1. Introduction

Change and constancy have been issues of concern to the church from its origin. The fact that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus almost immediately produced multiple interpretations of his identity and significance points to the intellectual and spiritual dynamism intrinsic to the Christian faith. On the other hand, the capacity of the church to absorb and respond definitively with something like a common mind to an issue not directly encountered in the ministry of Jesus, but contested within the church, was demonstrated in the decision of the Council of Jerusalem regarding the inclusion of Gentiles. In the midst of such dynamism and novelty what constitutes constancy? Although it cuts many historical and theological corners, one answer to this question would point to the nexus between office and ‘sound doctrine’ which is evident in even the later strata of the New Testament and then in the emergence of the episcopacy and its link to apostolic succession. Whilst this latter development is vulnerable to any critique (Marxist, Foucauldian or post-colonial) of the relationship between institution and discourse, the quest for unity across time and place is also no less intrinsic to Christianity than is the intellectual and spiritual dynamism noted above. After all, arguably, the most significant empirical impact of the proclamation of Jesus as Messiah and Lord was the creation of a new kind of human community which discovered a unity across pre-existing and divisive boundaries.

The tension between constancy and change has taken many forms throughout the history of the church. Perhaps the classical and paradigmatic articulation of the tension has been between catholicity and locality. Although less conceptually formal, it has also been articulated as a tension between the past and the present. The tension has also been shaped historically by ancillary discussions about the relationship between tradition and scripture. Another dynamic, has, however, become more conspicuous during recent decades: the tension between the churches of the West and those of the Global South. Here the issue has been not simply one of constancy and change, but of a tension between a certain kind of
uniformity on the one hand a proliferating diversity on the other. This has seen the emergence of yet another binary to formulate this tension: a tension between doctrine and contextual theology. And, moreover, when simultaneously construed as a tension between the West and the Global South the political, economic and ideological dimensions to this tension are inescapable.

Doctrine has always been one of the ecclesial sites of this tension between constancy and change etc. Indeed, to take one reasonably standard definition of doctrine, it becomes apparent why this is so. “Doctrine may…be provisionally defined as communally authoritative teaching essential to the identity of the Christian community”. And here lies the ideological rub: How is something ‘essential’ to ‘identity’ defined and maintained except by the use of power? Here the question of church unity, identity, doctrine and ideological critique collide – often with considerable force. Whether articulated as a tension between constancy and change, catholicity and locality, past and present, uniformity and diversity, or doctrine and contextual theology, the relationship is frequently presented in sharply polemical, either/or terms.

Focusing on the relationship between doctrine and contextual theology, in what follows I will propose that far from being confined to an either/or structure, there are real possibilities for considering a both/and relationship between doctrine and contextual theology. This will involve putting a question to the rhetoric of contextual theology and exploring the ideological critique of unity from both a Indian and a European theologian. I will then draw on some dynamic understandings of doctrine which have emerged from western theologians. I will conclude, not with a new conceptual articulation of the relationship but with an appeal to a cartographical metaphor drawn from Charles Taylor’s notion of the social imaginary.

2. The Rhetoric of Contextual Theology: Some affirmations and a question

The appeal to context in theological discourse serves a number of functions ranging from the descriptive to the polemical. It is descriptive when it merely states, for instance, that “[t]heology is always done from a certain perspective within a particular context”. It is polemical, however, when contextual theology is seen to be a corrective to other forms of theology. Moreover, its corrective force has operated at several levels. Firstly, it has corrected
the lack of historical consciousness which frequently characterised Christian theology prior to the European Enlightenment. In executing this correction, contextual theology has drawn attention to the socially- and culturally-conditioned presuppositions and axioms with which the theologian or theological community works. Secondly, it has sought to challenge the close alliance between theology and the academy characteristic of Western theology from the medieval period onwards. In executing this correction, contextual theology has fostered more populist and transformationist explorations of theology in race-, nation-, class- and gender-specific communities. Thirdly, it has drawn attention to the power relations which have surrounded – and even been embedded in – classical theological discourse.4

