

## Intercultural Theology – A Paradigm Shift<sup>1</sup>

The three disciplines missiology, ecumenics and comparative religion (when taught at a theological faculty) are the sources of what we start to call intercultural theology. Nowadays missiology is dealing to a large extent with the ways, how Christianity is taking form in different cultures. Mission is always also culture contact. If ecumenics does not limit itself to the Protestant-Catholic relationship but turns to the pluralism of confessions, denominations and groups, the cultural dimension will come to the fore as well. Under the premise that religion is a cultural system,<sup>2</sup> all three subdivisions of the pluridiscipline missiology, ecumenics and comparative religion<sup>3</sup> then are equally concerned with questions of culture contact, which can be qualified more closely as first contact, conflict and exchange<sup>4</sup>. Culture and religion are related dialectically to one another and penetrate each other. Cultures are manmade complex weaves of meaning and symbol systems, always already open to transcendence. Religions are cultural expressions of an experience of resonance.<sup>5</sup> Intercultural theology is therefore an adequate umbrella term for interconfessional, intercultural and interreligious issues.<sup>6</sup>

I The situation of the pluridiscipline missiology, ecumenics and comparative religion at the universities

---

<sup>1</sup> Originally given as a short paper on different occasions and in varying forms at the Universities of Birmingham, Aarhus and Utrecht.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Geertz, Clifford, *Religion as a Cultural System*, in: idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York 1973, 87–125.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Küster, Volker, *Religionsgeschichte, Missionswissenschaft, Ökumenik. Thesen zu einer bedrohten Pluridisziplin*, in: *Deutsches Pfarrernblatt* 97, 7/1997, 342–343.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bitterli, Urs, *Alte Welt – neue Welt. Formen des europäisch-überseeischen Kulturkontaktes vom 15. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert*, Munich 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Theißen, Gerd, *On Having a Critical Faith*, London 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Küster, *Interkulturelle Theologie*, in: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*<sup>4</sup>, Vol. 4, 197–199.

The general trend to favour religious studies above theology strengthens the position of comparative religion. Where the theological frame is preserved, there is a tendency to find a new name for missiology and ecumenics in reaction to the paradigm shift that these disciplines go through.

I.1 In Germany the chairs for missiology are in combination with ecumenics and/or comparative religion. While missiology is frequently declared superfluous, ecumenics is nearly absorbed by dogmatics. As a consequence, comparative religion becomes the leading discipline.

I.2 In the Netherlands most of the chairs for mission and ecumenics will not be reopened. Only at the IIMO in Utrecht, the Missiological Institute in Nijmegen and the Theological University Kampen (Thuk) will remain some kind of follow up with different labels. Comparative religion or History of Religions is in the Netherlands a discipline of its own right.

I.3 With about ten chairs still the most are located in Germany. Besides the three remaining in the Netherlands, in Great Britain and the Nordic countries Denmark, Sweden, Norway and Finland the numbers vary between one and two chairs. On the catholic side there is one chair left in Germany and in the Netherlands and a few in Southern Europe.

I.4 In the US missiology is established as a practical discipline at the seminaries, while the large schools such as Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Union or Chicago have chairs for ecumenics and World Christianity. They also hired a number of Third World Theologians such as C.S. Song (Berkeley), Kosuke Koyama (Union), Lamin Sanneh (Yale), Chung Hyun-Kyung (Union), Kwok Pui-Lan (Boston) or Thomas Thangaraj (Atlanta).

I.5 Eastern Europe and the Third World are the only places where new chairs are opened.

## II The emergence of an intercultural theology

In the wake of secular emancipation movements in the Third World in the period of decolonisation and the building of a new world order after World War II the then called younger churches cut the umbilical cord between them and the former mission churches and contextual theologies developed. The Western mission project and theology of mission underwent a crisis and tried to cope theologically with the new situation. In the 1970ies a demographical shift of Christianity from the North to the South, especially Latinamerica and Africa became evident. With the fall of the Berlin wall (1989) and the implosion of the communist block this epoch came to an end. Theology

has just begun to reflect on the new developments, which became known as globalisation.

II.1 From the late 60ies early 70ies onward contextual theologies emerged all over the Third World. As early as 1976 contextual theologians from Africa, Asia, Latinamerica and their Diasporas in the West organised themselves in Daressalam as Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).<sup>7</sup> Their debates about commonalties, differences and cross-fertilisation are a success story of an intercultural discourse. The representatives of the two great schools of contextual theology Liberation theology and Inculturation and Dialogue theology learnt from each other and broadened their perception of their particular contexts.

