

## CHAPTER 13

# Who Is Christ for Us? *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* as Impulse for a Transcultural Transformative Receptive Ecumenism

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The article delineates the ecumenical dialogue and learning process that evolved in Germany in the reception of the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*.<sup>1</sup> It claims that due to the fundamental changes in the present globalized world as well as in World Christianity, with the shifting of its centre of gravity from the global North to the global South, Receptive Ecumenism needs to take transcultural entanglements, epistemic violence, and transformative prospect more into consideration as it envisions a more just, participatory, and sustainable society.

### **From *Christian Witness* to *Mission Respect***

Ecumenical declarations are seldom so up-to-date, short, and concrete! In 1500 words, the document *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World* outlines an ethic of mission. The first paragraph summarizes the program: it is indispensable for Christians both to proclaim God's word and to do this "in harmony with the principles of the Gospel, in full respect for and love of all people."

The document, published in 2011, is the result of an ecumenical and interreligious process of learning which aims at further learning, as it states in the preface:

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1. World Council of Churches, Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and World Evangelical Alliance, *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct*, 2011, [https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ChristianWitness\\_recommendations.pdf](https://www.oikoumene.org/sites/default/files/Document/ChristianWitness_recommendations.pdf).

The purpose of this document is to encourage churches, church councils and mission agencies to reflect on their current practices... It is hoped that Christians across the world will study this document in the light of their own practices in witnessing to their faith in Christ, both by word and deed.

The ecumenical spirit and openness to multilateral learning is remarkable, taking into account that the document was written by three organizations that in the past seemed more divided than united on the issues of mission: the World Council of Churches (WCC), the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID). What brought these institutions together were concrete and ethical challenges in the multireligious context: globally and locally, transnationally and transculturally. These include interreligious tensions and conflicts, especially on the issues of mission and conversion to another religion, restrictions on the religious freedom of both Christians and members of other religions, and the misuse of religion for political and economic purposes. Yet, the good experiences in interreligious dialogue and the realization that interreligious dialogue and mission are not opposites but two sides of the same coin have led the three organizations to reflect together on how the Christian faith can be witnessed today. Together, the WCC, WEA, and PCID emphasize respect for people of other faiths, respect for each other's religious freedom, and renunciation of all forms of psychological and physical violence and all manipulation. In *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World*, the three global players have committed themselves to this code of conduct of mission.

Due to its topicality but also its conciseness, the document was rapidly adapted and contextualized in the Netherlands, Sweden, Brazil, India, and Malaysia. In Germany, a process of contextualization was initiated under the auspices of the Evangelisches Missionswerk (EMW) and the International Catholic Mission Agency Missio in Aachen. It was supported by 20 organizations, among them the Association of Christian Churches in Germany (ACK) and the German Evangelical Alliance, which is a member of the World Evangelical Alliance.<sup>2</sup> Identifying “mission” and “respect” as key terms in the document with a high relevance for the German context.

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2. See <https://missionrespekt.de>.

The reception process in Germany was titled “Mission Respect.”

A significant culmination in the process was the ecumenical congress “Mission Respect” in Berlin on 28-29 August 2014. By choosing the capital of Germany as the venue, the political relevance of the topic was stressed. An evening panel brought representatives of Parliament, the Ministry of Development and Cooperation, and the churches together to discuss the socio-political role of religions as well as issues of religious freedom and freedom of conscience.

With regard to ecumenical learning, the congress represents a first in the German context, because the approximately 250 participants represented an unprecedented broad spectrum of churches and theological “directions”: In addition to representatives of the larger Protestant churches and the Catholic Church in Germany, there were representatives of the – in Germany – “smaller” free churches, the evangelical and the Pentecostal churches. Such a variety of denominations, which sat here at one table, entered into conversation with each other, and were willing to listen to each other, is hardly to be found even within the framework of the ACK and other ecumenical alliances. The topics discussed were diverse, encompassing themes such as “mission in Germany,” “mission and proselytism,” “baptism and asylum,” “aggressive mission,” “mission and development,” or “interreligious social welfare.” These issues are often controversial among denominations, leading right to the contextually relevant pain points of ecumenism. The final declaration of the Berlin conference was encouraging:

The congress has shown that this broadly based process of dealing with the document is helpful for a deepened togetherness in our Christian witness. We are encouraged by many insights that we share in spite of our different ecclesial backgrounds. We are confident about remaining in fruitful dialogue with each other, even about controversial positions.<sup>3</sup>

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3. Evangelisches Missionswerk in Deutschland e.V. and Internationales Katholisches Missionswerk *missio*, eds., “Abschlussklärung” [Final Declaration], in *MissionRespekt. Christliches Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt*. Dokumentation. Internationaler ökumenischer Kongress, 27./28. August 2014 (Berlin, Aachen, Hamburg, 2015), 115, [https://missionrespekt.de/fix/files/Doku\\_MissionRespekt.pdf](https://missionrespekt.de/fix/files/Doku_MissionRespekt.pdf)

## **Christian Witness in a Broad Ecumenical Perspective**

With the desire to strengthen and theologically deepen the viability and sustainability of the broad ecumenical dialogue, a consultation took place from 13 to 15 June 2016 at the Theological University of Elstal near Berlin.<sup>4</sup> The consultation, which was prepared by a small multid denominational team, pursued the goal to explore to what extent the agreements and disagreements regarding the ethics of mission in *Christian Witness* reflect the mission theologies of the different denominations. Hence, again, pain points between the denominations – this time not primarily of missionary practice and “ethics” but of mission theology – were placed at centre stage of the ecumenical dialogue, in which more than 40 representatives of various churches and church-related institutions participated: “conversion and baptism as the goal of mission,” “eschatology and salvation as motivation for and horizon of mission,” “justice as the goal of mission,” “mission as invitation to worship,” and “strategies of mission.” The individual objectives were introduced by representatives from the different denominational perspectives and then discussed in the plenary and in multid denominational small groups. The whole consultation was accompanied by a spiritual program that contained morning and evening devotions as well as a closing worship service.

The contributions and discussions showed that while on a more abstract and general level, denominational differences persisted – especially with regard to eschatology, Christology, and mission strategies – these differences had to be differentiated upon closer examination. The denominational approaches were not presented as uniform entities. Rather, approaches and positions differed due to personal experiences. Thus, on the personal and biographical level, the boundaries were rather blurred. The biographical

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4. The conference in Elstal is documented in Michael Biehl and Klaus Vellguth, eds., *Christliches Zeugnis in ökumenischer Weite. Konvergenzen und Divergenzen als Bereicherung des Missionsverständnisses* (Aachen, Hamburg: missio/Evangelisches Missionswerk, 2016), <https://www.missio-hilft.de/missio/informieren/wofuer-wir-uns-einsetzen/zeit-gemaesses-missionsverstaendnis/missio-hilft-mission-respekt-christliches-zeugnis-in-oe-kumenischer-weite-berlin-2016.pdf>. For an English report of the Elstal-conference, see Christian Tauchner, “Theological Consultation on ‘Mission and Respect,’” in *Verbum SVD* 57, no. 2 (2016), 232–38, <https://missionrespekt.de/fix/files/Kongressbericht%20Tauchner.2.pdf>.

approach at the opening of the conference therefore revealed surprising commonalities. Furthermore, it bolstered people's readiness to listen to the other and to engage in a truly receptive ecumenical dialogue.

One of the results of the consultation in Elstal was the broadening of the horizon of the ecumenical dialogue from interdenominational to interdenominational *and* intercultural and international respectively and to thus open up to missional theologies of the global South and how mission is lived in the families of churches worldwide. Hence a series of ecumenical consultations "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology" started.

