a contingent creation, has been created “in the image of God” and assigned a cultural task that necessitates contextual theological reflection and embodiment.
The delicate harmony between plasticity and determinacy required of contingency must also be extended to the human creature, for the human creature is also part of the created order. It is not so plastic that it can be manipulated into whatever form human society sees fit, nor is it so determinate that there are not a multitude of ways to manipulate its physical and social life, and by so doing reflect the divine telos for flourishing and shalom. As with the created order in general, contingency is an essential component in the constitution and calling of the human creature, and the inner logic of its life. Contingency makes it possible for the human creature to exist, and to exist as the kind of creature it was meant to be.

Just as the classical theological category of creation ex nihilo gave rise to the idea of contingent intelligibility, freedom, and order, so the idea of the human creature as created in the image of God becomes the central conceptual tool for understanding the implications of contingency as applied specifically to the human creature. The human creature is reflexive in nature and reflective in purpose just as the created order, but in a unique way in terms of its constitution and calling. The phrase “created in the image of God” seeks to identify the uniqueness of human contingency.

The reflexity of the human creature is tied up in the fact that the human creature, as contingent, is deeply dependent upon its relations to God, others, and creation for its physical and social existence. This dependency seems evident from the biblical witness, and in particular the creation and fall narratives in Genesis 1–3, where the shalom that characterizes Eden is rooted in an ecology of relations such that the violation of one of these relations has ramifications for all others, just as the health of one of these relations has similar ramifications.

There are continuities and discontinuities aplenty between the created order and the human person, and those cannot be explored within the focus of this essay. Suffice it to say that the reflexiveness of the human creature as a relational and social being is essential to its ability to reflect and image its Creator, not only as a unique species, but through its work as a species uniquely dependent upon God and the symbolic worlds it both creates and sustains. The human person in the image of God is fundamentally a religious, social, cultural, and doxological creature, setting it apart in identity, nature, and calling from the rest of the created order. This too seems clear from the biblical witness, and in particular the fact that, of all the creatures God had made only one was given a task to complete, a task contingent upon its unique identity as image of God. The human person exists as a continent

23. Those continuities and discontinuities occur on a number of levels: physical, social, emotional, etc.
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creature like all others, but with an identity and calling unlike all others. It has been created in the image of God in order to image God.

That work (imaging God) is fundamentally one of stewardship, mediation, and priesthood—all exercised through the creation and transformation of culture, and very particular and complex forms of culture at that. Let’s expand a bit on this claim.24

The image of God is closely associated with the vocation of humanity as a priest of creation or mediator of order. This priestly vocation of mediation is fulfilled through cultural activity, understood in its broadest sense as the formation of conceptual and physical tools with which we order and orient our life together, and with which we apprehend and engage reality. As created in the image of God the human being is essentially a social being, and therefore an irreducibly cultural being, for human relations to the world, to God, and to other persons are made possible and held together within a cultural framework that God has not only provided for, but condescends to work within, binding himself to it in grace and love, all the while remaining transcendent over it as its Savior and Lord.

In the words of theologian Robert Jenson, we are uniquely related to God as “his conversational counterpart,”25 a conversation initiated by the Father, secured by the Son, and sustained by the Spirit. The whole created order is implicated in this conversation, for it provides not only the environment in which the conversation takes place but also the physical and social tools that make its dialogical and embodied character possible. The response that Christ secures and the Spirit enables is fundamentally a cultural response since it incorporates the entirety of our being, as embodied souls and ensouled bodies. Our cultural life is made possible through the agency of the triune God and is intended to reflect that God, and by so doing to sustain the creatures crafted after his image, and the created order in which they are placed (and of which they are a constituent part). These presuppositions necessitate the presence of contextual factors in all theological thinking, whether theoretical, practical, or pastoral. Thought about God is inherently contextual, and contextual according to divine design (not by accident or human necessity), since it is the triune God who has created

24. Much could be said at this point to substantiate that the human person is an irreducibly social and relational creature, whose constitution in the image of a social and relational God is directly tied to its fundamental calling as a culture-maker. It will suffice to simply cite the work by one of the editors of this volume as a gateway to the biblical, theological, sociological, and archaeological material on this topic. See Middleton, The Liberating Image. For a theologically focused treatment, with specific reference to the Trinitarian theology of Thomas F. Torrance, one could refer to Flett, Persons, Powers, and Pluralities.

