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Methodological Expansion in Tribal Theology: Toward a Transcontextual Methodology for Contemporary Tribal Realities in Northeast India

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Abstract

Methodological discussions within tribal theology have traditionally focused on articulating Christian faith through indigenous worldviews, communal consciousness, oral traditions, and cultural memory. These contributions have been indispensable in affirming the theological agency of tribal communities and challenging the dominance of externally imposed theological frameworks. However, the social realities within which tribal theology originally emerged have undergone significant transformation. Contemporary tribal communities in Northeast India increasingly inhabit environments shaped by migration, urbanization, globalization, digital technologies, educational mobility, and multiple forms of social belonging. Such developments have complicated earlier assumptions regarding the relationship between community, culture, identity, and theological reflection.

This article examines the methodological adequacy of existing tribal theological approaches in light of these changing realities. Employing a constructive theological methodology and engaging insights from contextual theology, postcolonial studies, sociology, anthropology, and media studies, it argues that contemporary tribal realities require a methodological expansion rather than a rejection of tribal theology. In response, the study proposes ‘Transcontextual Theology’ as a methodological framework within the broader tradition of contextual theology. Transcontextual Theology is defined as a theological methodology that interprets Christian faith through the critical discernment of multiple, overlapping, and interacting contexts while remaining normatively grounded in Scripture. By bringing tribal theology into dialogue with intercultural, comparative, and postcolonial theological approaches, the article demonstrates the need for theological methodologies capable of engaging increasingly interconnected realities. It concludes that the future vitality of tribal theology depends not only on preserving its foundational insights but also on developing interpretive frameworks capable of addressing the complex and dynamic conditions of contemporary tribal existence.

Keywords

Tribal Theology; Transcontextual Theology; Contextual Theology; Indigenous Theology; Northeast India; Hybrid Identity.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of tribal theology in Northeast India marked a significant development in the history of contextual theology. Rejecting the assumption that Christian faith must be interpreted primarily through imported theological categories, tribal theologians sought to articulate the gospel through indigenous worldviews, communal traditions, oral narratives, and cultural memory. In doing so, they affirmed tribal communities not merely as recipients of theology

but as active participants in theological reflection. Tribal theology therefore represented a theological and epistemological shift, challenging inherited forms of theological dependence and recovering indigenous agency within Christian discourse.

The significance of this contribution remains unquestionable. Yet the contexts within which tribal theology initially emerged have changed considerably. Contemporary tribal communities increasingly participate in realities shaped by migration, urbanization, educational mobility, globalization, digital communication, and translocal networks of belonging. These developments do not diminish the value of tribal theology. Rather, they raise an important methodological question: Can theological methodologies developed within relatively stable contextual frameworks adequately address contemporary realities characterized by overlapping and interacting contexts? If theology seeks to interpret Christian faith within lived experience, then it must account for the increasingly complex environments in which such experiences are formed.

This article argues that contemporary tribal realities require a methodological expansion of contextual theology. In response, the article proposes Transcontextual Theology as a constructive methodological framework capable of engaging the interaction of multiple social, cultural, digital, economic, political, and ecclesial realities while remaining normatively grounded in Scripture. Rather than replacing tribal theology, Transcontextual Theology seeks to extend its methodological horizon and strengthen its capacity to engage the realities of the twenty-first century.

2. Tribal Theology and Its Methodological Foundations

2.1 Emergence of Tribal Theology

The emergence of tribal theology in Northeast India must be understood within the broader development of contextual theology during the latter half of the twentieth century. It arose from a growing dissatisfaction with theological approaches that relied heavily upon Western philosophical categories and often failed to engage the cultural realities of indigenous communities. Tribal theologians argued that Christian faith could not be meaningfully communicated unless it entered into dialogue with the worldview, traditions, experiences, and social structures of tribal peoples.¹

Contextual theologians such as Stephen B. Bevans and Robert J. Schreiter demonstrated that all theology is shaped by particular historical and cultural situations.² Tribal theology emerged as a regional expression of this broader theological development, seeking to interpret the gospel through indigenous categories rather than imported conceptual frameworks. The movement also represented a significant epistemological shift. Rather than treating tribal cultures merely

1 · Renty Keitzer, *In Search of a Relevant Gospel Message: Introducing a Contextual Christian Theology for North East India* (CLC, 1995), 1–5.

2 · Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Orbis Books, 2002), 3–17; Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 1985), 1–20.

as objects of evangelization, tribal theologians recognized them as legitimate sources for theological reflection. Indigenous knowledge systems, oral traditions, myths, symbols, rituals, and communal experiences were increasingly viewed as theological resources capable of illuminating Christian faith.³ Consequently, tribal theology contributed not only to contextual theology but also to wider efforts aimed at decolonizing theological discourse and recovering indigenous theological agency.