Latinamerican liberation theologians have been accused for not taking into consideration folk Catholicism as well as the cultural-religious traditions of the indigenous peoples and the African minorities. During the 80ies they changed their attitude considerably. While Latinamerica was regarded as the most westernised part of the Third World, liberation theologies in Africa and Asia were more aware of cultural-religious issues from the beginning due to their contexts. Nevertheless, African theologians have challenged especially South African Black Theology for their presupposition of race issues. Inculturation and Dialogue theologians from Africa and Asia on the other hand were criticised for their lacking awareness of socio-economic and political factors. It was the Asian theologian Aloysius Pieris who pleaded for a merge of the two schools within EATWOT. In the 1990ies some upsprouting Asian liberation theologies such as Dalit Theology in India or Burakumin Theology in Japan criticised the traditional Dialogue theologies for not paying attention to the social implications in the cultural-religious systems of their respective contexts.

With her plea for an “irruption within the irruption” the Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye signalled the coming of the age of Third World women’s theology.<sup>8</sup> The women within EATWOT gave Third World Theology a fresh impulse. They are in a way the second generation. While some of them are still only in their 40ies the grand old men are slowly disappearing. It has to remain at present an open question how contextual theology in the Third World will continue. But the reconstitution of human dignity before God and men in contrary to the facts of individual life situations and the right

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Küster, *Aufbruch der Dritten Welt. Der Weg der Ökumenischen Vereinigung von Dritte-Welt-Theologen [EATWOT]*, in: *Verkündigung und Forschung* 37, 1992, 45–67.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Strahm, Doris, *Vom Rand in die Mitte. Christologie aus der Sicht von Frauen in Asien, Afrika und Lateinamerika*, Luzern 1997.

of cultural difference are irrefutable contributions by contextual theologies, now.<sup>9</sup>

II.2 The ecclesiological and theological awakening in the Third World is paralleled by a crisis in mission and mission theology in the West. As a matter of fact many of the chairs for missiology and ecumenics were instituted to observe these developments in the former mission countries. The term intercultural theology, which indicates a growing awareness of Christian pluralism, is closely connected to the names of Hans Jochen Margull, Richard Friedli and Walter Hollenweger, the founding editors of the “Studies into the Intercultural History of Christianity”. Margull and Friedli reacted immediately to the new developments in churches and theologies of the Third World in the late 60ies early 70ies. They were also pioneers in the debate about interreligious dialogue.<sup>10</sup> Hollenweger has written three volumes intercultural theology, which are an enormous reservoir of material but still lacking some systematic reflection.<sup>11</sup>

Here the second generation of post-war missiologists came to the front. Communication theories, which were applied in mission theology as a helpful tool, were critically reflected from the perspective of the receiver. Hermeneutics were introduced as a means to understand the other. In Germany Theo Sundermeier tried to re-establish missiology as a hermeneutic discipline encountering the “cultural stranger”.<sup>12</sup> Mission is being with the people, living together or “convivence” as Sundermeier puts it with a term found in Latinamerica. Convivence constitutes a community of helping as well as learning from each other and feasting together. The feast creates space to meet the other, also the cultural-religious stranger. The tension between convivence and difference is not neglected but accepted in mutual

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Christology*, London 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Margull, Hans Jochen, *Zeugnis und Dialog. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Ammersbek bei Hamburg 1992; Friedli, Richard, *Fremdheit als Heimat. Auf der Suche nach einem Kriterium für den Dialog zwischen den Religionen*, Zürich 1974.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Hollenweger, Walter J., *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit. Interkulturelle Theologie*, München 1979; idem, *Umgang mit Mythen. Interkulturelle Theologie II*, München 1982; ders., *Geist und Materie. Interkulturelle Theologie III*, München 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Sundermeier, Theo, *Konvivenz und Differenz. Studien zu einer verstehenden Missionswissenschaft*, Erlangen 1995; idem, *Den Fremden verstehen. Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Göttingen 1996.

respect.<sup>13</sup> Another milestone on the theoretical level was Bob Schreiter's analysis of local contextualisation processes with the help of communication theories and semiotics.<sup>14</sup> The Christian tradition as such for him is a series of local theologies. With his concept of a "new Catholicity" he then opts for a theology that operates between the local and the global.<sup>15</sup>

Intercultural theology is a necessary tool to link the divergent contextual theologies and to analyse global cultural systems in their interaction with Christianity. Its central features are the change of perspective that is expressed by the recognition of the different identities of the cultural-religious other and the attempt to understand him or her in a way that they can discern themselves in my perception. Intercultural theology is creating new space for theological thinking in an age of pluralism.<sup>16</sup>

II.3 The discourse among contextual theologians in EATWOT as well as the Western discourse on contextual theologies in the pluridiscipline missiology, ecumenics and comparative religion were focussing on three themes: *liberation*, *inculturation* and *dialogue*. Both discourses led to the conclusion that there is a necessity for an intercultural theology.

