
On Karl Barth and Asians: Actualism and Contextual Theologies

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that Karl Barth (1886-1968) is a contextual theologian who can be an interlocutor in contextualization and decoloniality in Asia. While Barth is seen as antithetical to natural theology, which may imply opposition to contextual theologies, his theology is nevertheless contextual since he was fully engaged with the mood of his time while proclaiming that God turned his face toward humanity. In this article, I will draw on his concept of actualism found in his *Church Dogmatics II*. I contend that actualism calls us to 1) go beyond the translation approach, 2) respond to God's revelation through contextualization and decolonization, and 3) consider God as the main subject and object in our contextual and decolonial endeavors in Asia.

Keywords

actualism, contextual theologies, Karl Barth, Asians, contextualization, decolonization

INTRODUCTION

Karl Barth (1886-1968) is acknowledged as one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century,¹ but not as a contextual scholar. Many theologians are aware of Barth's powerful *Nein!* (No!) in 1934 to his dialectic companion Emil Brunner (1889-1966) on the issue of natural theology. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that Barth's rejection of natural theology as a legitimate source of God's revelation means he has no regard for the importance of culture, reason, and experience in the formation of

1 Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1986), 11.

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one's theology—things that are important for contextual theology and decolonization in Asia.²

In this essay, I do not use the term “Asians” as a generalization. I follow Kwok Pui-Lan's assertion that Asian theologians have diverse views of what “Asians” mean. Nonetheless, that term is essential to indicate two things: 1) a collective consciousness of Asians against the Western hegemony in theology and 2) their affirmation that they can discern God's revelation and acts through their unique and diverse cultures and histories.³

Contextualization⁴ means theologizing with the assumption that all theologies are not ahistorical and acultural. Thus, I do not mean to argue that Asian theologies are contextual while the Minority World's theologies are not. Even the Minority World's concerns and issues shape their reading of Scripture making it contextual. I agree with Daniel Lee that the term “contextual theologies” is problematic because every theology is contextual.⁵ However, I still use the concept in this essay with an emphasis that contextual theologies are more than propositional, which demands engaging our particularity theologically—critical interaction with our cultures so we can determine the suitable expression of the Scripture for

2 I am indebted to Filipino scholars who present three steps for decolonization in the academy: “First, scholars must expand citation practices beyond the canon [Western methodologies], which means genuinely recognizing alternative perspectives. Second, decolonization involves recognizing a ‘pluriversal’ instead of a universal world. The third step includes seriously engaging with people from the ‘global south’ not as mere research objects but as knowledge producers in their own right.” Dada Docot, Stephen B. Acabado, and Clement C. Camposano, “Extending the Conversation: Recent Explorations in Philippine Studies,” in *Plural Entanglements: Philippine Studies*, ed. Dada Docot, Stephen B. Acabado, and Clement C. Camposano (Quezon City, Philippines: BUGHAW, 2023), 8.

3 Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 40.

4 I am using contextualization and inculturation synonymously, following the explanation of Leonardo Mercado: “The theology of inculturation can be seen from two perspectives. One way is to look at culture as a preparation for evangelization (*preparatio evangelica*). The other way is to look at culture as a necessary ingredient for the incarnation of Christ.” Leonardo N. Mercado, *Inculturation and Filipino Theology* (Manila: Divine World Publications, 2011), 29.

5 Daniel D. Lee, *Double Particularity: Karl Barth, Contextuality, and Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), xii.

our location and time.⁶ In this article, I assume that contextualization and decolonization are part of a postcolonial approach in theology that aims to examine “the oppressive contexts and their continuing influence, which perpetuates colonial legacies, to effect liberation.”⁷

I propose that Barth is a contextual theologian who can serve as an inspiration for contemporary contextual theologies in Southeast Asia.⁸ I argue that Barth’s actualism entails an approach or methodology that is compatible and helpful for Asian theologians. I refer to contextual theologies as products of theological interpretations that engage cultural contexts and social issues rather than embracing a packaged theology and uncritically accepting Western hermeneutics. It is a reading that recognizes that every culture has a seed of the gospel, and the gospel is not without culture.⁹ It includes an interrogation of the Minority World’s imposition of their reading of the Scripture into our contexts. However, it does not mean closing doors for conversing with Western scholars. As such, I will discuss Barth’s actualism, which, among other things, entails three things: 1) it calls us to go beyond translation; 2) our response to God’s revelation involves contextualization and decolonization; and 3) God is the main subject and object in our contextual and decolonial endeavors in Asia. To establish this essay’s contribution, I will briefly mention the reception of Barth, discuss actualism, and then deliberate on the possible convergence between actualism and contextual theologies.

6 See Stephen Pardue and Timoteo D. Gener, “Global Theology: Where to from Here?,” in *God at the Borders: Globalization, Migration and Diaspora*, ed. Charles R. Ringma, Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest, and Athena O. Gorospe (Manila: OMF Literature, Inc., 2015), 69.

7 Bernie Umali Mabalay, “Doing a Postcolonial Filipino Theology of Struggle/s,” *Wesleyan Journal for Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (June 2021): 73, <https://www.wesleyan.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/WJRS-1-1.pdf>.

