

Editorial

աստվածաբանություն / ﺍﻟﺪﯨﻨﯩﻲ ﺍﻟﻤﯩﻠﻞ / धर्मशास्त्र / Teolojia / اللاهوت / 神学 / thần học

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Published in *Global Missiology*, www.globalmissiology.org, July 2026

So who is “theology” for?

Some readers—like my contextualized, analytical-editorial self—might instinctively react to that question with such grammatically outdated correctives as, “That question should read, ‘For whom does “theology” exist?’ or ‘For whom has the Church theologized?’” Some of us might also want the question to come across in a more “sophisticated” or “educated” manner than its plain, everyday style connotes. “Proper” grammar, “acceptable” sentence formation, and “advanced” vocabularies are important, are they not—including for presenting the Christian gospel, right?

I confess to liking as much as any other English speaker, sentimentally at least, the now archaic rule that Winston Churchill satirized in his alleged witticism, “Ending sentences with prepositions is something up with which I will not put.” I also prefer avoiding split infinitives, in order faithfully to follow (or “to follow faithfully,” not the abundantly more common and now natural-feeling “to faithfully follow”) strictly traditional grammar. Today’s mixing of objective- and subjective-case pronouns in everyday speech, especially the egregious beginning of a sentence by listing multiple subjects that start with the first-person pronoun *me* (“improperly” in the objective case), always draws my attention (not “Me and him” but “He and I!”). I confess to admiring eloquence and colorful imagery in language use, and I often wish I were more impressively expressive in how I spoke and wrote in my native tongue, English, as well as in other languages in which I function.

But back to that opening question: Who is “theology” for?

Remarkably, let’s say providentially in a way that our editorial team did not plan, all the contributions in this July 2026 issue of *Global Missiology* address, in one way or another, that apparently straightforward question. The Hemming-Handley article and three book reviews are about theological training, the nature of theology, the formulators of theology, and the use of theology—all in today’s changing contexts of worldwide Christian growth and ministry. A reframed, expanded form of the opening question encapsulates this issue’s contents: “Given today’s undeniably changing religious landscape, who theologizes for whom?”

The recognition that the Christian faith must deal with changing contexts spurred Martin Kähler’s early-twentieth-century dictum, “Mission is the mother of theology.” As David Bosch explained, Kähler observed that the early Eastern Mediterranean churches, including the New Testament writers, were “*forced* to theologize” because of their “missionary encounter with the world” (Bosch, 1991, p. 16, emphasis original). The New Testament was written in Koine Greek (as the Septuagint had been), and the Spirit-empowered followers of the ascended Jesus in the Hellenistic part of the world largely witnessed in Koine Greek, in order to communicate with the ubiquitous Greek speakers among whom they lived. (The New Testament also records such exceptions as Paul using Aramaic for certain Jewish audiences, e.g., in Jerusalem as recorded in Acts 21-22.) That communication required fresh conceptualizations and articulations, into Greek thought and language, of divine revelation and theology that for generations had been embedded in Hebrew and in Aramaic. An important example was those followers of Jesus who had come to

Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene. Remarkably they preached to the Greeks and not just to Jews, and in so doing they preached Jesus as κύριος (Kurios) of the Roman Empire and of all people, not just the מָשִׁיחַ (Messiah) of Old Covenant Israel (Acts 11:19-20). Early-generation Christians in the Hellenistic world had to “theologize” in Greek to sort matters out for themselves and, arguably more importantly, to enable others around them to understand, articulate, and believe “divine words” about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Of course, early-generation Christians and their acquaintances in other cultural-linguistic worlds, such as Armenian and Syriac (whose equivalent terms for “theology” are the first two listed in this editorial’s title), also had to find terms for understanding, communicating, and processing the Christian gospel. All cross-cultural and cross-generational followers of Jesus, along with others observing and hearing them, have been “forced” to “contextualize,” to “un-scramble and re-scramble,” the Christian faith—Christian “theology”—for themselves (including in Hindi, Swahili, Arabic, Chinese, and Vietnamese; see again the editorial title). As evidenced by the Bible itself having been given in multiple languages and subsequently translated into countless other tongues, Christianity is an infinitely translatable faith. The triune God intends to be understood deeply and personally by all people.

The challenge that this issue’s contributions collectively tackle is that of bridging contextual gaps widened by the recurring, historical tendency of Christian traditions to unduly guard, freeze, and perpetuate particular expressions of “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). That tendency resists God’s intention for all people to understand and trust him and his works in personal, transforming, and culturally appropriate ways. Foreign expressions of that faith—be they from earlier generations, different cultural-linguistic contexts, or both—can serve as barriers to personal, transforming, and culturally “at home” faith. How to deal constructively with “foreign ‘theology’” is the common thread that runs through this issue’s article and book reviews.