25. Jenson, Systematic Theology, 95.
Thus, there is something unique about the constitution of the human creature that necessitates a cultural environment for its survival, and that generates a cultural environment as an essential aspect of the *telos* of its being. The cluster of relations and capacities this requires, and how they are oriented and put to use, can be understood as “the image of God,” and are directly related to the trinitarian understanding of the God developed above. Some of these same anthropological assumptions, although differently described, are central to the work of sociologist Peter Berger.26 BERGER'S THEORY OF CULTURE IS DEEPLY ROOTED IN FUNDAMENTAL WORLDVIEW ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM, ASSUMPTIONS THAT ARE, AT SIGNIFICANT POINTS, COMPATIBLE WITH THE THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY DEVELOPED HERE. ALTHOUGH BERGER WOULD NOT USE THE LANGUAGE OF “IMAGE OF GOD” TO DESCRIBE THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL MODELS THAT INFORM HIS CULTURAL THEORY (LET ALONE EXPLICATE WHAT THE “IMAGE” MEANS BY RECURS TO A TRINITARIAN GOD), THE DYNAMICS OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM DESCRIBED IN HIS SOCIOLOGICAL WORK ARE RECOGNIZABLE IN THE THEOLOGICAL WORK OF A NUMBER OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGIANS. OF PARTICULAR INTEREST IS BERGER'S DESCRIPTION OF THE HUMAN ORGANISM AS “INCOMPLETE,” “OPEN TO THE WORLD” AND “PLASTIC,” WHICH I TAKE TO BE A SOCIOLOGICAL AND NATURALISTIC WAY OF REFERING TO WHAT THEOLOGIANS HAVE DESCRIBED AS THE FUNDAMENTAL SOCIALITY OF THE HUMAN CREATURE AS A CONTINGENT BEING AND ITS DESIRE TO FIND MEANING BEYOND ITSELF IN ITS CREATOR. A BRIEF EXPLANATION OF BERGER'S ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS, AND THE CULTURAL THEORY BUILT UPON THEM, IS IN ORDER.

ACCording to Berger, the plasticity of the human organism is rooted in the fact that the human species is not born into a species-specific environment but must create one for itself. In addition, the human creature does not have a highly developed instinctual apparatus that will enable it to survive apart from the care and sustenance of others, or apart from a socially constructed environment. These two factors differentiate the human species from other species.

What biology does not provide (a well developed instinctual apparatus, or a species-specific environment) must be compensated for through non-biological means. It is this fundamental necessity that drives the human creature to create a socio-cultural world. This world in turn provides the human creature with a sense of significance and security in the light of its fundamental fragility and meaninglessness. It does this by giving the

human creature signs, symbols, and institutions as tools with which the hu-
man creature builds a stable social world and finds a meaningful role within
it. These are relatively uncontroversial and widely accepted assumptions
among anthropologists and sociologists.

The clarity and simplicity of Berger’s description of this process is what
makes his contribution so significant. According to Berger, the constitution
of this cultural world comes about through a three step dialectical process,
one that he articulates in many of his works, but is succinctly described
in his book with Thomas Luckmann entitled *The Social Construction of
Reality*.27

Berger identifies three distinguishable steps or “moments” in the dia-
lectical process that serves as the basis for his theory of culture; they are
externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The specific content of
each of these movements is not important. What is important is that they
are necessary movements rooted in the plasticity and biological incomple-
teness of the human creature that give rise to culture, and serve to create a
socio-cultural environment that functions as the human creature’s primary
tool of adaptation and survival.

While Berger and other anthropologists and sociologists ground this
three-fold dialectic in human biological incompleteness, I would locate it
in the creation of the human person in the image of the triune God and
the vocation of the human person as a priest of creation. For Berger, the
fundamental plasticity of the human organism leads to a diversity of social
constructions, and the necessity of being formed by what the human organ-
ism creates.28 For myself, however, the plasticity of the contingent order as
a whole, and the sociality of the human person in particular, becomes the
basis for the expression of the image of God and the fulfillment of human
stewardship.