2.2 Major Contributors to Tribal Theology

Among the earliest and most influential voices in tribal theology was Renthly Keitzer. His work emphasized the necessity of contextualization and argued that theology in Northeast India must emerge from the lived experiences and cultural realities of tribal communities. Keitzer maintained that theological reflection should engage indigenous worldviews, oral traditions, and communal memory rather than relying exclusively upon imported theological categories. K. Thanzauva further developed tribal theology by emphasizing community as the primary context of theological reflection. For Thanzauva, tribal societies understand personhood relationally rather than individualistically. Human existence is experienced through networks of kinship, mutual responsibility, and communal belonging. Consequently, theology cannot be detached from the communal structures through which people understand themselves and their relationship with God.⁴ His work remains important because it demonstrated how tribal concepts of community could contribute to broader theological discussions concerning ecclesiology and Christian social ethics.

A major methodological expansion occurred through the writings of A. Wati Longchar. Longchar argued that tribal theology must engage not only culture and community but also ecology, land, and relationality. He observed that many tribal worldviews perceive reality as an interconnected whole in which human beings, nature, community, ancestors, and the divine exist within networks of mutual relationship.⁵ This holistic perspective challenged dualistic theological frameworks that separate spiritual concerns from social and ecological realities. Longchar's contribution significantly broadened the scope of tribal theology and positioned it within wider conversations concerning indigenous theology and ecological justice.

Subsequent scholars continued to enrich the field. Yangkahao Vashum explored Christology from a tribal-indigenous perspective, demonstrating how tribal experiences could contribute to contemporary understandings of Jesus Christ.⁶ Shimreingam Shimray engaged issues of conflict transformation and peace building, showing that tribal theology possesses important implications for public theology and social reconciliation.⁷ Lovely Awomi James examined the

3 · Renthly Keitzer, "Hermeneutic in Primal Vision Vis-à-vis Hermeneutic in Christian Tradition," *Gurukul Journal of Theological Studies* 5 (1994): 81–89.

4 · K. Thanzauva, *Theology of Community: Tribal Theology in the Making* (Mizo Theological Conference, 1997), 104–112.

5 · A. Wati Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology: Tribal Theology-Issues, Method and Perspective* (Tribal Study Centre, 2000), 62.

6 · Yangkahao Vashum, *Christology in Context: A Tribal-Indigenous Appraisal of North East India* (Christian World Imprints, 2017), 90–125.

7 · Shimreingam L. Shimray, *Negotiating Peace: A Theological Approach to Conflict Resolution* (ISPCK, 2018), 44–71.

relationship between tribal worldview and Christian faith, while M. Maisuangdibou and others contributed to discussions concerning indigenous epistemology and theological methodology.⁸ Collectively, these scholars demonstrate that tribal theology is neither static nor narrowly cultural; rather, it remains a dynamic theological tradition capable of addressing a wide range of ecclesial and social concerns.

3. Contemporary Tribal Realities and the Need for Methodological Expansion

The enduring significance of tribal theology lies in its ability to interpret Christian faith within the lived realities of indigenous communities. However, theology exists within history, and historical realities are never static. While the foundational insights of tribal theology remain indispensable, the social conditions within which contemporary tribal communities live have undergone significant transformation. Emerging translocal realities and changing patterns of identity formation have created realities that differ considerably from those that shaped earlier theological formulations. The challenge facing tribal theology today is therefore not whether its foundations remain valuable, but whether its methodological framework is sufficiently equipped to engage the complexity of contemporary tribal existence.⁹

3.1 Migration, Mobility, and Social Transformation

One of the most visible transformations within tribal societies is the increasing movement of people across geographical, cultural, and social boundaries. Earlier tribal communities were largely organized around relatively stable village structures where social relationships, cultural practices, and communal identities were maintained within localized settings. In contrast, contemporary tribal life is increasingly characterized by mobility. Educational opportunities, employment prospects, economic pressures, and professional aspirations have contributed to large-scale migration both within and beyond Northeast India.¹⁰

Thousands of tribal youth now pursue higher education in metropolitan centers such as Delhi, Bengaluru, Pune, Kolkata, Guwahati, and Shillong. Others migrate for employment to major Indian cities or overseas. As a result, many tribal Christians now inhabit social environments marked by cultural diversity, linguistic plurality, religious complexity, and competing systems of value. Their daily experiences are shaped not only by indigenous traditions but also by urban institutions, professional cultures, national discourses, and global influences.¹¹ Theology must therefore account for realities in which belonging is no longer confined to a single geographical or cultural location.

8 · Lovely Awomi James, *Tribal Theology: Reviewing the Naga Traditional Worldview* (Christian World Imprints, 2017), 40–65; M. Maisuangdibou and Kailadbou Daimai, “Tribal Epistemology, Methodology and Theology,” *Journal of Tribal Studies* 27, no. 1 (2022): 1–12

9 · Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 1985), 5–16; Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. ed. (Orbis Books, 2002), 15–21.