8 Due to Barth’s massive work, Volker Küster correctly argued: “If it comes to contextual and intercultural theology, Karl Barth is a sort of trickster.” Volker Küster, “Yes! Intercultural Existence Today,” in *Theo-Politics? Conversing with Barth in Western and Asian Contexts*, ed. Markus Höfner (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 31.

9 Mabalay, “Doing A Postcolonial Filipino Theology of Struggle/s”: 74.

RECEPTION OF BARTH: A BRIEF DISCUSSION

Contrasting and interesting receptions of Barth exist. Even inside the Western evangelical household, various opinions on Barth exist. There are at least three reasons (not in order) for these different readings of Barth. First, it takes a lifetime to interpret Barth's massive writings appropriately. Second, interpreting his works is daunting because of his embedded dialectic methodology. Third, some have read his work based on their "received Barth" or common caricature.¹⁰

On the one hand, an anti-Barth attitude comes from strict fundamentalists who perceive him as a liberal thinker. They are suspicious of him, particularly on the issue of biblical inerrancy. However, he rejected the Protestant liberalism of the nineteenth century during his pastoral ministry and throughout his career. According to David Guretzki, most of these fundamentalists who are allergic to Barth are highly influenced by the assessment of Cornelius Van Til. On the other, liberal theologians consider Barth to be theologically naïve.¹¹ Kevin Vanhoozer wrote that the first evangelical reactions (from Cornelius Van Til and Carl F. H. Henry, for example) to Barth's theology were not positive. But for him, Barth has something to contribute to evangelical theology since his theology of the Word of God affirms the authority of Scripture.¹² Even William J. Abraham, who is not a fan of Barth, admitted that the latter is an essential conversation partner for Evangelicals due to his recovery of the rich resources of the Christian tradition and his focus on the proper subject of theology, which is God. It is up to Evangelicals to decipher Barth's mistakes and avoid them.¹³ Bernard Ramm, who studied under Barth and broke

10 Donald J. Dayton, "Karl Barth and Evangelicalism: The Varieties of a Sibling Rivalry," in *Karl Barth and the Future of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Christian T. Collins Winn and John L. Drury (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2017), 3-4. See also Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book? Barth on Biblical Authority and Interpretation," in Sung Wook Chung, ed., *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 28.

11 David Guretzki, *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 8.

12 Vanhoozer, "A Person of the Book?," 26-27.

13 William J. Abraham, Foreword to *Karl Barth and the Future of Evangelical Theology*, ed. Christian T. Collins Winn and John L. Drury (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2017),

ranks with his conservative evangelical colleagues, argued that Barth's theology is a reaffirmation of Reformed thought although interpreted in his context. Thus, it is helpful to move beyond the "received" caricatures of Barth by delving into his writings.¹⁴

Due to the general impression of Barth's negative and limited view of other religions, his theology is perceived to be irrelevant by some Asian scholars with a strong affinity to Asia.¹⁵

Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama (1929-2009) stated that there was a handful of Southeast Asian theologians who believed Barth had something to say about Asian realities. Therefore, there were few excellent and discerning discussions on Barth's wealth of insight in light of the development of theologies in Southeast Asia.¹⁶ Maybe the powerful effect and noise of the Barthian bomb on the playground of the theologians had died down, and the next generation of scholars have returned to their traditional theological games.¹⁷ In 1969, Koyama raised these questions:

vii, viii-ix.

- 14 Bernard Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1983), 11-14. C. Ryan Fields provides a summary of Evangelicals' standpoints toward Barth and proposes an attitude of humility while acknowledging the complexities of Barth's theology. As such, critical dialogue with his works may strengthen evangelical theology. C. Ryan Fields, "Evangelical Engagement with Barth: A Modest Proposal," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 44, no. 4 (2020): 324-335, <https://theology.worldidea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/ERT-44-4.pdf>.
- 15 Benno van den Toren, "Christianity as 'True Religion' according to Karl Barth's *Theologia Religionum*: An Intercultural Conversation with Selected Asian Christian Theologians," *Asia Journal of Theology* 35, no. 2 (October 2021): 156, <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v35i2.9>. Lai thought that Barth's "religion as unbelief" means that humans attempt to justify themselves apart from the grace of God and that they use religion to predict the revelation of God. Thus, this "unbelief" does not primarily attack other world religions since unbelief exists even in Christianity. See Pan-Chiu Lai, "Religious Studies in Christian Universities in Contemporary Asia: Its Relationship to Christian Theology," *Christian Higher Education* 2, no. 1 (2003): 58-59.
- 16 Kosuke Koyama, "Editorial: Barth's Last Pastoral Letter," *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 1, https://archive.org/details/sim_south-east-asia-journal-of-theology_autumn-1969_11/page/n6/mode/1up.
- 17 Carl R. Trueman, Foreword to David Gibson and Daniel Strange, eds., *Engaging Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2008), 14. I am alluding to the effect of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* on liberal theologians.