### **Towards an Intercultural and Worldwide Ecumenical Missiology**

In continuation of the consultation in Elstal and its observation that Christology is a controversial issue in the ecumenical dialogue on mission, the first international conference, "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology," held in Mainz in 2019, took up the topic "mission and Christologies." "The aim of the conference, which was organized as a process, was to establish the extent to which the confession of Christ and Christology can lay the ground for greater agreement in missionary theology."<sup>5</sup>

As was the case with the consultation in Elstal, the conference in Mainz resembled a laboratory for ecumenical learning, starting with a biographical approach and structured by lectures, group discussion, plenary sessions, as well as times for prayer and joint excursions. This did not conflict with the straightforwardly academic character of the presentations and discussions.

Thus, ecumenical learning and dialogue took place in a comprehensive way, similar to the idea of a Receptive Ecumenism as developed by Murray<sup>6</sup> and Timmer<sup>7</sup> and a Transformative Receptive Ecumenism as

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5. Michael Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ: Contextual and Interconfessional Perspectives on Christology* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2020), 13.

6. Paul D. Murray, "Receptive Ecumenism and Catholic Learning: Establishing the Agenda," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 7, no. 4 (2008), 279–301, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742250701725785>.

7. S. Timmer, "Receptive Ecumenism and Justification: Roman Catholic and Reformed Doctrine in Contemporary Context," PhD diss. Marquette University, 2009, [https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations\\_mu/362](https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/362).

developed, for example, by Plaatjies van Huffel.<sup>8</sup> Like other conferences that follow this receptive and transformative “shift in the understanding of ecumenism and in methodology,”<sup>9</sup> the conference in Mainz did not focus on “areas of potential convergence between the churches” or strive for “visible unity through theological and ecclesial convergence” and “conciliar fellowship” but focused on mutual enrichment and “individual growth and learning of each church tradition in dialogue with others.”<sup>10</sup> Neither the conference in Mainz nor the consultation in Elstal or the conference in Berlin were designed as a conciliar ecumenical conference striving for dogmatic agreement on mission; rather, they focused on receptive learning. In this they followed the rationale inherent in *Christian Witness*, which reveals a new, transforming, and receptive understanding of ecumenism, as Biehl and Anders observe:

The surprising point is, however, that the signing bodies did not ask to comment or critique the document [but] request that the recipients implement the principles and recommendations expressed in the document and, if needed, to contextualize them, depending on local conditions . . . Such an unusual and demanding approach to the reception of a text pointing away from itself and to the discussion and adapted implementation of its ideas releases creativity but its effects are, for the same reason, difficult to measure.<sup>11</sup>

Resemblances between the conference in Mainz and the concept of Transformative Ecumenism also exist with regard to the content. Plaatjies van Huffel lists seven elements of Transformative Ecumenism, according

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8. Mary-Anne Plaatjies van Huffel, “From Conciliar Ecumenism to Transformative Receptive Ecumenism,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 3 (2017), 1–13, at 6, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4353>.

9. Plaatjies van Huffel, “From Conciliar Ecumenism,” 6.

10. Plaatjies van Huffel, “From Conciliar Ecumenism,” 6.

11. Christoph Anders and Michael Biehl, “Christian Witness in a Multi-religious World: Trajectories in the International Ecumenical Discussion,” *Transformation* 36, no. 1 (2019), 3–11, at 8, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0265378819831817>

to the Manila colloquium on “Living out Transformative Ecumenism,” that reveal striking parallels to the contributions in Mainz: To live out transformative ecumenism is (1) to respond to the call from the margins to seek justice, (2) to live inclusively in solidarity with each other, (3) to actively seek first the kingdom of God, (4) to empower mutually, (5) to live out the subversive nature of the Gospel, (6) to be rooted in the dynamic spirituality of life, and (7) to live and love, struggle and celebrate always hopeful in God’s power to transform.”<sup>12</sup>