10 · Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India, *Census of India 2011: Migration Tables D-03* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2011), 12–18.

11 · Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope* (ISPCK, 2000), 55.

3.2 Digitalization and Religious Formation

The rapid expansion of digital technologies represents another major transformation affecting contemporary tribal societies. The emergence of social media platforms, digital communication networks, online worship services, podcasts, YouTube ministries, and virtual communities has altered the ways individuals access information, form relationships, and engage religious life. Digital technologies increasingly function as important sites of identity formation and theological learning.¹²

These developments are increasingly evident among the tribal communities in Northeast India, particularly among the younger generation whose religious formation now occurs through both local church structures and digital networks. Heidi Campbell observes that digital religion has created new patterns of religious participation that challenge traditional assumptions concerning authority, community, and religious practice.¹³ Contemporary believers often encounter theological ideas through global digital networks rather than exclusively through local congregations or denominational institutions. Consequently, theological understanding is shaped by interactions that transcend geographical and ecclesial boundaries. For tribal communities, digitalization presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, digital media facilitates the preservation of indigenous languages, traditions, oral histories, and cultural knowledge. It enables communication among dispersed communities and expands access to educational and theological resources. On the other hand, digital environments expose individuals to competing worldviews, fragmented sources of authority, misinformation, consumer culture, and rapidly changing social narratives.¹⁴ Theological reflection can no longer focus solely upon local cultural realities; it must also engage the digital spaces through which contemporary identities and beliefs are increasingly formed.

3.3 Globalization and Cultural Change

The effects of globalization have further intensified the interconnectedness of contemporary life. While tribal communities have long interacted with external cultural influences, contemporary globalization operates with unprecedented speed and reach. Global media, economic systems, educational structures, technological innovations, and political discourses increasingly shape local realities.¹⁵ Anthony Giddens defines globalization as the intensification of worldwide social relations through which local events are influenced by distant occurrences and vice versa.¹⁶ Similarly, Manuel Castells describes contemporary society as a networked social order characterized by interconnected flows of information, culture, and power.¹⁷ These observations are particularly relevant to contemporary tribal communities, whose experiences are increasingly shaped by forces extending beyond local and regional boundaries.

12 · Heidi A. Campbell, *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds* (Routledge, 2013), 5-7.

13 · Campbell, *Digital Religion*, 7-9

14 · Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 359.

15 · M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake* (WCC Publications, 1987), 24-25.

16 · Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 64-66.

17 · Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 23-25.

Theological questions concerning identity, morality, economics, ecology, justice, and community are now influenced by realities that transcend traditional cultural settings. Decisions made in global economic centers, technological innovations developed elsewhere, and cultural narratives circulating through international media increasingly affect local experiences. Theology must therefore engage not only local contexts but also the wider systems within which those contexts are embedded.¹⁸

3.4 Hybrid Identity and Multiple Belonging

The combined effects of migration, digitalization, and globalization have contributed to increasingly complex forms of identity formation. Contemporary tribal individuals frequently negotiate multiple forms of belonging simultaneously. A person may identify as tribal, Christian, Indian, professional, urban resident, digital participant, and global citizen at the same time. These identities do not necessarily exist in opposition to one another; rather, they intersect and interact in dynamic ways.¹⁹ Postcolonial scholars have emphasized that identity is rarely fixed, singular, or culturally isolated. Kwok Pui-lan argues that contemporary identities are often hybrid, emerging through ongoing interactions among multiple cultural, social, and historical influences.²⁰ Such observations are particularly relevant for younger generations of tribal Christians whose experiences differ significantly from those of earlier generations.

This development presents an important methodological challenge. Earlier contextual approaches frequently operated on the assumption that a primary cultural context could be identified as the principal location of theological reflection. Contemporary realities suggest that theological questions increasingly emerge from the interaction of multiple contexts rather than from a single social environment. Questions concerning vocation, discipleship, authority, community, ethics, and belonging are now shaped by overlapping realities that cannot be adequately understood through a singular contextual lens.²¹

3.5 The Methodological Challenge

Much tribal theological reflection developed within contexts where culture, community, and identity possessed relatively stable points of reference. Contemporary experiences increasingly challenge such assumptions. Individuals move between multiple social environments, participate in diverse networks of belonging, and encounter competing sources of meaning and authority. As a result, the relationship between context and theological reflection has become more complex than earlier models anticipated.²² The issue, therefore, is not whether theology should remain contextual. The issue concerns how contextual theology should respond when contexts themselves become fluid, interconnected, and overlapping. If theology seeks to interpret Christian faith within lived realities, then theological methodology must account for

18 · K. C. Abraham, *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Orbis Books, 1990), 88-94.

