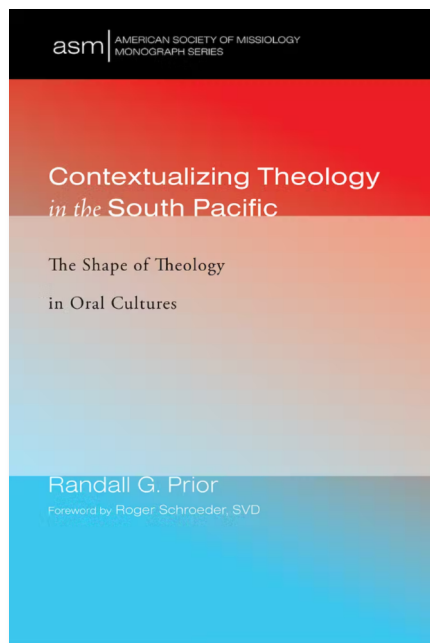


REVIEW: *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures* by Randall G. Prior

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While anthropologists and linguistics still spend considerable time researching Melanesia—the area of the South Pacific encompassing Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia—missiologists have tended to overlook the smaller islands. This makes Prior’s *Contextualizing Theology in the South Pacific: The Shape of Theology in Oral Cultures* a rare and significant project.

Prior’s work charts “The Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu” project within the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu (PCV) beginning around 1998. This project included several consultations for local church leaders to develop contextual theologies for Vanuatu that were later published in five books of

collected essays. The book includes four chapters discussing the influences on the project, one on the project itself, followed by a brief but impassioned conclusion.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide general orientations to the desire and need to contextualise theology, most of which will be familiar to anyone working in the field, but with a welcome focus on Pacific voices. Chapter 3 sharpens this with a comprehensive survey of how Pacific scholars have defined the content and methodology of theology. For those seeking an orientation to Pacific theologizing, this is worth the price of the book alone.

Chapter 4 lays out Prior’s central thesis, which is both common sense and remarkably overlooked: the *mode* of contextualized theology is centrally important.

Three issues in the Pacific context directly speak to this issue of methodology: Orality, the absence of what Prior calls the “Enlightenment paradigm” in the region, and the separation of theological colleges from local church communities. For contextual theology to be properly contextual to the South Pacific, it must be orally produced and anchored in local church communities, experiences, and worldviews.

Chapter 5 examines the “Gospel and Culture in Vanuatu” project itself alongside Prior’s reflections upon each stage of the project. He clearly sees the second stage as the high point, embodying the *oral* and *communal* methodology argued for in the previous chapters. While measured in his language, the third stage was evidently frustrating for Prior, where further contextualization was confined to the faculty of Talua, the Presbyterian theological college (now Talua Theological Training Institute). The proposed fourth stage and the related “Women in Leadership” project are discussed with optimism, which unfortunately has not translated into reality on the ground in Vanuatu.

We should applaud Prior’s attention to a neglected area of the world and to the significant issue of methodology in contextual theology—both of which are necessary and timely correctives. However, there are several areas where his work begs for greater context, nuance, and academic rigor to develop these insights into tools for application in the South Pacific and beyond. Prior’s theological bias appears to motivate the glib dismissal of Ma’afu Palu—a significant figure in Pacific theology—because of his evangelical understanding of Scripture. In his discussion of orality and Pacific paradigms, Prior relies on highly limited, outdated, or anecdotal sources such as his own personal diaries and seminal but hardly contemporary work of Walter Ong. Wider engagement in the extensive literature of orality or the ethnography of Vanuatu could make these central sections much more convincing and useful. Finally, a more realistic perspective on the impact of the project is necessary. Despite its fruitful second stage, the project and its successors are no longer being pursued in Vanuatu, and indeed, even its published legacy was not even found in the Talua Theological Training Institute library until purchased in 2022 by the reviewer.

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