The contributions in Mainz, for their part, revealed a remarkable broad range of “faces” of Jesus Christ and by this of Christological concepts ranging from Jesus as Palestinian and Arab in Christologies of the Middle East, Christ the ancestor and servant leader in African theologies, Jesus the Avatar in Asia, Jesus the worker in Latin America, to queering Jesus. The recurring theme in these “faces” and the Christological and missiological presentations was Jesus’ suffering and compassion, which reflected the vulnerability of life as a starting point and challenge of theological and missiological reflection as well as of solidarity and the struggle for transformation. The North American Catholic theologian Stephen Bevans called it a “Christology from below”; he referred to the term “deep incarnation,” coined by Elisabeth Johnson.<sup>13</sup> Petros Malayan, from the Armenian Apostolic Church, claimed that mission in the discipleship of Jesus means taking suffering upon oneself and remaining at the side of those who suffer.<sup>14</sup> Septemmy Lakawa called for a theology of remaining and for staying at the side of those who suffer, even if – as in the case of traumatized victims of violence in Indonesia – the suffering does not stop.<sup>15</sup> And Wilbert van Saane concludes his deliberations on Christology and mission in the Middle East by stating that “‘Arab’ and ‘Palestinian’

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12. Plaatjies van Huffel, “From Conciliar Ecumenism,” 10.

13. Stephen Bevans, “Ecumenical Christology for Mission: Implications from US American Roman Catholic Perspectives,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 51–69, at 55 and 58, quoting Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril* (Maryknoll: Orbis: 2018), 224.

14. Petros G. Malakyan, “Witnessing the Contemporaneity of Christ in the Contemporary World: Towards an Ecumenical Missiology through Christ-likeness – A North American Perspective,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 71–81.

15. Septemmy E. Lakawa, “The Theopoetics of the Cross: Trauma and Poetic Witnessing from an Asian Feminist Perspective,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 165–75.

contextual theologies . . . are prepared to engage with the religious other, even if that engagement comes at the price of vulnerability.”<sup>16</sup>

These examples from the ecumenical conference in Mainz reveal a profoundly subversive, countertriumphalist, prophetic, and political Christology from below resembling the idea of a Transformative Receptive Ecumenism as delineated above. Their starting points are the challenges of injustices and marginalization at hand in the concrete contexts. Unfolding political missiologies based on these Christologies, the contributions in Mainz reveal “the significant role that religious communities pay on the socio-political level,”<sup>17</sup> as Margit Eckholt reflects with reference to Jürgen Habermas:

In Holy Scripture and throughout religious traditions intuitions of transgression and redemption and of saving ways out of a life that seems hopeless were expressed, they were subtly referred to and hermeneutically kept alive. For this reason, things can remain intact in the community life of religious communities – provided that they avoid dogmatism and moral constraints – which have been lost in other places and for the restoration of which it does not suffice to solely rely on the professional knowledge of experts. By this I refer to sufficiently differentiated possibilities of expression and sensitivities regarding failed existences, for social pathologies, for the failure of individual life conceptions and the deformation of distorted living environments...<sup>18</sup>

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16. Wilbert van Saane, “Christology and Mission in the Middle East,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 85–92, at 91–92.

17. Margit Eckholt, “Jesus Christ – ‘Light of All Nations’: Traces of Christological Work in Germany from a Roman Catholic Perspective and New Paths for a Christology that is Dedicated to the Promotion of Peace,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 103–17, at 105.

18. Eckholt, “Jesus Christ – ‘Light of All Nations,’” 105, quoting from Jürgen Habermas, “Vorpolitische Grundlagen des demokratischen Rechtsstaates,” in Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger, *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion* (Freiburg/Br. 2005), 15–37, at 31.

Thus, the many faces of Jesus Christ, the Christologies, and their missiological implication are indeed, as the introduction to the publication of the proceedings states, “influenced not so much by the denominational backgrounds of the theologians as by the social, religious and cultural contexts to which their missiological concepts are related”<sup>19</sup> – be it “issues arising from interreligious dialogue; ecological challenges; exclusionary nationalisms and ethnicisms; the emergence of new forms of spirituality; the increase in individualism and associated loneliness; scientific knowledge; the situation of post-socialist and post-modern atheism; and the experience of a hierarchical and centralist church.”<sup>20</sup> Yet, the category “context” can be misleading, as if the challenges were not interdependent and interconnected. I would rather suggest speaking of transcultural challenges because the challenges are globally interconnected, running through many if not all cultures and countries, though taking shape in different ways. This leads to the consideration that the concept of a Transformative Receptive Ecumenism needs to be developed further to take these transcultural dynamics and their critical impact on epistemological challenges more into account.