On the one hand, what has become a “foreign ‘theology’” for many throughout today’s world is, or at least *was*, a healthy expression of who God is and what he has done. The Hellenistic context within which the New Testament was given, and within which early Eastern Mediterranean Christian communities lived and witnessed, demanded Greek “words” and “studies”—λόγος (logos)—about deity—θεός (theos)—that meshed with Greek conceptual categories. Hebrew and Aramaic had different categories; neither had a separate concept or term equivalent to “theology,” for example. The development of Greek and Greco-Roman “theology” was a contextual necessity birthed from Christian mission, as Kähler, Bosch, and others have observed.

Many Western languages’ indebtedness to Greek and Latin, accompanied by several Western societies’ Greco-Roman conceptual heritage, make the continuing linguistic-intellectual use by much of Western Christianity of “theos-logos” only natural and appropriate. Furthermore, the Church’s fundamental unity and catholicity behoove other, “non-Western” branches of the Church, as well as contemporary so-called “postmodern” and “postsecular” (and otherwise newly shaped) Western Christian communities, to utilize “theology” and its many developments over the many generations since those early Eastern Mediterranean times.

On the other hand, no single expression of the Christian faith—including the “theology” that long ago was birthed within Greco-Roman circles out of missional engagement—should be tenaciously guarded, frozen, or perpetuated in ways that hinder ongoing missional engagement in new and different settings. Christian unity and catholicity are linked with diversity and

particularity. Moreover, the need for new and sometimes corrective expressions of “theology” (as articulated in or translated from English) is made even more acute in today’s historical pivot, at least by Christians and by others in many parts of the world, away from the often assumed, unconscious guardianship and imposition of tradition associated with the widespread cultural presence fostered by British and U.S. economic and military power.

Today’s missional need for fresh theological expressions and personal development is why Hemming and Handley commend to others the kind of competency-based theological education that has recently taken root in Kenya; the academic-only leadership training perpetuated in many Western-based models is insufficient for the kind of church leaders needed in today’s diverse and changing settings. That same need drives Steffen and Neu, as presented by Manokaran, to advocate a “character theology” that emphasizes God’s revelation through people’s lives more than just through concepts. Similarly, Gashute reviews a recent publication of African interpretations of the New Testament, facilitating direct missional engagements between the Scriptures and various African settings. What missional engagement needs in “post-Christendom” societies is an important focus of cultural apologetics, as Bishop explains.

So who is “theology” for? An important qualification at this point is that Hemming and Handley, in advocating holistic, competency-based theological training, do not therefore argue for *replacing* traditional intellectual theological education. They instead appeal for collaboration and mutual strengthening between models. Similarly, Kwame Bediako—perhaps more than any other scholar—championed the fundamental viability and “abiding” importance of everyday, “grassroots,” vernacular, and oral theological understandings and expressions. He thus urged “academic theology to be in touch with, to listen to, to share in, and to learn from, but never to replace” such “spontaneous ... theology which comes from where the faith lives” (Bediako, 2000, p. 17). At the same time, Bediako (including through his own example) did not therefore dismiss the ongoing role of inscribed and published intellectual theologizing. Acknowledging the leading role played by everyday theologians and their communities should not lead to removing stage lighting from those making academic contributions.

In an almost passing comment in his lengthy testimony to King Agrippa and other dignitaries, the Apostle Paul recounted how the risen Jesus had appeared to him: “I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language [τῇ ἑβραϊδὶ διαλεκτῷ], ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?’” (Acts 26:14). Scholars have examined the Greek phrase just listed and have thereby discussed exactly what language Jesus used with Paul, with Aramaic being the typical conclusion. In any case, Paul included his seemingly trivial, linguistic point to convey the monumental reality that the actual, risen Jesus of Nazareth used their shared colloquial, mother-tongue language in speaking personally to the Jewish, Aramaic-fluent Paul of Tarsus. Jesus wanted Paul to understand him, and Paul evangelistically wanted Agrippa to know how personally God interacts with all people (Acts 26:28-29).

“Words about deity,” “study of God and his works,” and equivalent descriptions—whether in societies with a Greco-Roman heritage or in societies whose conceptual-linguistic categories do not resonate as much with intellectualized Greco-Roman “theology”—are for everyone. While the risen Jesus gives spiritual teaching gifts to churches, he does so for all his people—because he “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Tim. 2:4). God orchestrates his world so that all people “should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). God has graciously spoken in the colloquial languages of Hebrew,

Aramaic, and Koine Greek. His Spirit has overseen the Bible's accelerated translations into the world's languages, whether orally or inscribed, so that all might understand and articulate who God is and what he has done, i.e., might "theologize" as followers of Jesus Christ. All human beings "theologize" in the broadest sense, even while articulating "Christian theology" per se is the Church's responsibility. Because "theology" is for everyone, a Christian openness to listen and learn others' thinking and languages should temper any well-intended but tight-fisted clutching and fossilizing of any theological tradition.

So who is "theology" for? "Theology" is for everyone bearing the *imago dei* / צֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים / εἰκόνα του Θεού / Կսմոն պսակկեր / ڪلمن ڪلهي / ईश्वर की छवि / mfano wa Mungu / صورة الله / 神的形象 / hình ảnh của Thiên Chúa. Me and them think so. What about you?

References

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