Each of these corrective moves must be defended; there is no question that each in its own way was – and often remains – necessary. They represent the abiding achievements of contextual theology and its claims upon classical theological traditions, their practitioners and institutions. There is, however, also a rhetoric attached to contextual theology which problematises any kind of theological unity. Take for instance, the opening words of Stephen Bevans’ Models of Contextual Theology: “There is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextual theology; feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology, Filipino theology, Asian-American theology, African theology, and so forth.”5

The polemical point of Bevans’ claim is fair enough. But is it equally valid as a definitive statement? This question is hardly new. Moltmann’s open letter to Bonino in 1976 remains an important expression of the concern that intentionally contextual theology can deny to Christian discourse the universal scope which at the very least seems to belong to the nature of the gospel and is also the presupposition for speaking across contexts.6 To raise such questions is not at all to gainsay the recognition of the diversity of Christian theology which – no less than its universal scope – belongs to the nature of the gospel. Nevertheless, we cannot say ‘there is no such thing as theology, only theologies’ without raising some fundamental questions about the nature of the Christian community. Indeed, the following remark from Clemens Sedmak brings such questions to the fore – at least implicitly. In defending the idea of local, culturally-specific theologies, Sedmak proposes: “Christian identity is constantly negotiated within local cultures. Christians live within local cultures. They do not live within a Christian culture. There is no such thing.”7 Once again, the polemical point is well taken. But with the rhetorical pitch – and perhaps their substantive claims – both Bevans and Sedmak problematise any concept of theological unity – the usual domain of doctrine.
Yet contextual theologians are not untroubled by this problem. Robert Schreiter, for instance, seeks to counter the charge that contextual theology leads to parochialism: “One must posit a certain commensurability of cultures, in the sense that all cultures may receive the Word of God and be able in some measure to communicate with one another…[or] give up either the universality of salvation given by God in Jesus Christ or the fundamental unity of humankind.” But, notice here that the counter to ecclesiological parochialism is not a theological account of the unity of the church and its theology, but the pre-existing capacity of cultures to communicate with each other. The unity of the church and its theology, however, is something deeper than a capacity of different churches to communicate with each other. It is not so much that they can communicate, but that they are a communion. The issue is at least as much spiritual as it is hermeneutical.

If, as is proclaimed as a central theme of the New Testament, the effect of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is the creation of community which once did not exist, then it is arguable that this should be reflected in our language about culture and context and theology. If in fact, the Christian community is one, then that unity ought to have some theological expression in some level of unity in Christian doctrine. But, if the rhetoric of contextual theology problematizes ecclesial unity, then the very concept of unity and oneness is subject to even wider ideological criticisms. To two such lines of critique I now turn.

3. The problems(s) with unity

Ideological critiques of unity have been sharpened in recent decades by the advent of postcolonial criticism and its application to Christian theology. Y.T. Vinayraj, for instance, points out that: “The logic of ‘Oneness’, whether in its theological or ecclesiological [form] has always been political.” More specifically, Vinayraj develops a postcolonial critique of the nexus of ecclesial unity and divine oneness which lent itself to (and perhaps was produced by) a collusion between church and empire. The ensuing ecclesiology traded on a political ontology of empire. The result: “When the Church becomes a sovereign power of rule and its liturgies become the celebration of the sovereign God, [the] calling of the Church is nullified and reversed. Church as a sovereign power defines its ontology unrelated to the excluded and the marginalised.” This has been historically reinforced by the concept of oneness triumphing over a genuinely Trinitarian understanding of God in the West: “the logic of ‘Oneness’ has always been foundation for the Western theological tradition” and has continually functioned to resist genuine engagement with marginality and manyness. In
response, Vinayraj draws on Atonio Negri’s theory of “Multitude as a radical, anti-imperial political subjectivity that resists subjectivity from within”. He goes on to argue for an ecclesiology of marginality. It is a radical ecclesiology which is itself “a call within the call of the Church to become a ‘weak church’ of the Crucified God.” Necessarily, this requires the deconstruction of the West’s Omni-God and its replacement with God as “relationality, fluidity and multiplicity.” Drawing these threads together he outlines an ecclesiology of Multitude which “does not mean unity and diversity or commonality between units; rather it is a shared solitude – a set of relationship[s] without a single essence.”