Plasticity and sociality make it possible for the human person to take
on a concrete cultural identity, and to be part of a concrete cultural collec-
tivity through the socialization process. This gifts the human creature with
the capacities necessary to shape the social world in such a way that it will
reflect the divine purpose for the creation and the creature. By this process,
the human creature is offered a security and significance that is ultimately
grounded outside the ever changing boundaries of the socially constructed

27. A more condensed version of the process described in *The Social Construction
of Reality* may be found in Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 1–28 with a more condensed version
still in Wuthnow, et al., *Cultural Analysis*, 34.

28. Torrance also recognizes the “plasticity” of the human person and understands
this plasticity as a quality of personhood: “As person . . . man is the being who is open to
others as well as to the world.” Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology*, 193.
world. This entire process would be impossible apart from the contingency of the human creature as the image of God, and apart from the explicit inclusion of contextual factors in the human person's reflection about God.

Just as plasticity and sociality are essential features of the human creature created according to God's design, they can also be just as much a threat to the human person. This is because the very openness of the human person to the world that this requires also opens the human person to being determined by that world. This is why any articulation of a contextual theology must not make context alone the sole focus of its endeavors—if the ultimate purpose of such a contextual theology is to reflect the God of Jesus Christ, enable the flourishing of the human creature, and push the created order toward shalom. Context is important, but it is not enough.

Berger does not seem to be able to account for the threat of cultural determinism, or if he does, it certainly is not solved by recourse to a transcendent reference point. This however, is exactly the move made by Torrance to keep in check the blessings and curses of those who wish to think theologically and contextually. A dialectic of externalization, objectivation, and internalization that is incongruent with the divine telos for the created world and the human creature would subvert the personal structure of humanity and the vocation of that humanity as priest of creation.

In order to set the human person free to be determinate (to have a concrete identity and to fulfill a concrete calling), without being determined, a transcendent reference point is required, one that is dynamic and active and that has an objective existence of its own.29 For Torrance, this reference point is the triune God. It is this reference point that safeguards the personal structure of being human even while safeguarding the plasticity of the human person from becoming a vehicle of determinism; instead, this plasticity is the means by which the unique human telos is fulfilled. This is summed up by Torrance in the following way: “I submit that it is only through a divine Trinity who admits us to communion with himself in his own transcendence that we can be consistently and persistently personal,  

29. Perhaps a reminder is in order here. Torrance fully affirms the goodness of being created a determinate being. This is not a negative quality of being human that must be transcended. The determinate nature of human life is rooted, not in the fall or human sin, but in the declaration of the created order as ‘good’ by its Creator and the assumption, resurrection, and redemption of the created order through the incarnate Christ. For Torrance being determinate is good, for it means the realization of God’s good purposes for the creature. However, being determined for Torrance takes on a different meaning, where the identity and ultimate purpose of the human creature is defined solely by its relation to the created order and one’s social environment and not the Creator who brought it into being. Whether something is determinate or determined can only be discerned through an understanding of that object’s telos.
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with the kind of freedom, openness, and transcendent reference which we need both to develop our own personal and social culture and our scientific exploration of the universe.”

What Torrance introduces here is the idea that socio-cultural systems, like the human organisms that generate them, are incomplete in themselves. They too are the contingent byproducts of contingent persons shaping a contingent world through cultural activity, and thus are realities that require completion beyond themselves in order to fulfill their reason for being. Berger recognizes this with regard to the human creature, simply through his assertion that the human creature is incomplete, seeking security and significance. But one wonders whether this incompleteness would also extend to the socio-cultural world, and whether Berger can really answer the ultimate question of meaning within the limits of his discipline, for whatever meaning or completion the human creature seeks for itself is ultimately (for Berger) generated by the self. But this hardly seems an adequate place to go for transcendence, and perhaps is a further clue that the created order and the social world are contingent.