### **Beyond Denominational and Contextual: Transcultural Transformative Receptive Ecumenism as Critique of Epistemological Violence and Intersectional Oppression**

Presuming transcultural entanglements in the contextual challenges as well as in the Christological concepts and their missiological implications leads to assessing the convergences and divergences as results of long-standing intercultural and interdenominational negotiations. The insights into the transcultural dynamics eventually demand that in the ecumenical dialogue, “the other” tradition cannot be assumed as completely “other.” This perception exhibits (self-)critical implications for the concept of the transformative receptive ecumenical learning.

The Centre for Transcultural Studies in Heidelberg understands the meaning of transculturality as follows:

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19. Michael Biehl, Hanna Stahl, and Klaus Vellguth, “Towards an Ecumenical Missiology,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 11–20, at 18.

20. Michael Biehl et al., “Preface,” in Biehl et al., eds., *Witnessing Christ*, 9–10, at 9.

Transculturality is built on the understanding that cultures in the widest sense have never evolved as distinct entities or even primarily by interaction of separate units. Rather, entanglement, exchange, porosity and hybridization have always been an instrumental part of the ongoing definition and development of culture. The syllable trans- (as opposed to, for instance, inter-) points in that transgressive and translatory direction: borders create border-crossing, in dividing they simultaneously connect. Ostensibly, there is a paradox at the heart of transculturality: in order to point to the transcultural, one first has to assume separate cultures, while simultaneously negating their existence.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, insights into transcultural dynamics demand to say farewell to the idea of acculturation, inculturation, or contextualization in the classical sense that assumes cultures and religions as closed entities and not as products of continuous entanglements. With regard to the ecumenical dialogue, transcultural insights imply that even apparent differences and particularities are results of cultural and denominational negotiations, and therefore ecumenical dialogue partners hold points of contact and entanglements even when they are not observable at first sight.

Transcultural ecumenical learning does not make ecumenical dialogue and learning easier. In fact, it can become more critical because it is not simply mutually enriching and not only furthering individual growth. It can and does also question one's own stereotypes and entanglements in the production of knowledge about "the other" – what the postcolonial sociologist Santos has called an "epistemicide":<sup>22</sup> knowledge created about the other that at the same time eliminates the knowledge and cultures of subalternized people.

Transcultural transforming Receptive Ecumenism therefore includes

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21. Laila Abu-Er-Rub, Christiane Brosius, Sebastian Meurer, Diamantis Panagiotopoulos, and Susan Richter, *Engaging Transculturality: Concepts, Key Terms, Case Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2019), xxvi.

22. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2014).

critical deconstructions of practices of epistemic violence and of claiming universal validity of one's own particular knowledge system as well as establishing a network of mutual empowerment and liberation. It also not only takes into account denominational or cultural differences but assumes that the borders of denominations and cultures are blurred and that the sense of belonging grows along various religious, denominational, cultural, but also gender-, age-, or social class-related lines and experiences. It becomes truly transformative when – like in the case of the contributions of Mainz – experiences of multiple intersectional oppression are taken into consideration and justice and liberation are sought within the field of often conflicting interests.

### **Border-crossing Spirituality**

Last but not least, Transcultural Transformative Receptive Ecumenism involves not only critical thinking, theology, and missiology. It also profoundly relies on a transforming spirituality that touches all senses, opens up for new epistemologies as ways of creating an aesthetic knowledge of the senses and of the body and bones, and furthers the transgression of borders of denominations, cultures, geographies, sex and gender, social class, “race,” or age for resonance with a wider environment.