Although raising many questions for ecclesiology (and not just the Indian ecclesiology which is his primary concern), of interest for the current discussion is the parallel between Vinayraj’s argument and certain theological critiques of divine oneness developed by European theologians. One specific example is that of Jürgen Moltmann. Like Vinayraj, Moltmann exposes the link between divine unity and the unity of church and empire: “The idea of unity in God therefore provokes both the idea of the universal, unified state: one God – one emperor – one church – one empire.” Unlike Vinayraj, however, Moltmann appeals precisely to the doctrine of the Trinity as the critical lever by which to “vanquish[] the monotheistic notion of the great universal monarch in heaven and his divine patriarchs in the world”. This involves Moltmann developing, in turn, what he regards as the long-neglected doctrine of perichoresis. This does not replace, but reformulates, the unity of God: “The unity of God is to be found in the triunity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It neither precedes that nor follows it.” The ecclesiological – and broader – implications are as follows:

…it is not the monarch of a ruler that corresponds to the triune God; it is the community of men and women, without privileges and with subjugation. The three divine Persons have everything in common except for their personal characteristics. So the Trinity corresponds to a community in which people are defined through their relations with one another and in their significance for one another, not in opposition to one another, in terms of power and possession.

Vinayraj would possibly respond to Moltmann by suggesting that the social doctrine of the Trinity would too easily settle on a politically docile ‘unity-in-diversity’. (Moltmann does give a political reading to this concept of plurality, but it is not clear if that is directly drawn
from the appeal to perichoresis or is an overlay to it.) A longer comparison between these two proposals would be fascinating in its own right. But my point in drawing these two writers into conversation is threefold. Firstly, it is to highlight the ideological utility of the doctrine of God’s unity and its corresponding doctrine of ecclesiological unity. As such, appeal to the unity of the church and the role of doctrine in such an appeal must proceed carefully. Secondly, by highlighting Moltmann’s use of the doctrine of the Trinity (in contrast to Vinayraj’s resistance to it), it is possible to see how doctrinal discourse, rather than simply the object of ideological critique, can itself be a form of ideological critique – of its own assumptions and traditions, of the church, and of society.

But so to understand doctrine requires a more dynamic understanding of doctrine. I will do so in the next section with some admittedly brief references to three doctrinal theologians: Karl Barth, Sarah Coakley and Christine Helmer.

4. The dynamics of doctrine

Karl Barth is not normally associated with an open or dynamic view of doctrine. But actually, according to him, dogmatics (to use his preferred term) “is ready for new insights which no former store of knowledge can really confront on equal terms or finally withstand. Essentially dogmatic method consists in this openness to receive new truth, and only in this”.21 Dogmatics does not structure itself around any “tenet, principle or definition of the essence of Christianity”.22 He repeatedly resists notions of finality, and emphasises act and dynamism over the static and constant:

Doctrine is not identical with any existing text – whether it is that of specific theological formulae, or that of a specific theological system; or that of the Church’s creed, or even the text of the Bible. Pure doctrine is an event. ... It cannot in any sense be thought of as a solution already existing somewhere or other, which can simply be taken over. [Of course] where else can it begin...except with the investigation of the Bible, or the Church’s confession…. But it only begins with this investigation. There is far more to it...than merely the repetition of those texts. … All the conclusions of dogmatics must be intended, accepted and understood as fluid material for further work. 23
This is so because “the content of the Word of God is God’s work and activity, and therefore God’s free grace, which as such escapes our comprehension and control, upon which, reckoning with it in faith, we can only meditate, and for which we can only hope.”

This conviction about God’s freedom, moreover, is not a stand-alone, arbitrary conviction: it is grounded in Barth’s definitive commitment to the Christian confession of God’s radical identification of God in the drama of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The openness of theological work taps deeply into Christian theological convictions; ultimately, it is derived from the freedom of the God of whom it seeks to speak.

