

Reconceiving Theology: Influencing Factors to the Formation of Theology

by Donald Grigorenko

“Imagine if Millard Erickson was born in Uzbekistan! Or, Wayne Grudem in Malaysia! Or, John Piper in Kuwait! Or, Tim Keller in Ethiopia! What would their theology look like?”¹

I stumbled on this set of questions on a web page and it generated a batch of further questions for me. Of course, these authors are regarded by many evangelicals as theological spokesmen of our American evangelical movement. So, what *would* their theology look like? Well, I don’t know. But I can say with some confidence that it would look quite different from what they have formulated in their American context. The next question is *why* would a theology crafted by an Uzbek Erickson, Malaysian Grudem, Kuwaiti Piper, or an Ethiopian Keller be different? I believe this is the question that needs careful attention. And our answer will not only account for these “contextual theologies,” but will also lay bare the nature of theology and cause us to reflect upon how we understand our own theology.

Some may say that given the same passion, interest and a good translation of the Bible, each one of these thinkers would have come up with precisely the same theology (although in a different language). I don’t think many would defend this view. So, what are some of the factors that contribute to make a Piperian Kuwaiti theology distinct? My goal in this article is to outline a few of the key factors influencing the formation of a theology. This is not an exhaustive list. I like to think of these factors as resources and we’ll touch on three of them: language, concepts, and relevant questions.

First, we look at language. Language deeply impacts what and how we communicate. But even more significant for our study, “language offers to its speakers a ready-made interpretation of the world, truly a *Weltanschauung*, a metaphysical word-picture.”² Our native languages offer a rich God-given toolbox for expressing our thoughts and, importantly, truth about God, humanity and our world. Yet the tools that we have been given are not identical. Many have learned and functioned in a second language. They have

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struggled, as I have, with an idea in one language while seeking to adequately express it in another. And the problem is not simply one of vocabulary. The language itself “shapes” the thought.

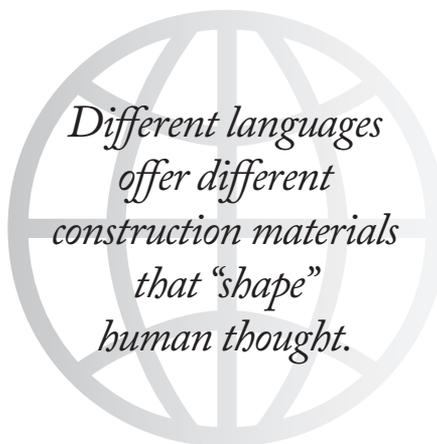
An analogy might help to clarify the importance of language as a resource in expressing concepts. When I was a child, there was a popular building toy called Tinker Toys. Tinker Toys were made of wood and came in connectable pieces including different lengths of rods and round disks with holes into which the rods could be inserted. From Tinker Toys, I constructed cars, planes, and buildings. My children grew up with Legos which are plastic interconnecting blocks of various shapes, sizes and colors. From Legos, my children constructed cars, planes and buildings. But a car assembled with Tinker Toys and one assembled with Legos are not the same. Each car has features, functions and also limitations that reflect the construction material. In the same way, different languages offer different sets of construction materials or resources that “shape” human thought and expression.

The influence of language on theological formulation can be illustrated by the early Christological controversies which addressed the relationship between the human and divine nature in Christ. Nicaea (325 AD) addressed the full divinity of Christ contra Arius. Then Constantinople (381) condemned Apollinarius and his denial of the full humanity of Christ. Then the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) finally addressed the relationship of the two natures. The conclusion of Chalcedon was that Christ had two natures and one person. On one side were the Monophysites who affirmed only one blended divine-human nature, and on the other, so the story goes, were the Nestorians who were said to separate the man Jesus from the divine Word such that the Christ dwelt in the man Jesus. More recently, this portrayal of the views of

the Syriac church and Nestorius have been called into question. Apart from the fact that the portrayal of Nestorius’ views that has endured is that of his enemies in Alexandria, the question of the linguistic resources available to the Greek and Latin church versus those available to the Syriac church are casting fresh light on these debates. Brock states that,