What theological insight of Barth will be *discerned and chosen* by the South East Asian theologians to become a ‘bomb’ in South East Asia? Or, if there is no possibility of a straight explosion of Barth—which is most likely in South East Asia—in what way will his theology be able to help us to produce an ‘exploding theology’ out of the very texture of South East Asian culture?¹⁸

Asians could benefit from Barth’s thought by discerning what to borrow from him and use in our unique questions and challenges.¹⁹ In my perspective, his actualism is rich and can be utilized.

BARTH’S CONTEXTUAL APPROACH: THE CONCEPT OF ACTUALISM IN CD II

CD II/1 was originally published at the outset of World War II. Barth wrote about the perfection and the reality of the *Wholly Other*²⁰ while engaged with the turmoil brought by the war on his people and country. He volunteered for military service just as this volume was about to go to press. The two major themes of *CD II/1* appeared in its chapter titles (“The Knowledge of God” and “The Reality of God.”²¹ In *CD II/1*, readers reckon with the foundation of Barth’s theology: “God is.”²² This volume’s first chapter argues that God’s action is the foundation of human knowledge of him. In his sovereign acts, he presents himself to us as a Subject, which necessitates a response.²³ The possibility of human knowledge does not rest on our ability to grasp and master God. On the contrary, in his freedom, he presents himself to us.

18 Koyama, “Editorial: Barth’s Last Pastoral Letter”: 1.

19 Pan-Chiu Lai, “Barth’s Theology of Religion and the Asian Context of Religious Pluralism,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (October 2001): 248.

20 The term *Wholly Other* had come into vogue via Rudolf Otto. Barth used this term to describe God’s absolute transcendence emphasizing the radical difference between God and all creatures. Richard Burnett, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 220.

21 Guretzki, *An Explorer’s Guide to Karl Barth*, 184.

22 G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Editors’ Preface to Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, part 1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), vii.

23 Bromiley and Torrance, Editors’ Preface to *CD II/1*, vii.

Actualism: No to Static Being

Barth's theology is not static. It changed as he deepened his thoughts on new things, clarified some beliefs, and responded to new questions as he understood God. In short, his dynamic theology can be summed up in one word: actualism.²⁴ That concept is ubiquitous in Barth's works, particularly in *Church Dogmatics*.

According to George Hunsinger, actualism is a motif in Barth's theology, referring to his language of acts, events, decisions, happening, history, and occurrence. This idea shows Barth's understanding of God and human relations in terms of *actions* as opposed to monadic or restrained beings and substances.²⁵ However, it does not mean God is an impersonal and dynamic force because he is the absolute I.²⁶ As Paul Nimmo explained, "The term alludes primarily to the way in which Barth, following the witness of Scripture, conceives of *God* and *Jesus Christ*, and (derivatively) of human beings, as beings-in-action, existing in a *covenant* relationship in which the dialectical concepts of 'history' and 'event' are important."²⁷ The concept of actualism is a helpful guide in navigating Barth's massive theological *opus* of *Church Dogmatics*.

First, actualism emphasizes God's dynamic nature and relationship with his creation. It then follows that the nature of revelation is not static or a mere deposit of ideas. Revelation is active; it is a verb through which humans come to know God. Second, we see actualism in Barth's use of the word "event" to describe the nature of the church as an active community, inspired and enabled by the Holy Spirit to continue to serve as a witness to Jesus Christ.²⁸ For Barth, the church serves as the historical form of Jesus's

24 Keith L. Johnson, "A Reappraisal of Karl Barth's Theological Development and his Dialogue with Catholicism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 14, no. 1 (January 2012): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2400.2011.00603>.

25 George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30.

26 Sara Mannen, "Karl Barth's Theology of God as the Absolute Person: Decision and the Problem of the Counterfactuals," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (September 2022): 1-27, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12618>.

27 Paul Nimmo, "Actualism," in *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, ed. Richard E. Burnett (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 1. Emphasis author's.

28 Guretzki, *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth*, 74-75.

existence here on earth.²⁹ Therefore, the church as the body of Christ is more than just a metaphor and deeper than just a static community.³⁰

Revelation as an Event: God's Dynamic Disclosure

The doctrine of God is the foundation of actualism in Barth's theology. Since revelation is not just a compilation of propositions, we cannot control or master it. Since God is hidden, there is no other way by which we can unveil him. The God who is the qualitative "Other" from us has revealed himself in a Divine *occurrence*. Only in this event do we encounter the dynamic God who enters into a covenant with us.³¹ We can understand actualism by the contrasting natures of God and humans. First, actualism speaks of God's free decision to act in love in his relationship with himself and his creations. Second, since God is sovereign, we cannot take the initiative to create an "event" to enter into a relationship with him.³²

Actualism in Barth's theology freed revelation from human illusion to domesticate it. Alan Torrance put this correctly: "God is not simply 'another object' to be interpreted or described by the human subject, but the most concrete Reality in the light of which every facet of our understanding requires to be reconceived. It is theologically invalid, therefore, for the human creature to approach this unique 'subject-matter' as if we were its lord."³³ We can know God not through static information about him, but through actualism. Barth insisted that he refused to affirm any attempt to use human ability, nature, and moral conscience to find God's ultimate disclosure of himself. He detested any human effort at salvation so that he might present redemption as a work of the *Wholly Other*.³⁴

29 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 661.