Sarah Coakley is not so overtly engaged with ‘doctrinal theology’ as Barth is, but she is committed to the task of systematic theology which of course is inescapably linked with doctrinal discourse. She is also a committed feminist and is deeply alert to the hegemonic, rationalist and patriarchal dimensions of the quest for totality and unity which is associated with the systematic and doctrinal task. Yet Coakley accepts the quest for totality, and she does so for moral reasons. She pursues what she calls a théologie totale, but this pursuit is set beside “the purgative contemplative practice of silence as its undergirding point of reference”. There are two points to make about this.

First, for Coakley contemplation is an activity that opens the theologian to modes of knowledge other than the rational and cognitive, and precisely as such becomes a tool of ‘unmastery’ — that is, a tool which subverts the tendency to control with which being ‘systematic’ or ‘doctrinal’ is so often allied.

The very act of contemplation — repeated, lived, embodied, suffered — is an act that, by grace, and over time, precisely inculcates mental patterns of un-mastery, welcomes the dark realm of the unconscious, opens up a radical attention to the other, and instigates an acute awareness of the messy entanglement of [human] desires and desires for God.

Secondly, far from the quest for totality — with all its risks of hegemony — rendering doctrine problematic, in Coakley’s hands it becomes the very basis for widening the field of theological enquiry exactly in ways that subvert those false totalities and premature closures often associated with doctrine. In short: attention to the non-rational leads back to the systematic insistence on totality. The descriptor, totale, functions as
an attempt to do justice to every level and type, or religious apprehension and its appropriate mode of expression. Thus it is devoted precisely to the excavation and evaluation of what has previously been neglected: to theological fieldwork…; to religious cultural productions of the arts and the imagination; to neglected or sidelined texts; and to the examination of the differences made to theology by such factors as gender, class, or race… In short, théologie totale makes the bold claim that the more systematic one’s intentions, the more necessary the exploration of such dark and neglected corners; and that precisely as a theology in via, théologie totale continually risks destabilisation and redirection.29

In her recent work, The End of Doctrine, Christine Helmer contributes to debates about the nature of doctrine sparked by the advent of postliberal theology in the 1980s. Helmer directly confronts the concern of many doctrinal theologians that acknowledging the social production of doctrine (understood as communally-agreed authoritative) is a surrender to the reductionism of social constructivism. Helmer insists what is an undeniable reality, i.e., that there is no ecclesial doctrine which is not socially produced. It always involves conversation and dispute. She further argues that this in no way diminishes its truth-claiming status or functions. This in turn requires a more historically-oriented understanding of truth.

[T]ruth is not diminished when it is understood in historical interpretation(s). Rather, being attuned to the historical brings truth into the medium of human intersubjectivity, where disagreement and explication, competing perspectives and various proposals – all are part of the process of its formulation. … [D]octrine exists – has always existed – in production, negotiated in discussion and debates. 30 …

This brief engagement with three doctrinal theologians invites much more exploration of their views and respective theological and philosophical backgrounds than can be carried out here. Yet for the purposes of this essay, they demonstrate that doctrinal construction can be understood as a dynamic, open, and even contemplative practice. It also suggests that there might be greater overlaps between the discourses of doctrinal and contextual theology. In the next and concluding section I will explore how these overlaps might help address the question of the doctrinal articulation of the unity of the global church.

5. Doctrine, Context, Unity and the Church’s Social Imaginary
The concept of the social imaginary has been developed in a number of disciplines, but I
draw here on Charles Taylor’s development of it in the historical analysis of modern political
theory in his *Modern Social Imaginaries*.\(^{31}\) According to Taylor the idea of the social
imaginary refers to the “ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together
with others, how things go between them and their fellows”;\(^{32}\) it is what is “carried in images,
stories and legends”.\(^{33}\) It is not, however, abstract social theory. The social imaginary entails
a more existential dimension by which it provides an implicit, “largely unstructured and
inarticulate understanding of our whole situation, within which particular features of our
world show up for us in the sense they have”.\(^{34}\) In summary:

Our social imaginary…incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of
each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the
collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how
we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. Such understanding is both
factual and normative; that is, we have an idea of how they ought to go, of what
missteps would invalidate the practice.\(^{35}\)

In performing this implicit, inarticulate function, it does nevertheless relate to more technical
and explicit social theory in a way analogous to the way “my ability to get around a familiar
environment stands to a ‘literal’ map of this area. I am very well able to orient myself without
ever having adopted the standpoint of overview the map offers me”.\(^{36}\) Yet, there will be
occasions when changes in the environment, such as the closure of familiar roads or the
building of new ones, or flood or fire damage, necessitate access to some literal map. Indeed,
when those changes are permanent, new maps will need to be drawn and absorbed.