One of the reasons for the difference of opinion on Christology lay in the different understandings given to certain of the key terms.³

And in these councils the terminology was of utmost importance. Terms such as *physis*, *ousia* and *hypostasis* were common in the Western church discourse on Christology and had



evolved into technical terms which stretched their meaning. The Syriac church on the other hand had its own vocabulary (*keyane* or *keiane* for “nature” in Syriac and *prosopon* “person” in Greek) and the semantic ranges of the paired terms were far from a complete match.⁴ The consequence was misunderstanding on both sides of what the other was affirming, and we know the rest of the story. The winners write the history (politics and theology!). Nestorius and the church of the East were labeled as heretics and dropped from the story of the church. Recently additional writings of Nestorius have been discovered and many historians have concluded that his Christology was within the boundaries of orthodoxy.⁵

Language informs our theology and we are tempted to caricature or condemn theology that does not conform to our formulas.

Closely associated with language are the ways in which arguments are formed in different languages and their associated cultures. In 1966 Robert Kaplan published his *Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education*⁶ which continues to be referenced especially in ESL and EFL research, and teaching English for academic purposes. There he maps five patterns of discourse or argument that he contends are characteristic of different languages and cultures. Kaplan opened the door to the consideration of language and culture in the examination of rhetoric and discourse. More recently, Ulla Connor and others have carried this consideration further under the label “intercultural rhetoric.”⁷ Languages and cultures have preferred ways of expressing thoughts, ideas and arguments. These discourses shape linguistic expression and argument. I will illustrate with a story.

While living on the outskirts of Kathmandu, Nepal, I developed a friendship with a native Nepali named Ramesh whose house was a mile from mine. Ramesh was a keen follower of Christ and desired that his fellow Nepali believers be well grounded in the teaching of the Bible. Ramesh was well equipped to help the Nepali church. He was a scholar with a PhD in New Testament Studies from Oxford University. Ramesh was teaching in a Bible college in Kathmandu and was working through Paul’s letter to the Romans. I recall an insightful conversation I had with him about his teaching experience. He expressed that he was not “connecting” with his students as they labored paragraph by paragraph through the letter. Students were not performing well. This frustration led him to change his tactics. Rather than developing the argument of a paragraph inductively word by

word, clause by clause, progressively adding the pieces together linearly as he had been taught by his English graduate work, he began each new paragraph with a lesson which put the whole paragraph together in a way that related it to life. He then progressively added the technical details of the text to support the main idea. According to Kaplan, the English mode of argument begins at the beginning and takes a direct path to building to a conclusion, piece by piece, point by point. “English writing tends to favor linear organization, while other languages often take a less direct form.”⁸ Ramesh had the insight to recognize that his students, learning in Nepali and in a South Asian culture, were accustomed to beginning with broad strokes and cycling down to the details. Kaplan argues that these “contrasting rhetorics” are learned patterns characteristic of various languages.⁹

Beyond language and discourse, genre influences theological expression. In different cultures, there are designated types of literature for different purposes in communication. There are textual cues that tip us off that we are reading a particular genre of literature. When we encounter a “once upon a time” we conclude that this is a fairy tale and read on with that expectation. If we open a technical manual for Microsoft Windows and the first sentence begins with “once upon a time,” we will look back at the cover wondering what is going on. Contemporary theology reads like normal-language prose with the addition of a wider theological vocabulary, much like this article. But this convention was not always the case. I recall my first efforts in reading Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa*. The first challenge was to understand the organization of the work. Then there was the learning curve of catching on to what Thomas was doing under each Question with “Objections,” “On the Contrary,” “I answer that,” and “Replies.” And this was a text for *beginning* theology students. It was an adventure

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in a different theological genre. It was like encountering a “once upon a time” where it should not have been.