30 Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth, Theologian of Christian Witness* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 155.

31 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, part 1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 199.

32 Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 30-31.

33 Alan Torrance, "The Trinity," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 72.

34 Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 28. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II, part 2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 92.

To repeat, God's self-disclosure is more than propositional. As Barth explained: "Revelation means the giving of signs. We can say quite simply that revelation means sacrament, i.e., the self-witness of God, the representation of His truth, and therefore the truth in which He knows Himself, in the form of creaturely knowledge."³⁵ The dynamism of revelation reminds us that it is a miracle. It is not a work of humans but the occurrences of the Divine. In short, "The Moment when God, not man, speaks and acts, is the Moment of Miracle."³⁶ Therefore, revelation is not just about acquiring ideas or data about God but entails serving as his faithful covenant partners, fellowshiping with him, and witnessing to him.³⁷ In his unveiling, we are not only given the privilege to know the *Wholly Other*; we are also called to enter into a relationship with him and learn to worship and love him. In that way, we understand who we are and the purpose of our existence.³⁸

Humans as "Events": Responding to Revelation

Revelation is always a miracle and grace that cannot be fully exhausted by reason.³⁹ It is a miracle because it happens anew and is always an expression of God's freedom that no humans can manipulate.⁴⁰ However, that does not mean we are static observers, because his self-disclosure necessitates a response from us. Revelation is not just a one-sided action; though it is primarily his event, he also requires an *act* from us.⁴¹ According to Hart, "Revelation, as Barth never tires of reminding his readers, is an event: it is something which happens, something which God does, and something in which *we are actively involved*."⁴² Part of the definition of

35 Barth, *CD II/1*, 52.

36 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 422.

37 Trevor Hart, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 55.

38 See Barth, *CD II/1*, 39.

39 Barth, *CD II/1*, 198.

40 Herbert Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1964), 34.

41 Hart, "Revelation," 49. See also Barth, *CD II/1*, 12.

42 Hart, "Revelation," 45. Emphasis mine.

actualism is the being-in-action of God and humans. Actualism, then, does not negate humanity's freedom. There is active participation on our part as we relate to the Creator. We are not mechanical things or machine-driven events. God has made us his covenant partners, not that we deserve such privilege but because of Jesus Christ.⁴³ In Barth's words, "Man now exists only in the event of his history as the creature and covenant-partner of God."⁴⁴

According to Barth, God "encounters him in such a way that man can also know Him. He encounters him in such a way that in this encounter God is and remains God and thus raises up man really to be a knower of Himself. But that this is the case is wholly and utterly God's own being and work, which man can only follow."⁴⁵ The reality of God is not at our disposal, but since he continues to speak to us anew, our relationship with him is an event—an activity of his grace.

God in Action: The Lord Who Acts in Love and Freedom

Actualism tells us that God is "never a philosophical or theological or logical given but is always an active and real Actor and Agent in the world that can be anticipated and invoked and addressed but never boxed in or forced to act at human will or whim."⁴⁶ The "God" that we are talking about here is not an abstract idea or an empty word. There were two things that Barth endeavored to avoid when speaking of God. First, he saw a problem in the scholastic and philosophical divorce between God's being and God's acts. Second, while God is the being-in-act, Barth also avoided the belief that the Creator's acts totally captured and exhausted his being.⁴⁷ He is not the God of deists and pantheists, but the self-sufficient and the

43 Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 35-36. Barth maintained that God creates and sustains our faith so we can learn to love and fear him. Barth, *CD II/1*, 37.

44 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 4, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 662. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III, part 2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 1-18.

45 Barth, *CD II/1*, 32.

46 Guretzki, *An Explorer's Guide to Karl Barth*, 75-76.

47 Bromiley and Torrance, Editors' Preface to *CD II/1*, vii-viii.

most authentic I⁴⁸ who, from eternity, has enjoyed his being as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

God reveals himself to us in a dynamic way. For humans to know him, God *acted* (event) by lowering⁴⁹ himself so that despite our limited capacity, we can encounter him truly.⁵⁰ This does not mean that God is at human disposal or that we can domesticate him. In God's revelation, we encounter him as the One who loves freely—the God whom Paul mentioned, “For in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is the Existent, which follows that he is not subject to any humans, creations, or necessity. In short, God's freedom is aseity.⁵¹

God is unique from us and is the perfect I who acts and lives in freedom. His being is dynamic and seeks to establish a fellowship with his creation.⁵² Barth pointed out that if we could condition God, then we are no longer his creatures, and the God who is manipulated by his creatures is not God anymore.⁵³ In discussing the Creator who loves in freedom, the emphasis is not primarily on the word “free” but on him, which means we can encounter the sovereign Lord based only on what he disclosed.⁵⁴

POTENTIAL CONVERGENCE: ACTUALISM AND CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES

Asians are diverse in cultures, traditions, customs, histories, experiences, and current situations. However, Asian differences do not mean there is no commonality. Filipino Catholic theologian José de Mesa, drawing from the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, recognized the connection between these people and cultures, and one qualifier for “Asian” is

48 Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 69.