I suggest that with this idea of the social imaginary and Taylor’s analogy of the map, it is
possible to understand both doctrinal theologians and contextual theologians as different
kinds of cartographers. Social imaginaries are always developing and they develop in
different ways under different pressures. As they do so their implicit maps also change. For
this reason, the work of the social cartographer is also continually developing. To extend the
analogy: new territories are discovered, mistakes in previous maps are discovered, physical
changes occur in the terrain, water bodies dry up and rivers change direction. Yet, there is
always a physical reality beckoning the work of the cartographers. Concerned with the role of
doctrine in the unity of the church, doctrinal theologians will have an inclination to keep the
whole map in mind – not in order to keep it static, but to explore the way local discoveries impact on the overall map. Contextual theologians will insist on attention to the detail of particular places and demand that any enthusiasm or fascination with the beauty or grandeur of the whole map do not gloss over or suppress the particular points that might render the map more uneven, less manageable or less easily negotiated.

Ultimately, this analogy can only be drawn so far. But it is one way of understanding the relationship between constancy and change in the church as that is modulated through the relationship between doctrine and contextual theology. It allows some possibilities for understanding these two discourses not in an either/or relationship, but a relationship of both/and.

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1 The origin of this paper lies in an earlier and more exploratory version which I presented first to the postgraduate community at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary and then the MTh theology cohort at the United Theological College, Bangalore in January and February respectively of 2017. This final form develops some themes not explored in the public presentations and also reflects research and conversations in which I was able to engage at both Institutions. I am grateful for the opportunity generously provided to present at both colleges and for the questions and feedback received from both groups of students.


4 For a brief overview of the history of the emergence of contextual theology and some of the critical debates which have accompanied that emergence see Paul Duane Matheny, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 1-42.

5 Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 3. For the purposes of this article I will note only in passing an often unacknowledged assumption within such approaches to contextual theology. Such broad-brush claims to context (e.g. Filipino, African, etc.,) obscure that the interpretation of any context is itself always contestable. As Kathryn Tanner points out appeals to the constancy or stability of tradition or culture – be they Christian or other – can often “hide the fact of cultural conflict in one and the same historical circumstance”. Her point is that the resistance to hermeneutical naivety in relation to scripture and tradition must be extended to the interpretation of culture itself: contemporaneity with a culture makes it no more hermeneutically transparent than historical remoteness makes an ancient
biblical text hermeneutically opaque. See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 135.

6 See Jürgen Moltmann, “An Open Letter to José Miguez Bonino,” in *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (March 1976): 57-63. Note especially this call for mutual-accountability between different parts of the church: “[T]he destruction of European theological imperialism should not lead to the provincialization of theology. If that were to happen, we in Europe would be able to abandon the rest of the world and Christianity as a whole and occupy ourselves with our own concerns and traditions” (57).

7 Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology*, 80.


9 Classically expressed in 1 Cor 1:11-22; Gal 3:26-29ff; Eph 2:11-22.


13 Vinayraj, “Ecclesiology with (out) Margins”, 84.


15 Vinayraj, “Ecclesiology with (out) Margins”, 89.


21 *CD* I/2, 867.

22 *CD* I/2, 866.

23 *CD*, I/2, 768f.

24 Barth, *CD* I/2, 868.

25 For Barth’s definitive and much-quoted statement on the identification of ‘God’ with the drama of the incarnation see *CD* IV/1, 186.

26 Indeed, the notion of doctrine as ‘event’ corresponds to the reality of God as event: “To its very deepest depths God’s Godhead consists in the fact that it is an event – not any event, not events in general but the event of His action, in which we have a share in God’s revelation” (*CD* II/1, 263).


28 Coakley, “Is there a Future?”, 5.


30 Christine Helmer, *Theology and the End of Doctrine* (Louisville: WJKP, 2014), 167f