Samuel Moffett provides examples of differing theological genre from the *Odes of Solomon* of the Church of the East. It is theology as poetry:

His Word is with us in all our way
The Saviour who gives life and does
not reject (us).
The Man who humbled Himself,
But was exalted because of His own
righteousness . . .
And light dawned from the Word
That was before time in Him.
The Messiah in truth is one.
And He was known before the founda-
tions of the world,
That He might give life to persons for-
ever by the truth of His name.¹⁰

The Western church preferred a theology of the Trinity expressed in precise rational discourse using technical terms. The Greek Fathers described the Trinity as a divine dance—*perichoresis*.¹¹

Second, concepts are resources in the construction of theology. The fact that theology draws on the conceptual resources at hand in a particular time and place is not at issue. How and to what extent is really the question. The question is not new. Recall Tertullian’s declaration: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Well as it turns out, quite a lot. We do not begin the task of theological formulation with a conceptual blank slate. We have conceptions of reality and how it works already installed as a kind of conceptual operating system. We gain these conceptions largely through enculturation but we can add to or adjust these resources through study, both formal and informal. Although we are not held hostage to this slate of conceptual building materials, what we

need to do is be aware of them and use them critically. They should be a servant not a master.

Through the history of the church, philosophy provided a framework for theological expression. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria, contra Tertullian, explicitly assembled his theology on a Neo-Platonic foundation. Plato was a favored resource for many early theologians, so much so that various accounts were proposed of how Plato arrived at his thought. Was he enlightened, inspired or did he plagiarize the Jewish scriptures as Clement argued? The genealogy of Plato in theology can be traced from the second century, through Augustine and on to the formulations of the Reformers. Augustine in his *Confessions* (Book VII, Ch. 20) is explicit that by beginning with Plato, *and then* proceeding to the scriptures, he was able to solve his theological puzzles. Later Thomas Aquinas built his *Summa* on the superstructure of Aristotle, “the philosopher.” Although we can debate the appropriateness of Augustine and Aquinas resting their theology on Platonic or Aristotelian foundations as they did, the fact remains that they did, and theology today owes much of its color to those beginnings with those conceptual resources.

I have my students read African theologian Kwame Bediako.¹² In a couple of his essays, Bediako deals with Jesus as ancestor. Bediako’s objective is to express a biblical Christology using the conceptual resources found in Ghanaian culture, or more specifically, the Akan culture and language. The traditional Akan spirit world is like others of primal religion societies with a distant Supreme Being who is the creator and the sustainer of the universe. Then subordinate to the Supreme God are

lesser “gods,” and finally ancestors.¹³ The lesser gods can be capricious and are influenced through ritual in order to bestow favor and not trouble. Ancestors on the other hand are revered as good and maintain the moral order of the community by dispensing rewards and punishments. Ancestors are clan members that have gone on ahead to God. For the traditional Akan to qualify as an “ancestor” or *Nana*, one must fulfill three requirements. He must have lived among the clan, lived an exemplary life, and finally have been a person from whom the community gained benefits.¹⁴ Bediako argues,

Once the meaning of the cult of ancestors as myth is granted and its “function” is understood within the overall religious life of traditional society, it becomes clear how Jesus Christ fulfils our aspirations in relation to ancestral function too. Ancestors are considered worthy of honour for having “lived among us” and for having brought benefits to us; Jesus Christ has done infinitely more. They, [the mythical ancestors], originating from among us, had no choice but to live among us. But he, reflecting the brightness of God’s glory and the exact likeness of God’s own being (Hebrews 1:3), took our flesh and blood, shared our human nature and underwent death for us to set us free from the fear of death (Hebrews 2:14–15). He who has every reason to abandon sinful humans to their just desserts is not ashamed to call us his brethren (Hebrews 2:11).¹⁵

Much like the apostle John who both adapts and adopts the concept and vocabulary of the Greek *Logos* as a resource for his description of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, so Akans both adapt and adopt the concept and vocabulary of *Nana Yesu*. Thus,