49 See Barth, *CD II/1*, 198. For Barth, “God's decision in Jesus Christ is a gracious decision. In making it God stoops down from above.” Barth, *CD II/2*, 10.

50 Barth, *CD II/1*, 61. That is why the Gospel has only one content and that is no other than the Son of God. Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 16.

51 Barth, *CD II/1*, 306.

52 Barth, *CD II/1*, 284-285

53 Barth, *CD II/1*, 580.

54 Barth, *CD II/1*, 320-321.

inculturation or contextualization.⁵⁵ Also, religiosity is another common denominator. Wonsuk Ma is right in saying that “Asia is the cradle of all major religions of the world. Interaction among diverse religions is part of the daily life of its 4.55 billion people. Asian cultures have deep religious roots, making the separation between culture and religion difficult.”⁵⁶

Asia’s religions, histories, and cultures are important factors in understanding Asian civilizations. While human experiences are not the ultimate arbiters of Asian theologies, Asian Christians have to deal with their fast-changing socioeconomic and political landscape with the issues embedded in their unique contexts.⁵⁷ Asians are facing unique sociopolitical and economic concerns compared to their brothers and sisters in the West, such as hunger, overpopulation, environmental crises, natural calamities, and corruption.⁵⁸ One common problem in Southeast Asian countries, except for Singapore, is extreme poverty exacerbated by natural catastrophes.⁵⁹

In his editorial of *The South East Asia Journal of Theology*, Koyama penned: “This issue begins with a pastoral letter from Karl Barth addressed to Christians in South East Asia. The letter was written three weeks before his death. In this brief letter, one of the greatest pastors of our day comes to us, and forcefully speaks to us about the theological way to magnify the name of Jesus Christ in South East Asia.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, Barth wrote an article “No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth” addressing Asians: “To be sure, I have had the pleasure now and then to meet a South East

55 José M. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Re-rooting* (Quezon City, Philippines: Maryhill School of Theology, 1987), 1.

56 Wonsuk Ma, “Lord and Giver of Life: The Holy Spirit among the Spirits in Asia,” in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019), 119.

57 Clarence Devadass, “From *Theocentric* to *Theopraxis*: Renegotiating Theology in the Context of the Plurality of Traditions in Asia,” *International Journal of Indonesian Philosophy & Theology* 2, no. 2 (2021):106, <https://aafki-afti.org/IJIPTh/article/view/22/pdf>.

58 Bong Rin Ro, “Theological Trends in Asia,” *Themelios* 13, no. 2 (Jan/Feb 1988): 57, <https://tgc-documents.s3.amazonaws.com/themelios/Themelios13.2.pdf>.

59 Peter Phan, “Contemporary Christianities in Southeast Asia: Challenges and Opportunities,” *Indonesian Journal of Theology* 9, no. 1 (2021): 14, <https://www.indotheologyjournal.org/index.php/home/article/view/209/230>.

60 Koyama, “Editorial: Barth’s Last Pastoral Letter”: 1.

Asian Christian (and sometimes a Buddhist) or to get to know him a little in my study among my many books. I also read the newspaper carefully every day and there I learn again and again something of the dynamic situation in your corner of the world.”⁶¹ In his letter, he seemed delighted that he had, at least, a connection to Southeast Asian Christians.

In Asia, we need to address poverty, cultures, and religions. Edmund Kee-Fook Chia explained that these three are important interlocutors of Asian theologies because they not only enhance theological reflections but also show that theologizing is not just about either “from above” or “from below.” For example, conversation with cultures is a process of inculturation or contextualization. Dialoguing with other religions creates a space for interreligious conversations and cooperation. A consideration of the issue of poverty tells us that theology is not detached from the people’s plight in Asia.

In serving God as Asian Christians, Barth encouraged us to grapple intentionally and seriously with the distinctive needs of our regions. In doing so, we engage in courage and humility.⁶² In short, Barth discussed the importance of serving as living witnesses to our particularity and locality. Singaporean theologian Simon Chan’s description of Barth’s contribution to cultural engagement is telling: “Barth’s theology could be said to entail a different form of social engagement—or, to be more precise, his theology could be said to lay the foundation for a different theology of social engagement.... This personal particularism of Barth’s thought is one [*sic*] his most important contributions to an alternative theology of engagement.”⁶³ Such a different way of social engagement comes from his belief that God has turned his face toward humanity.⁶⁴

61 Karl Barth, “No Boring Theology! A Letter from Karl Barth,” *The South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 3, https://archive.org/details/sim-south-east-asia-journal-of-theology_autumn-1969_11/page/3/mode/1up. I want to thank reviewer 1 for pointing out that the whole issue of the journal is dedicated to Barth and that the article “No Boring Theology!” was written by his research assistant Eberhard Busch and approved by Barth.

62 See Barth, “No Boring Theology!”: 3-4; Lai, “Barth’s Theology of Religion and the Asian Context,” 259.

63 Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 38, 39.