Though the human creature may need a transcendent reference point as a locus of security and significance (as both Torrance and Berger would agree), for Berger that reference point would never really transcend the dialectical cycle of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Consequently, it is difficult to see how a determinism of a hard or soft variety can be avoided.

For Torrance, as with Berger, the purpose of the cultural world is to mediate meaning, primarily by placing human persons in contact with an external world and giving the social world stable boundaries. However, the external world they are placed in contact with is as fragile and contingent as the human organism placed in it, and as such cannot bear


31. Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith notes in his book *What Is A Person?* that even the idea of “social structure,” as pervasive and fundamental an idea as it is for many of the social sciences, is little understood in terms of their origins and purpose: “Theorists in recent years have made helpful strides in conceptualizing what social structures are. We have been less successful, however, I think, in explaining the sources and origins of social structures in the first place. What actually gives rise to the social structuring of human life?” See C. Smith, *What Is A Person?*, 5.

32. Much more could be said here with regard to the role of the social world in theological reflection and theologically informed action. We have not spoken about the effects of sin on the socially constructed world of the human person, and the problems that presents for the inclusion of contextual elements in theological reflection. This would only further highlight the need for a ‘transcendent reference point’ in our theological thinking that is dynamic and active, transcending the social contexts in which our theological reflection takes place, but critically validating and endorsing that work where it reflects and overlaps with God’s own work.
the meaning-making demands placed upon it by the human creature. A transcendent reference point, it seems to me, is necessary, one that is mediated by a socio-cultural world, but is not ultimately a product of it. The theological anthropology developed in this essay is open to just such an understanding of the social world, while Berger's anthropology seems, in the end, closed to such a possibility. Whether that is simply a limitation of Berger's personal beliefs, I do not know. From his academic work however, it seems to be a limitation of the methodologies he has employed to define his discipline.

What Torrance brings to his work, and to the work of any contextual theologian, is an understanding of the human person as a social and relational being whose cultural activity is not simply a means to provide for itself a stable, meaning-effused social environment. Instead, Torrance helps us see that human cultural activity, in a greater or lesser degree, reflects the character and will of its Creator. Because of this the meaning of socio-cultural activity is lodged in a transcendent ground that liberates the creature for true security and significance, and subsequently results in imaginative cultural exploration and expression that is motivated by love and characterized by freedom, as opposed to socio-cultural worlds motivated by fear and characterized by insecurity, violence, and determinism.

CONCLUSION

I close with the following quote from an essay entitled “The Goodness and Dignity of Man in the Christian Tradition” that Torrance delivered in 1986 at the Lam Chi Fung Memorial Symposium on Christianity and Chinese Culture:

It is now the role of man in union with Christ to serve the purpose of God's love in the ongoing actualization of that redemption, sanctification and renewal within the universe. . . . Thus man has been called to be a kind of midwife to creation, in assisting nature out of its divinely given abundance constantly to give birth to new forms of life and richer patterns of order. Indeed, as the covenant-partner of Jesus Christ man may be regarded as the priest of creation, through whose service . . . the marvelous rationality, symmetry, harmony and beauty of God's creation are being brought to light and given expression in such a way that the whole universe is found to be a glorious hymn to the Creator.33

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It would seem reasonable to suggest that if we are to engage in the task of developing a contextual theology for the Caribbean, we need to listen to a melody that originates and terminates in the triune God, but not before it has drawn into itself a created order freely brought into being by the will of God and graciously entrusted to a creature crafted after the image of God. It is this creature, peculiarly constituted and uniquely called, that God dingolays and improvises with, in order to draw the created order toward its liberating telos. Human dingolaying in the image of God, participating in the divine melody, is a cultural task; it is a task for theologians and laypersons from every cultural context, if it is to be done completely, with integrity, and in a way that reflects the triune God and enables the flourishing of creation.

This dingolaying grounds the development of a Caribbean contextual theology that has theological integrity and local relevance and reference, while fostering social action. Indeed, authentic dingolaying requires all of these three characteristics to be present for any single one to be validated.

Torrance’s presentation is critiqued in Yeung, Being and Knowing.