Ancestor Christologies are grounded in the claim that Jesus’ mediatory role is analogous to the mediatory role ascribed to ancestors in some indigenous religions of Africa.¹⁶

Yet Bediako makes an important observation about the language used

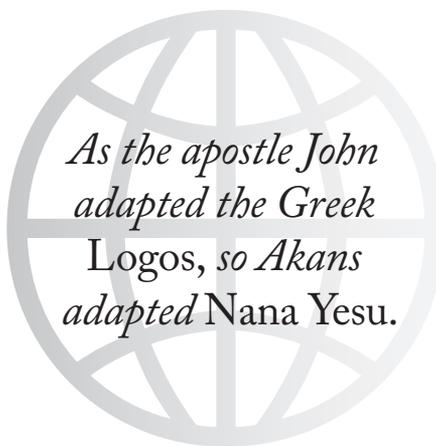
to link Jesus with the Akan concept of ancestor or *Nana*. He says,

In my experience in Ghana, hardly anyone will pray in English to “ancestor Jesus” or “Chief Jesus,” but many will pray in Akan to “*Nana Yesu*.”¹⁷

The semantic range of the English word “ancestor” and the Akan word *Nana* translated as “ancestor” only minimally overlap. Thus, linguistic and conceptual resources intersect.

Finally, relevant questions shape our theology. Church Missionary Society missionary John Taylor (d. 2001) is frequently quoted:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man



would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like?¹⁸

In every age and place where the church exists, there are questions that need to be addressed theologically. Those questions may arise from a number of sources. Heretics pose challenges that demand a response. Our culture often sets an agenda that demands a theological answer. But “questions” can be explicit and implicit. In other words, we might approach the Bible and its interpretation with implicit, nagging

questions that lead us to look for particular answers, like an appetite longing for satisfaction without consciously expressing these questions.

One area of productive discussion more recently has been the consideration of guilt, shame and fear as moral cultural orientations. In guilt-oriented cultures, priority is given to an impersonal legal code. These cultures tend to be individualistic. Shame-oriented cultures are collectivistic and give priority to the behavioral expectations of the community. Fear-oriented cultures are often dominated by folk religions with a concern for a hostile spirit world. Global Mapping International describes these orientations as cultural frameworks that function as a lens that “impact our understanding of the gospel” and how we read the Bible.¹⁹ They pose implicit questions. It is true that no culture is entirely oriented to either guilt, shame or fear. But in most cultures, one orientation is more dominant than the others.

I served in South Asia and I was intrigued to discover that, when sharing their experience of coming to faith, many believers in that context described Jesus as the answer to their fears. Many had experiences with a malevolent spirit world and even unbelievers would occasionally come to our gathering looking for relief from spirit oppression. This was a dimension of ministry for which my seminary training did not fully prepare me. What we observed was the application of a more *Christus Victor* understanding of the atonement.²⁰ In this case, one of the questions implicit in a seeker’s hearing this gospel was, “What does this message have to do with the forces of evil that threaten me?” In the West, we give little attention to 1 John 3 where we read that, “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.”

More has been written about the contrast between guilt/innocence and honor/shame societies. Transgression in the

former represents a loss of innocence; the latter represents a loss

of face. Guilt leaves us with a sense of moral failure, even if no one else knows about our transgression. . . . In contrast shame leaves us with a sense of humiliation, defeat, and ridicule and is intricately tied to our exposure and loss of honor or status before our peers and those in authority within our social network.²¹

Through the lenses of our Western guilt/innocence glasses we read the Bible. Themes of shame and honor are often invisible to Western guilt/innocence-oriented readers of the Bible. This is especially true with the Bible's teaching on sin. Tennent points out that the first response of the first couple upon their disobedience was to hide (Genesis 3:8). Many descriptions of sin and its consequences are in terms of shame:

In that day the Lord will shave with a razor, hired from regions beyond the Euphrates. . . . the head and the hair of the legs; and it will also remove the beard. (Isaiah 7:20)

Many commentators interpret this text to mean that God will bring devastation upon Israel for their disobedience, and this is true. But the point of the language is to highlight the indignity, reproach and insult Israel will experience in their judgement. *The Adam Clarke commentary* (published in 1828) notes that,

The Eastern peoples have always held the beard in the highest veneration, and have been extremely jealous of its honor. To pluck a man's beard is an instance of the greatest indignity that can be offered.²²

In the New Testament, we miss the point of some teaching without a sensitivity to shame in first century Palestine. In Luke 15 the prodigal son is not simply forgiven but shockingly shown honor despite his debauched, shameful past. He is honored with the best robe, a ring and a fattened calf. These are honoring acts. In the execution of Christ, "everything was done to maximize the shame."²³ The death of Christ was a public shaming, in which

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Jesus bore our shame. And as Christ was raised and restored to honor, seated at the right hand of the father, so we too are raised with him, even though we experience the degrading shame of an unbelieving world. Indeed, we are honored with participation in Christ's triumphal procession and one day will know future honor and glory with Christ in the resurrection. The death of Christ was not "a mere execution . . . [that] atoned for guilt."²⁴ Was the cross retribution for God being dishonored by sin and rebellion? Is salvation a restoration of God's honor through Christ and our place of honor with him in the order of creation? Bruce Nichols observes,

Christian theologians have "rarely if ever stressed salvation as honoring God, exposure of sin as shame, and the need for acceptance and restoration of honor."²⁵

Indeed it is difficult to find discussions of shame in evangelical theologies and theological dictionaries.²⁶

Theology answers relevant questions—explicit or implicit. Today, questions of gender, race, and politics present challenges demanding theological reflection. In the last election, we repeatedly heard the distressed question, "How should a Christian vote?" And the question was not simply which candidate should get the vote of the thoughtful evangelical who desired to live in obedience to the Bible. But more basically, the crisis precipitated the theological question of the responsibility of the Christ follower to the political world in which he or she lives. Questions generate theology grown in a particular place and time. Andrew Walls made the observation that the apostle Paul generated a great deal of theology for the Corinthians confronted with the question of what a

believer should do when sitting down with his neighbor and being served meat that might have been offered in pagan ritual. This was a new question raised by gentiles living in a gentile society. This was not a question that Jewish believers would ask; they didn't eat with gentile pagans.

So, what is theology? Theology is a thoughtful *human reflection* on God's revelation (both special and general), which responds to *contemporary questions and challenges*, while drawing upon the *linguistic and conceptual* resources of a particular time, place, and culture. Further, there is no privileged set of linguistic or conceptual resources, and no privileged set of contextual questions. All theologies are "contextual." They are the product of a historical and cultural particularity. Consequently, as one blog puts it, we should

Label particularity lest you imply universality. . . . The NIV Study Bible or ESV Study Bible could take their cue from the African Study Bible, and rename A Western Study Bible or A Study Bible for First-World Problems. Why do Western theologians write Systematic Theology, but Asian theologians write Water Buffalo Theology? Suppose the seminary course "Systematic Theology" was relabeled "Western Theology."²⁷

This kind of reconceptualization of theology is *not* just now breaking into our world of missiology. The issues have been raised by Tienou, Netland, Dyrness, Kärkkäinen, and others for some time. Yet an understanding of the contextual nature of theology has only rarely broken into the guild of Western evangelical theology.

Theology is a humanly crafted artifact that we hold with an open hand. It is held with an open hand, not because we should easily give it up, but because

we should be open to its correction, clarification and completion. A different set of resources brought to the scriptures has the potential to bring to light what was missed, correct what was misunderstood because of the limitations of our resources, and clarify what seemed out of place. Theologies true to the message of the Bible provide an occasion for a rich theological complementarity. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ “Honoring Theology,” *HonorShame* (blog), May 11, 2016, <http://honorshame.com/honoring-theology/>.