64 In Barth’s words: “...we all live only by the fact that a great and merciful God speaks his gracious Yes to all of us.” Karl Barth, *Letters 1961-1968*, ed. Jürgen Fangmeier and

I assert that the starting point for discussing contextual theologies is the reality that God is dynamic and has communicated himself to us through a particularity—Jesus Christ. I contend that this is the basis of why contextual theologies are even possible and a must. I propose three things that we could draw from our discussion.

Beyond the Translation Approach

First, actualism challenges us to go beyond the translation approach in contextualization. As we have seen, revelation is an act and more than just a set of propositions. This reminds us that we are not just called to “copy and paste” packaged theologies and discipleship methods from the Minority World. Filipino theologian Victor Aguilan is correct in saying that Christians in the country continue to mirror American Christianity. Many of us still carry a colonial mentality.⁶⁵ Thus decoloniality is necessary, as Barth said: “Now it is your task to be Christian theologians in your new, different and special situation with heart and head, with mouth and hands.... You truly do not need to become ‘European’ and ‘Western’ men, not to mention ‘Barthians,’ in order to be good Christians and theologians. You may feel free to be South East Asian Christians.”⁶⁶ Barth’s advice above is congruent with the desire of Timoteo Gener and Stephen Pardue when they argued about the importance of Evangelicals in the Majority World to express their faith freely and contextually, and not on a surface level or a mere translation of Western theologies.⁶⁷ Unfortunately, while we live in a society grappling with injustice, poverty, and political turmoil, many Evangelicals in the Philippines still focus on theological controversies that revolve around whether miraculous gifts exist today and whether baptism should be daintily pouring or immersion,⁶⁸ or other modernist issues in

Hinrich Stoevesandt, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 202.

65 Victor R. Aguilan, “Spirituality of Struggle: Resistance, Repentance, Solidarity, and Renewal,” *Asia Journal of Theology* 38, no. 1 (April 2024): 9, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54424/ajt.v38i1.89>.

66 Barth, “No Boring Theology!”: 3-4.

67 Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, Introduction to *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2019), 3.

68 Melba Padilla Maggay, “Theology, Context, and the Filipino Church,” in *Global Mission: Reflections and Case Studies in Contextualization for the Whole Church*, ed. Rose

the Minority World, such as the literal interpretation of Scripture, the existence of God, and naturalism.⁶⁹ In Asia, where religion is ubiquitous, the existence of God is not an issue.⁷⁰ It is essential not merely to follow Western theological trends because we have different experiences and pressing issues.

I do not suggest that we should detach ourselves from global Christianity or neglect essential writings by Christians in the Minority World. My concern is that despite the reality that the Christian population in Asia surpasses their counterparts in North America, the ubiquity of evangelical theological materials that we have in the Philippines is predominantly Western. That is not bad per se, but these Western resources carry those concerns in their region that may not be relevant to our country or may not answer the questions we raise in Asia. Moreover, scant are the resources within Evangelicalism that deeply delve into the specific and significant challenges and concerns of Asian Christians.⁷¹ Engaging the issues of our culture is part of responding to God's disclosure.

Responding to Divine Acts

Second, actualism also talks about human relations, which involves reacting to God's self-disclosure—we are not static beings. Actualism refers to a language that names God in his revelation climaxing in being God for us in Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, I argue that contextualization and decolonization are parts of our responses because we try to understand how he moves within our situatedness and existential struggles. Since God's people serve as the historical form of Jesus on earth, they should be active "contextualizers" by engaging the issues in their contexts. Asian

Dowsett (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2011), 149.

69 Melba P. Maggay, "A Religion of Guilt Encounters a Religion of Power: Missiological Implications and Consequences," in *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes*, ed. Melba P. Maggay (Manila: OMF Literature, 2013), 32-33; Melba Maggay, *Filipino Religious Consciousness: Some Implications to Missions* (1999; repr., Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 2002), 24.

70 George N. Capaque, "The Trinity in Asian Contexts," in *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue (Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library / Manila: Asia Theological Association, 2019), 67.

71 Gener and Pardue, Introduction to *Asian Christian Theology*, 2.

Evangelicals should evolve beyond their otherworldly spirituality. The idea that the Good News of salvation is only focused on purely the spiritual realm ignores the importance of the environment, the human body, and other pressing matters that pertain to our existential struggles (issues in the here and now in this space and time).⁷²

Actualism tells us that humans are situated in a particular context. Jesus's incarnation affirms that. As Filipino-American theologian Justin Ariel Bailey remarked: "[E]very human culture is capable of 'hosting' the gospel... the gospel calls every human culture to repentance and the obedience of faith (Acts 17:30, Rm 1:5). It confronts every culture with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, a revelation that comes from the outside with a message we could not have told ourselves..."⁷³ Thus, culture can serve as a good interlocutor of theologizing. I have pointed out that actualism entails that we, as God's covenant partners, need to witness. Such an endeavor implies the importance of knowing our situatedness and the spirit of our time. Therefore, reading cultures is essential as we follow Jesus's command to disciple. Ministering to people of different cultures necessitates understanding their situatedness, which is complex. As people of faith, we are situated in our local cultures. As such, we communicate the good news of Jesus Christ prophetically to our contexts full of existential concerns. We are challenged not just by reading and understanding our cultures but also by engaging religious, social, cultural, and political issues.⁷⁴ Put another way, our theology "must also respond to the actual challenges of the situation where the church finds itself. In Asia, as a whole, the church is challenged to engage in a triple dialogue with the majority poor, with the diversity of cultures, and with the different religions."⁷⁵