19 · Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 90-92.

20 · Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 91-94.

21 · R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247-252.

22 · A. Wati Longchar, *Doing Theology from a Tribal Perspective* (Eastern Theological College, 1999), 52-57.

the multiplicity of influences that increasingly shape contemporary existence.

This methodological challenge forms the basis for the proposal developed in the following sections. The argument advanced here is that contemporary tribal realities require not the abandonment of contextual theology but its methodological expansion. Such an expansion must enable theology to engage the interaction of multiple contexts while remaining grounded in the normative sources of Christian faith. It is within this framework that the proposal of Transcontextual Theology emerges.

4. From Contextual Theology to Transcontextual Theology

The proposal of Transcontextual Theology emerges not from dissatisfaction with contextual theology but from recognition that contemporary realities require further methodological development. The fundamental insight of contextual theology, that theology is always shaped by historical, cultural, social, and political realities remains indispensable. Indeed, without the contributions of contextual theology, neither tribal theology nor other indigenous theological movements would have emerged. The present proposal therefore seeks continuity rather than discontinuity with the contextual theological tradition.²³

4.1 Contextual Theology Revisited

Contextual theology arose as a critique of theological universalism that often treated Western theological formulations as normative for all cultures and historical situations. By emphasizing the importance of context, theologians such as Stephen Bevans, Robert Schreiter, Gustavo Gutiérrez, and C. S. Song demonstrated that Christian faith must always be interpreted within concrete human realities.²⁴ Theology is not produced in a cultural vacuum but emerges through an ongoing dialogue between the Christian tradition and the lived experiences of particular communities. This insight transformed global theological discourse. Liberation theology emphasized the context of economic oppression; Black theology highlighted racial injustice; feminist theology exposed patriarchal structures; Dalit theology interpreted Christian faith through the experiences of caste oppression; Minjung theology reflected the struggles of marginalized Korean communities; and tribal theology articulated faith through indigenous worldviews and communal life.²⁵ Each of these movements demonstrated that theology becomes meaningful when it engages the realities of the people it seeks to serve. While these approaches remain valuable, contemporary realities increasingly reveal that individuals rarely inhabit a single context in isolation.

4.2 The Multiplication of Contexts

The contemporary world is characterized by unprecedented levels of interconnectedness.

²³ · Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 17-19.

²⁴ · Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 1985), 1-22; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1973), xi-xxxiv.

²⁵ · James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Lippincott, 1970); A. P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," *Voices from the Third World* 10, no. 2 (1987): 148-157; C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology* (Orbis Books, 1979).

Identity formation increasingly occurs at the intersection of numerous influences rather than within a singular cultural environment. For example, a tribal Christian student from Nagaland studying in Delhi may remain deeply connected to village traditions, tribal identity, denominational heritage, family networks, and indigenous cultural values. At the same time, that individual may participate in urban educational institutions, national political conversations, digital communities, global media cultures, and professional networks. These realities do not exist independently; they interact continuously and shape one another.²⁶ Theology must therefore address not merely contexts themselves but the relationships among contexts.

4.3 Defining Transcontextual Theology

The central argument of this article is that contemporary tribal realities require a theological methodology capable of engaging multiple and interacting contexts. In response to this challenge, this study proposes the concept of Transcontextual Theology. Transcontextual Theology may be defined as:

A theological methodology that interprets Christian faith through the critical discernment of multiple, overlapping, and interacting contexts while remaining normatively grounded in Scripture.

This definition contains three foundational affirmations. *First*, theology remains contextual. Transcontextual Theology does not reject the contextual insight that all theological reflection occurs within particular historical realities. Rather, it affirms that theology is always contextual while recognizing that contemporary contexts are increasingly complex and interconnected. *Second*, contemporary experience frequently involves multiple contexts simultaneously. Human beings increasingly inhabit diverse social, cultural, technological, political, economic, and religious environments that influence one another. Theology must therefore engage not only individual contexts but also their interactions.²⁷ *Third*, theological authority remains grounded in Scripture. Contexts shape theological questions, but they do not determine theological truth. The role of context is interpretive rather than normative.²⁸ Transcontextual Theology should therefore be understood as a methodological expansion of contextual theology rather than a replacement for it.

4.4 The Meaning of the Prefix “Trans”

The term *trans* derives from the Latin prefix meaning “across,” “through,” or “beyond.” In this proposal, the prefix does not imply movement beyond context in the sense of becoming context-free. Such an interpretation would undermine one of the most important insights of contemporary theology. Rather, *trans* refers to movement across and through multiple contexts. It signifies the recognition that contemporary realities are increasingly constituted by interactions among diverse social worlds. Theological reflection must therefore engage these

²⁶ · Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, 64–78.

²⁷ · Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology*, vol. 1 (IVP Academic, 2016), 76.