² Leo Spitzer, “Language—The Basis of Science, Philosophy and Poetry,” *Studies in Intellectual History*, ed. George Boas et al. (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1953), 83.

³ Sebastian Brock, *Fire from Heaven: Studies in Syriac Theology and Liturgy* (Burlington Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2006), 5.

⁴ Brock, *Fire from Heaven*, 7.

⁵ Moffett comments, “For fifteen hundred years Nestorius has been branded in the West as a heretic, and for most of that time, from what the West knew about him the condemnation seemed just. His writings were burned; only fragments survived. His image as left to history was that created by his enemies. Then, dramatically, in 1889 a Syrian priest discovered an eight-hundred-year-old manuscript of a Syriac translation made about 540 of Nestorius’ own account, in Greek, of his controversies and his teachings. It had remained hidden for centuries disguised under the title *The Book* (or *Bazaar*) of Heraclites, but the author was unmistakably Nestorius.

Judged by his own words at last, Nestorius is revealed as not so much ‘Nestorian’ and more orthodox than his opponents gave him credit for. Luther, for example, after looking over all he could find of his writings decided that there was nothing really heretical in them.... At no time did he [Nestorius] deny the deity of Christ, as was charged against him.... Nor did he deny the unity of Christ’s person, which was the most enduring of the charges against him.” Samuel Moffett, *The History of Christianity in Asia Volume 1: Beginning to 1500* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 175–176.)

⁶ Robert Kaplan, “Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education: Language Learning,” in *Language Learning*:

A Journal of Research in Language Studies, Volume 16 (1966): 1–20.

⁷ Ulla Connor, “New Directions in Contrastive Rhetoric.” *TESOL Quarterly*, 36 (2002): 493–510.

⁸ Will Bankston, “Global Theology in English: Promising or Problematic?” *The Gospel Coalition* (blog), February 24, 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/global-theology-in-english-promising-or-problematic>.

⁹ Kaplan’s research has been taken up by Ulla Connor in her *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). More recently she developed Kaplan’s thought in *Contrastive Rhetoric: Reaching to Intercultural Rhetoric*, eds. Ulla Connor, E. Nagelhout & W. Rozycki (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008).

¹⁰ Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, 54.

¹¹ The term is used to describe the relationship between the three members of the Godhead. It describes the divine movement of “interpenetration, communion, and interdependence. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit move and flow and draw life from one another in a bond of perfect love.” Accessed 2/22/2017, <http://arstheologica.blogspot.com/2005/12/perichoresis.html>.

¹² Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

¹³ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 22–23.

¹⁴ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 30.

¹⁵ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 30–31.

¹⁶ Stephen T. Pardue, Gene L. Green and K. K. Yeo, eds., *Jesus without Borders: Christology in the Majority World* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2014), 49.

¹⁷ Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel*, 78.

¹⁸ John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision, Christian Presence amid African Religion* (SCM, 1963), 16.

¹⁹ <http://www.gmi.org/infographics/missiographic-Honor-Shame.jpg> Accessed 2/27/2017.

²⁰ Gustav Aulén, (trans. 1969 by A. G. Herber SSM), *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (London: SPCK, New York: Macmillan, 1931).

²¹ Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 79.

²² Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible* (1831), Accessed 4/29/2017, <http://sacred-texts.com/bib/cmt/clarke/isa007.htm>.

²³ Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 90.

²⁴ Tennent, *Theology in the Context*, 91.

²⁵ Bruce Nichols, “The Role of Shame and Guilt in a Theology of Cross-Cultural Mission,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 25, no. 3 (2001): 232. Quoted by Tennent, 92.2001.

²⁶ Accessed 2/27/2017, <http://www.gmi.org/infographics/missiographic-Honor-Shame.jpg>.

²⁷ “Guilt-Innocence Cultures are WEIRD,” *HonorShame* (blog), January 19, 2017, <http://honorshame.com/guilt-innocence-cultures-weird/>.