72 Aldrin M. Peñamora, "Kapwa Ethics: Christ-Centered Ethics of Responsibility towards the Earth, Our Neighbor," in *Why, O God? Disaster, Resiliency, and the People of God*, ed. Athena E. Gorospe, Charles Ringma, and Karen Hollenbeck-Wuest (Manila: OMF Literature, Inc., 2017), 128.

73 Justin Ariel Bailey, *Interpreting Your World: Five Lenses for Engaging Theology and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 36, 37.

74 Melba Padilla Maggay, "The Task of Contextualization: Issues in Reading, Appropriating, and Transmitting the Faith," in *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Issues through Asian Eyes*, ed. Melba Padilla Maggay (Manila: OMF Literature Inc., 2013), 7.

75 José de Mesa, *José de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila: De La Salle University Publishing House, 2016), 141.

The church is an event because it is charged to proclaim and serve as a witness to the living God.⁷⁶ He does not call us Christians to stay within our worship halls. As I discussed above, actualism challenges us to respond to his revelation, and part of that is addressing our existential struggles. Looking at the situation of the Philippines, Christians need to engage the spirits of our time and pressing concerns. Things might have been different if our country had been more affluent, like those developed nations in which poverty is less apparent. However, Filipino Christians are summoned to live as disciples in a context in which people's stomachs are empty, and justice seems on the side of the powers that be.⁷⁷ Barth modeled this by engaging academia, the church, prisons, and political challenges of his time. One excellent example of his contextualized theology is *The Barmen Declaration*.⁷⁸

Barth did not dichotomize theology and practical ministry. He avoided the extreme dichotomy between prayer and study, theory and practice, life and knowledge.⁷⁹ In Southeast Asia, it is expected that seminary teachers should also serve in the church. Barth then could be an ally since he lived as a pastor-theologian. From 1921 to 1925, he taught Reformed Confession and other courses. Reflecting on his transition from pastoral work to academic teaching, he announced in a letter:

I wanted to become a pastor and was so for twelve years, without regarding myself as either called or adapted to the office of academic scholarship and teaching.... By accepting this, I was led to a new and more basic study of the reformers and to controversy in principle with Schleiermacher and the modern theology determined either directly or indirectly by him. I then traversed many a complicated path in Göttingen, Münster, and Bonn

76 See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV, part 3, second half, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 614-616.

77 Melba Padilla Maggay, *Transforming Society* (Quezon City, Philippines: Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1996), 2.

78 "The-Barmen-Declaration," <https://www.ekd.de/en/The-Barmen-Declaration-303.htm>.

79 Sangwoo Kim, "Embodied Prayer: The Practice of Prayer as Christian Theology" (ThD diss., Divinity School of Duke University, 2016), 7, https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/12926/Kim_divinity.duke_0066A_10057.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

and received several new impulses through the attentive hearing and questioning of my German students.⁸⁰

I find him an inspiration in not separating pastoral ministry and theology. For example, after his formal theological training, Barth served as an assistant minister in a Reformed Church in Geneva for two years (1909-1911) and a pastor in a village in Safenwil for ten years (1911-1921).⁸¹ His immersion in the rough and tumble of life affected his ministry. The perplexing realities of his cultures, such as the poverty, class divisions, hard labor, and injustice he encountered in Geneva and Safenwil, helped hone his imagination in interpreting the Scriptures. These challenges in life made him reflect on a hope that the theological mood of his time failed to provide. Barth was not indifferent to the issues of his time and context while explaining the concept of actualism.

God's Disclosure and Our Existential Issues

Third, actualism is God's revelation of himself. Therefore, the primary focus in rerooting our faith in Asia is God. Actualism summons us to reject the extreme experiential and cultural approach. I do not deny that cultural issues are important aspects of contextual theologies. Culture is insufficient,⁸² but focusing on propositions as the only means of revelation is also problematic. In theologizing in Southeast Asia, I argue that actualism reminds us not to become captive to culture and, at the same time, to recognize that God is the subject-object (a dialectic perspective) of contextual theologies. We contextualize not to berate Christians in the Minority World or to romanticize culture but to understand God and his revelation as we make our faith relevant to our lived experiences. We do

80 Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, *Karl Barth—Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922-1966*, ed. Bernd Jaspert, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 157-158.

81 Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer, *A Late Friendship: The Letters of Karl Barth and Carl Zuckmayer*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4. For more about Barth's pastoral work, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976), 52-68.