²⁸ · David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order* (University of Chicago Press, 1975), 45–56.

intersections rather than focusing exclusively upon isolated contextual locations.²⁹ The prefix *trans* thus signifies contextual interaction rather than contextual abandonment. It emphasizes movement between contexts while maintaining continuity with the contextual theological tradition.

5. Dialogue with Contemporary Contextual Approaches

The proposal of Transcontextual Theology does not emerge in isolation. Contemporary theology has produced numerous approaches that seek to engage cultural diversity, globalization, postcolonial realities, and intercultural encounters. Any new methodological proposal must therefore be situated within these broader conversations. This section places Transcontextual Theology in dialogue with several influential approaches in order to clarify both its areas of convergence and its distinctive contribution.

5.1 Intercultural Theology

Intercultural theology emerged from the recognition that Christianity has become a genuinely global faith expressed through diverse cultural traditions. Rather than privileging a single cultural expression of Christianity, intercultural theologians advocate dialogue, mutual learning, and reciprocal theological exchange among Christian communities. Theo Sundermeier, Volker Küster, and Henning Wrogemann have been particularly influential in developing this perspective.³⁰ The central contribution of intercultural theology lies in its challenge to theological monoculturalism. It recognizes that no culture possesses a monopoly on theological truth and that the global church is enriched through encounters among diverse cultural traditions. Intercultural theology therefore encourages openness, hospitality, and theological learning across cultural boundaries.³¹

Transcontextual Theology shares this commitment to plurality and dialogue. Both approaches reject theological exclusivism and affirm the importance of learning from diverse experiences. However, their primary concerns differ. Intercultural theology focuses principally upon relationships between cultures and the theological insights that emerge through intercultural encounters. Transcontextual Theology, by contrast, focuses upon the interaction of multiple contexts operating simultaneously within particular persons and communities. Its concern is not merely cultural diversity but contextual convergence. The question is not only how cultures interact with one another but how cultural, digital, economic, political, educational, ecclesial, and technological realities collectively shape theological experience.³² Consequently, while intercultural theology provides an important foundation for understanding cultural plurality, Transcontextual Theology extends the discussion by examining how multiple forms of contextual influence intersect within contemporary life.

29 · Theo Sundermeier, *The Stranger in God's World* (SCM Press, 2005), 26–28.

30 · Sundermeier, *The Stranger in God's World*, 25–38; Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ* (Orbis Books, 2001), 1–22; Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology*, vol. 1 (IVP Academic, 2016), 43–89.

31 · Wrogemann, *Intercultural Theology*, 78–80.

32 · Sundermeier, *The Stranger in God's World*, 32–33.

5.2 Comparative Theology

Comparative theology represents another important methodological development within contemporary theology. Closely associated with Francis X. Clooney, comparative theology encourages sustained engagement with religious traditions other than one's own. Through deep learning across religious boundaries, theologians seek to enrich their understanding of their own faith while remaining committed to their religious tradition.³³ The significance of comparative theology lies in its emphasis on intellectual humility and theological learning. Rather than approaching other traditions primarily as objects of critique, comparative theology invites careful listening and constructive engagement. Such encounters often lead to deeper self-understanding and renewed theological insight.³⁴

Transcontextual Theology appreciates this commitment to dialogue and learning. Nevertheless, its primary concern differs substantially from that of comparative theology. Comparative theology focuses upon encounters between religious traditions, whereas Transcontextual Theology addresses the methodological challenges arising from multiple social contexts within contemporary life. Its concern is not primarily interreligious comparison but the interpretation of Christian faith amid overlapping cultural, social, technological, economic, and political realities.³⁵ Therefore, while comparative theology expands theological understanding through interreligious engagement, Transcontextual Theology seeks to expand contextual theology through engagement with contextual complexity.

5.3 Postcolonial Theology: R. S. Sugirtharajah and Musa Dube

Among contemporary theological movements, postcolonial theology has made some of the most significant contributions to the recovery of marginalized voices. Scholars such as R. S. Sugirtharajah and Musa Dube have demonstrated how colonial power structures shaped biblical interpretation, theological discourse, and missionary practice. Their work challenges forms of theological domination and calls for the recovery of indigenous perspectives that were often suppressed within colonial frameworks.³⁶ Sugirtharajah argues that biblical interpretation has frequently reflected imperial assumptions that privileged Western perspectives while marginalizing local voices. His postcolonial hermeneutics seeks to expose these dynamics and recover alternative readings rooted in the experiences of formerly colonized peoples.³⁷ Similarly, Musa Dube emphasizes the importance of reading Scripture from the perspective of marginalized communities while remaining attentive to issues of power, exclusion, gender, and social justice.³⁸

Transcontextual Theology shares several important commitments with postcolonial theology. Both affirm indigenous agency, challenge theological domination, and recognize the

33 · Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 9–13.