II.4 Liberation, inculturation and dialogue were also the recurring themes in the official documents of the Catholic Church after the Vatican Council II on the topics of mission and the relation to other religions such as "Redemptoris Missio" (1990) and "Dialogue and Proclamation" (1991). The same is true for the World Council of Churches on the protestant and orthodox side with documents like "Guidelines on Dialogue" (1971) and "Mission and Evangelisation" (1982).

But the discussion within and between the churches has not been without tension and conflict. There has been a rather critical stance towards liberation and dialogue theologians on the catholic side, as it is indicated by the

---

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Simpfendörfer, Werner, *Auf der Suche nach einer interkulturellen Theologie. Herausforderungen – Aspekte – Bausteine*, in: *Junge Kirche* 48, 1987, 266–273; idem, *Interkulturelle Theologie. Wie kann man Ende und Anfang verknüpfen?* in: *Evangelische Kommentare* 6/1989, 37–40. While Sundermeier tries to bear the tension between convivence and difference, Simpfendörfer concentrates on cultural conflicts. Both regard the feast as the exemplary opportunity to experience the cultural stranger. But while Simpfendörfer wants to overcome the strangeness in the feast, Sundermeier respects it.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Schreiter, Robert J., *Constructing Local Theologies*, Maryknoll, New York 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Schreiter, *The new Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, New York 1997.

<sup>16</sup> Postcolonial theory speaks of creating a "third space". Cf. Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, London/ New York 1994.

cases of Leonardo Boff and Tissa Balasuria. In official Vatican documents inculturation is restricted again to mere accommodation. In the ecumenical movement there was a split between the so-called ecumenicals and evangelicals about the question of liberation and interreligious dialogue, which led to the foundation of the evangelical Lausanne movement.<sup>17</sup> However, even within this group pluralism turned out. Especially those coming from the Third World feel the need to take their contexts of poverty and oppression as well as religious pluralism into consideration.<sup>18</sup> As far as the gospel and culture issue is concerned evangelicals have always had a missiological interest in the theme.<sup>19</sup> There they meet with Catholicism. The performance of the young Korean theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung at the 7th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra 1991 led to a severe conflict with the orthodox churches on the gospel and culture issue.<sup>20</sup>

II.5 “Globalisation” has become the chiffre for the recent changes in the world order.<sup>21</sup> It is signified by the global extension of neoliberal capitalism after the fall of communism and through communication technologies. This change of contexts could not be without consequences for contextual theologies, as can be clearly shown with regard to our three generative themes:

- *Liberation*: The political situation in the Third World has changed. In Latinamerica the military dictatorships were replaced by populist regimes and young democracies. In South Korea the life-long opposition leader

---

<sup>17</sup> Let the Earth Hear his Voice. International Congress on World Evangelisation Lausanne, Switzerland, Douglas, James Dixon (ed), Minneapolis 1975.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Samuel, Vinay/Sugden, Chris, Sharing Jesus in the Two Thirds World. Evangelical Christologies from the contexts of poverty, powerlessness and religious pluralism. The Papers of the First Conference of Evangelical Mission Theologians from the Two Thirds World, Bangkok, Thailand, March 22–25, 1982, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1984.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. The Willowbank Report. Report of a Consultation on Gospel and Culture, held at Willowbank, Somerset Bridge, Bermuda from 6th to 13th January 1978, Lausanne occasional papers 2, Wheaton, IL 1978; Kraft, Charles H., Christianity and Culture. A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologising in cross-cultural Perspectives, Maryknoll, New York 1979.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Chung Hyun-Kyung, Come Holy Spirit – Renew the Whole Creation, in: Kinnamon, Michael (ed.), Signs of the Spirit. World Council of Churches Official Report Seventh Assembly, Canberra, Australia, 7–20 February 1991, 37–47; Reflections of Orthodox participants addressed to the Seventh General Assembly, idem, 279–82; Basdekis, Athanasios, Canberra und die Orthodoxen. Anfragen und Forderungen an den ÖRK im Anschluss an die 7. Vollversammlung, Ökumenische Rundschau 40, 1991, 356–74.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Beck, Ulrich, Was ist Globalisierung? Frankfurt a.M. 1997; Malcolm Waters, Globalisation, New York 1995.