82 On May 7, 1968, Barth wrote to Carl Zuckmayer, "I would gladly concede that *nature* does objectively offer a proof of God, though man overlooks or misunderstands it." Barth and Zuckmayer, *A Late Friendship*, 42.

contextual theology rooted in God's revelation as the triune God. This does not mean that our contextual theologies in Asia should always be deduced from trinitarian doctrine. Rather, our creative work of theology should not be detached from the Trinity and from Jesus Christ, who reveals God to humanity and represents humanity to the Creator.

God has given us culture as a tool to speak of him. Also, just because one draws on culture as an aspect of theologizing does not mean it is syncretism. Lee is correct in his two propositions concerning Barth's encouragement to Asians to do theology in their particular contexts: on the one hand, culture does not determine theology. On the other hand, Barth says "Yes" to contextual theologies and even decoloniality, as Asians need not become Europeans or Americans to become faithful witnesses and theologians of the Word.⁸³ However, as I suggested above, contextual theologies are first and foremost about God who keeps conversing with us.

Arguing that Barth is an excellent interlocutor in discussing contextualization in Southeast Asia is perhaps erroneous to some since, at first glance, he is an unlikely ally in doing contextual theologies. I believe my argument is in line with how Stanley Hauerwas described the "humanism" of Barth. In his book *Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth*, Hauerwas argued that Barth was not only a theologian par excellence but also very human and political. To assert an anthropological center in Barth's theology seems odd, but Hauerwas insisted in his book that Barth's theology is not detached from anthropology. The latter is rooted in the former because it is impossible to understand our "humanism" apart from our relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ.⁸⁴

Barth's concept of actualism shows that he can serve as a potential ally in contextualization and decolonization in Southeast Asia. While he proclaimed that culture cannot imprison God, his theology arose from his engagement with the cultural and historical circumstances in which he found himself.

83 Lee, *Double Particularity*, xi.

84 Stanley Hauerwas, *Fully Alive: The Apocalyptic Humanism of Karl Barth* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2022), 1-4.

CONCLUSION

Why adopt Barth as an interlocutor with our Asian realities? Why bring a European theologian to Southeast Asia, where the “foreignness of Christianity” has been an issue due to colonization (except in Thailand)? Why draw on his theology of the Word, knowing that it is inevitable for Asian Christians to rub their elbows with other religions? To repeat, first, “Karl Barth offers much wisdom and insight for the churches of the majority world and for these ethnic churches, even though he is often seen as just a figure in the Western historical tradition.... It would certainly be a mistake to think that constructive wisdom about defining contexts and identities is absent altogether in his work.”⁸⁵ Second, as valid as these questions are, we would do well to understand that in Christianity, our lives are connected. We did not come from out of nowhere. We stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us. To put it differently, the church’s catholicity is vital for engaging with our cultures. We converse and learn from Barth not for his popularity but because we deal with our issues today by listening to the Spirit and learning from Scripture and the church’s saints.⁸⁶ I believe in the importance of cultural sensitivity and catholic sensibility.⁸⁷

I do not insist that Barth should set the agenda for cultural engagement in Southeast Asia. I do not claim that we, Asian Evangelicals, need to agree with all of his conclusions and assertions; rather, we should have the humility to learn from his best theological insights. I assert that he has something to say to the church in Asia and for our cultural engagement. To clarify, this is not about him but about going beyond him and serving as faithful witnesses of God in our Asian contexts. I hope that this work is not Barth *for* Asians but Barth *with* Asians.

85 Lee, *Double Particularity*, xi, 2.

86 John Coutts, *A Shared Mercy: Karl Barth on Forgiveness and the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 2.

87 Francis Jr. S. Samdao, “On the Idea of Contextualization: Cultural Sensitivity and Catholic Sensibility,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 46, no. 1 (2022): 51-61, https://theology.worldidea.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ERT-46-1_digital.pdf. I recommend the latest publication by Stephen Pardue, a theologian who teaches in Asia, Stephen T. Pardue, *Why Evangelical Theology Needs the Global Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023).

To reiterate, diversity is ubiquitous in Southeast Asia. It consists of various peoples, beliefs, cultures, and religions. Therefore, it is respectful to other Asians to state that this is only one way of reading Barth in Asia. For example, David Thang Moe believes that Barth's political theology could serve as a source for renewing the ethnic minority Christians in Myanmar and on how to live as faithful disciples of Christ under the military regime. He also holds that Barth's view of the *imago Dei* is an excellent interlocutor of Asian *yin-yang*.⁸⁸ Also, Quan Li saw the political theology of Barth as a source for addressing issues that Christians are facing in China.⁸⁹ An Asian scholar in a communist country may read Barth differently. An Asian theologian who rubs shoulders with Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims may interpret Barth differently from me. An Asian minister who engages with primal religions may also have another way of appropriating Barth's theology.

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88 David Thang Moe, "Reading Karl Barth in Myanmar: The Significance of His Political Theology for a Public Theology in Myanmar," *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018): 416-439; David Thang Moe, "Contemporary Theology in Asia: Current Challenges and Future Directions," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (2020): 18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021140020906947>.

89 Quan Li, "Karl Barth in Beijing: Towards a Political Ethics of Collective Right in Neoliberal China," *Political Theology* 20, no. 5 (2019): 369-381.