34 · Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 20–22.

35 · James L. Fredericks, *Faith among Faiths* (Paulist Press, 1999), 73–76.

36 · Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 247–249; Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Chalice Press, 2000), 17–22.

37 · Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 250–252.

38 · Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 24–28.

importance of contextual interpretation. Indeed, tribal theology itself emerged partly through the broader postcolonial effort to reclaim indigenous voices within theological discourse.³⁹ Despite these similarities, important differences remain. Postcolonial theology is primarily concerned with colonial histories, power relations, and strategies of resistance. Its central focus is liberation from structures of domination. Transcontextual Theology, by contrast, addresses a different methodological question. While acknowledging the continuing importance of postcolonial concerns, it focuses on how theology should respond when individuals inhabit multiple contexts simultaneously. Its primary concern is contextual complexity rather than colonial critique, though the latter remains an important conversation partner.⁴⁰

5.4 Kwok Pui-lan and Hybrid Identity

Among contemporary theologians, Kwok Pui-lan provides perhaps the closest dialogue partner for the present proposal. Her work explores the realities of migration, globalization, hybridity, and multiple forms of belonging within postcolonial societies. Rejecting essentialist understandings of culture and identity, Kwok argues that contemporary persons increasingly inhabit overlapping social and cultural locations.⁴¹ This insight is highly significant for understanding contemporary tribal realities. Many tribal Christians today experience identity not as a fixed cultural inheritance but as a dynamic process shaped by interactions among indigenous traditions, Christian faith, national citizenship, professional aspirations, digital participation, and global cultural influences. Kwok's emphasis on hybridity therefore provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding contemporary identity formation.⁴²

Transcontextual Theology shares Kwok's rejection of static understandings of identity and affirms her recognition of cultural hybridity. Both approaches acknowledge that contemporary identities are formed through multiple and interacting influences. However, their primary objectives differ. Kwok's work focuses principally upon postcolonial identity, feminist reconstruction, and cultural hybridity. Transcontextual Theology seeks to develop a broader theological methodology capable of engaging multiple contextual realities across the entire task of theological reflection.⁴³

In other words, hybrid identity constitutes one important dimension of the transcontextual condition, but it does not exhaust the scope of the methodology itself. The concern extends beyond identity formation to include theological interpretation, ecclesial practice, ethical reflection, and ministerial engagement within complex social environments.

5.5 Fernando Segovia and Multicultural Hermeneutics

Fernando Segovia has made significant contributions to multicultural and postcolonial biblical interpretation. His work highlights the plurality of reading communities and demonstrates how

39 · Longchar, *An Emerging Asian Theology*, 15–22.

40 · Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, 250–252.

41 · Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 90–98.

42 · Kwok Pui-lan, *Globalization, Gender and Peacebuilding* (Paulist Press, 2012), 56–72.

43 · Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 91–98.

biblical interpretation is shaped by diverse social, historical, and ideological locations. Segovia argues that no reading of Scripture is contextually neutral and that responsible interpretation requires attentiveness to the social location of the interpreter.⁴⁴ This insight echoes strongly with both contextual theology and tribal theology. Segovia's work challenges universalizing claims that ignore the diversity of human experience and affirms the legitimacy of multiple interpretive voices within theological discourse.⁴⁵

Transcontextual Theology shares this recognition of interpretive plurality. However, Segovia's primary focus remains biblical hermeneutics. The present proposal seeks to move beyond questions of interpretation alone and develop a comprehensive theological methodology. While biblical interpretation remains an essential component, Transcontextual Theology also addresses broader questions concerning identity formation, ecclesiology, mission, ethics, public engagement, and theological method.⁴⁶ Thus, Segovia contributes important hermeneutical insights that support the transcontextual project, even though his work does not directly address the methodological challenge of contextual convergence.

6. Operationalizing Transcontextual Theology

A theological methodology must provide more than conceptual clarity; it must offer practical procedures through which theological reflection can be undertaken. To address this concern, this section proposes a fourfold methodological process consisting of Context Mapping, Narrative Discernment, Theological Interpretation, and Reflexive Praxis.

6.1 Context Mapping

The first movement of Transcontextual Theology is Context Mapping. This process involves identifying and analyzing the various contexts that shape a particular theological issue, community, or individual experience. Context Mapping seeks to identify these influences and examine their relationships. Relevant contexts may include indigenous traditions, family structures, educational institutions, economic conditions, political realities, digital environments, ecclesial affiliations, professional networks, and global cultural forces. The objective is not merely descriptive. Rather, the process seeks to understand how these various contexts interact and contribute to the formation of identity, values, relationships, and theological questions.⁴⁷

This stage draws upon insights from sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, and social analysis. Liberation theologians have long emphasized the importance of social analysis as a necessary step in theological reflection.⁴⁸ Similarly, practical theologians such as Richard Osmer argue that responsible theological inquiry begins with careful attention to the realities being investigated.⁴⁹ Context Mapping seeks to identify these realities before theological interpretation

44 · Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies* (Orbis Books, 2000), 57–58.

45 · Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 62–67.

46 · Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, vol. 1 (Fortress Press, 1995), 3–7.

47 · Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* 67–69.

48 · Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 1973), 11–25.

49 · Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2008), 4–12.

begins. Without such analysis, theological reflection risks in oversimplifying the complexity of contemporary experience.⁵⁰

6.2 Narrative Discernment

The second stage focuses on discerning the dominant narratives and ideological forces that increasingly shape contemporary tribal consciousness. Contemporary understanding of morality, identity, relationships, success, freedom, and spirituality is increasingly influenced by media systems, educational institutions, digital culture, entertainment industries, and global ideological movements. James K. A. Smith argues that cultural practices and social environments shape human desires and imagination more profoundly than abstract intellectual ideas alone.⁵¹ Likewise, Byung-Chul Han observes that contemporary digital culture increasingly restructures patterns of perception, communication, and social existence.⁵² Narrative discernment therefore recognizes that theological engagement must move beyond the analysis of external social changes toward deeper discernment of the worldview-forming narratives continuously shaping contemporary tribal consciousness.

6.3 Theological Interpretation

Theological Interpretations asks several fundamental questions. How does the gospel illuminate these realities? What theological resources assist Christian communities in understanding their experiences? In what ways do Scripture and Christian tradition challenge, affirm, or transform prevailing assumptions? What does faithful discipleship require within these circumstances?⁵³ At this stage, theology must avoid two opposite dangers. The first is contextual reductionism, in which social realities determine theological conclusions. Such an approach risks transforming theology into a mere reflection of culture. The second is theological isolationism, in which doctrinal formulations are applied without adequate engagement with lived experience. This approach often produces theological irrelevance. David Tracy's concept of a "mutually critical correlation" provides an important methodological resource. According to Tracy, Christian tradition and contemporary experience must enter into a critical dialogue in which each illuminates and challenges the other.⁵⁴ Similarly, Bevans argues that theology emerges through the interaction of tradition and context rather than through the dominance of either.⁵⁵

6.4 Reflexive Praxis

The final movement is Reflexive Praxis. Theology ultimately seeks not only understanding but transformation. Consequently, theological reflection must find expression in discipleship,

50 · Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 370-379.

51 · James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009), 25-27.

52 · Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford University Press, 2015), 8-10; also see Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Penguin Books, 1985), 23-24.

53 · Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans, 1989), 222-233.

54 · Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order*, 43-45.

55 · Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 31-35.

ministry, mission, ecclesial life, public engagement, and social practice. Theology that remains purely theoretical fails to fulfil its ecclesial vocation.⁵⁶ Praxis, however, should not be understood as the final stage of a completed process. Contemporary realities continue to change, communities encounter new challenges, and theological responses require continual evaluation. Reflection and action therefore exist in a reciprocal relationship. Practice generates new theological questions, while theological reflection informs renewed action.⁵⁷

This understanding closely resembles practical theology. Don Browning argues that theology must remain engaged with the realities of human action and social practice.⁵⁸ Likewise, Osmer emphasizes that theological reflection involves continuous movement between interpretation and response.⁵⁹ The reflexive dimension is especially important within rapidly changing tribal contexts. Theological responses that were appropriate for one generation may require modification in another. Reflexive Praxis therefore encourages ongoing evaluation, allowing theology to remain pastorally responsive while maintaining continuity with the historic Christian faith.

6.5 The Methodological Cycle of Transcontextual Theology

Taken together, these four movements constitute an integrated methodological cycle. Context Mapping identifies the realities shaping contemporary experience. Narrative Discernment listens to the stories emerging from those realities. Theological Interpretation brings those experiences into dialogue with Scripture and Christian tradition. Reflexive Praxis embodies theological insight in concrete action while generating new experiences that require further reflection.⁶⁰ This cyclical structure distinguishes Transcontextual Theology from static theological models. Because contexts continually change, theology remains an ongoing process of faithful discernment rather than a once-for-all solution. The methodology therefore seeks to preserve theological continuity while enabling contextual responsiveness. In doing so, it offers a practical framework through which tribal theology may engage the increasingly interconnected realities of contemporary life without abandoning its foundational commitments.⁶¹

7. Criticisms and Limitations of Transcontextual Theology

7.1 Potential Criticisms

The first criticism concerns the possibility of theological relativism. Critics may argue that emphasizing multiple and changing contexts risks making theology excessively dependent upon social realities. If theological reflection continually adapts to emerging contexts, theological truth may appear contingent upon historical circumstances rather than grounded in divine revelation. This concern reflects a long-standing tension within contextual theology itself. Karl

56 · Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (Fortress Press, 1991), 7–11.

57 · Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 33–37.

58 · Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 46–52.

59 · Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 11–12.

60 · Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 55–59.

61 · Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 167–170.

Barth, for example, repeatedly warned against allowing culture or human experience to become the determining norm of theological reflection.⁶²

A second criticism concerns methodological ambiguity. Because contemporary individuals participate in numerous contexts simultaneously, critics may question how theologians determine which contexts deserve priority within theological reflection. Without clear criteria, the methodology risks becoming excessively descriptive or lacking sufficient theological focus. The challenge is particularly acute when different contexts generate competing values, assumptions, or moral expectations.⁶³

A third criticism involves the danger of fragmentation. If theology attempts to engage every relevant context, theological reflection may become dispersed among multiple concerns without maintaining a coherent theological center. Contemporary society already experiences significant fragmentation through digital media, consumer culture, and identity politics. Theology must therefore avoid reproducing the very fragmentation it seeks to interpret.⁶⁴

Another criticism may emerge from tribal theologians. Some may fear that emphasizing transcontextual realities could weaken commitments to indigenous identity, communal memory, and cultural rootedness. Because tribal theology originally developed as a response to theological colonialism and cultural marginalization, any movement beyond explicitly tribal categories may be perceived as diluting indigenous theological concerns.⁶⁵ These criticisms deserve serious consideration. Nevertheless, they do not invalidate the proposal. Transcontextual Theology does not regard contexts as sources of theological truth. Rather, contexts function as the environments within which theological interpretation occurs. The normative foundations of theology remain Scriptural, Contexts generate questions; they do not determine theological truth.⁶⁶

7.2 Limitations of the Present Proposal

The present study remains exploratory and therefore possesses several limitations. First, Transcontextual Theology is proposed here primarily as a methodological framework rather than a fully developed theological system. The concept requires further refinement through engagement with wider theological scholarship and practical application within diverse ecclesial contexts. Consequently, the proposal should be understood as an initial contribution rather than a definitive model.

Second, the study focuses primarily on contemporary tribal realities in Northeast India. While many of the issues discussed may be relevant to other indigenous and postcolonial communities, further research is required to assess the applicability of the framework beyond this particular context. Contextual realities differ significantly across regions, and methodological proposals must be tested within diverse settings before broader conclusions can be drawn.

62 · Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Harper & Brothers, 1957), 28–34.

63 · Schreier, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Orbis Books, 1985), 20–26.

64 · Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Polity Press, 2000), 1–5.

65 · Thanzaava, *Theology of Community*, 104–108.

66 · Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 98–103.

Third, this article concentrates on methodological concerns rather than detailed doctrinal applications. Future research should explore how Transcontextual Theology may influence specific theological disciplines such as Christology, ecclesiology, missiology, biblical interpretation, ethics, pastoral theology, and public theology. The long-term value of the proposal will ultimately depend upon its capacity to generate substantive theological insights within these areas.

Fourth, the study has primarily engaged contemporary social transformations such as migration, globalization, and digitalization. Additional work is needed to examine other dimensions of contemporary life, including economic inequality, ecological crises, artificial intelligence, political polarization, and emerging forms of religious pluralism. These realities may further challenge and enrich the proposed methodology. These limitations should not be viewed merely as weaknesses. Rather, they indicate areas where further theological development remains necessary. Indeed, the exploratory nature of the proposal reflects one of its central convictions: theology must remain open to continual reflection, evaluation, and renewal as contexts continue to evolve.

8. Conclusion

This article has argued that the changing realities of tribal life in Northeast India necessitate a methodological expansion of tribal theology. The emergence of tribal theology represented a significant theological achievement because it challenged the dominance of imported theological frameworks and affirmed the importance of local cultural contexts. However, contemporary tribal realities increasingly reveal the limitations of theological methodologies that operate primarily within singular or bounded contexts. The challenge confronting tribal theology today is therefore not the absence of context but the presence of multiple interacting contexts that simultaneously shape tribal identity, faith, and practice.

In the light of this development, the article proposed Transcontextual Theology as a constructive methodological expansion to engage these intersecting realities. So that the future vitality of tribal theology will depend not only upon its capacity to preserve its rich theological heritage but also upon its willingness to engage emerging realities with intellectual rigor, theological faithfulness, and contextual sensitivity. Theology remains a living and dynamic enterprise precisely because God continues to address human communities within changing historical circumstances. If tribal theology is to remain relevant to future generations, it must continue to develop methodologies capable of interpreting Christian faith within the complex realities of an increasingly interconnected world. Transcontextual Theology is offered as one possible contribution toward that ongoing task. The future of tribal theology will depend not only upon its ability to remember its roots but also upon its capacity to interpret faithfully the increasingly interconnected realities in which tribal communities now live.

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