Kim Dae-Jung finally became president and in South Africa Nelson Mandela managed a peaceful change. *Reconciliation, Reparation and Reconstruction* are thus the new themes on the theological agenda. But at the same time the differences between rich and poor increase in the global system. And many Third World countries have to deal with cruel ethnic and religious conflicts. The classic themes of liberation theology thus still remain current.

- *Inculturation*: As far as culture is concerned, globalisation theories speak of *glocalisation*. The hyperculture of consumerism, some have spoken of a McDonaldisation or Coca-Colonisation of the world is counteracted by a resurgence of local cultures. But the myth of cultural uniqueness has faded. Cultures are mixed and consist of numerous subcultures. Post-colonial theory speaks in this regard of *hybridisation* or *creolisation*.<sup>22</sup>
- *Dialogue*: The theological reflection on interreligious dialogue stagnates. At the same time we are confronted with ethnic as well as bloody cultural-religious conflicts driven by growing fundamentalism within the different religions. New non-patronising strategies of interreligious solidarity with those who are able to confront the fundamentalists from within their own religious traditions have to be explored.

### III Functions of intercultural theology

Intercultural theology has at least four functions:

III.1 The *heuristic* function, which can be differentiated into hermeneutics, comparative theology and dialogics:

- *Hermeneutics*: Intercultural hermeneutics do not look at the stranger to discover similarities first but accept him or her in their difference. The hermeneutic criteria is that the others must be able to recognise themselves in the description of their counterpart.
- *Comparative theology*: Intercultural theology also compares and asks for *transcultural constants* without trying to deny the differences. What does men have in common beyond culture?
- *Dialogics*: Intercultural dialogue is a common search for truth, which is only contextually. At the same time truth always will be more than the sum of the contextual truths. The rules of dialogue for the interconfessional, intercultural and interreligious encounters have to be negotiated in the process.

---

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Young, Robert J.C., *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London 1995; Hannerz, Ulrich, *The World in Creolization*, in: *Africa* 57, 1987, 546–559.

III.2 The *anamnetic* function: Intercultural theology collects and preserves the contextual knowledge.

III.3 The function of *foundational theology*: Intercultural theology deals with issues like gospel and culture or clarifies categories such as inculturation, syncretism and fundamentalism. In order to communicate, a terminological and theoretical framework must be developed out of the contextual debates that have to be constantly tested on their transcultural feasibility.

III.4 The *ethical* function: Intercultural theology develops strategies for dealing with globalisation and the new nationalisms and ethnicity as well as the resulting cultural conflicts. Dialogue and conflict are the two interconnected issues for future discussions.

#### IV Intercultural theology as a new paradigm

Intercultural theology might lead to a paradigm shift that has consequences for theology in toto.

IV.1 The new paradigm *intercultural theology* is not only formally a new heuristic framework for the whole of theology but also connected to all its branches in a material way. Intercultural exegesis then deals with cultural and religious contexts of biblical literature or history and of effects of these scriptures in different cultures. Intercultural church history looks at cultural factors in the mission history of Christianity. Practical theology searches for orientation in the multicultural society. The web of generative themes<sup>23</sup> of systematic theology such as trinity, Christology and ecclesiology etc. has to be reconsidered interculturally. Then one has to ask what new perspectives are opened up through the combination of the generative themes of the text with those of the diverse contexts, for instance liberation, cultural identity, ecology or gender issues.

IV.2 Besides interdisciplinarity intercultural theology necessitates also a pluralism of methods and multimediality. Narrativity and aesthetics become equal to the traditional academic theology. In all its variations art is taken seriously as a theological medium.

IV.3 But if everything is intercultural theology nothing is intercultural theology. According to its emergence from the pluridiscipline missiology, ecumenics and comparative religion, intercultural theology should be estab-

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Freire, Paulo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York 1970; Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ*, London 2001, 33–35.

lished in the field of systematic theology and integrate its source disciplines. At the same time there will always remain a historical and empirical dimension.

IV.4 Intercultural theology is a pluralistic concept. Its theological foundation is the inner pluralism of the Christian faith, as it is expressed in the canon of biblical literature, the doctrine of God triune and the multitude of confessions, denominations and groups. This faith as an open system makes it possible to link Christianity to the pluralism of late modernity, which then is not considered as a threat but as an opportunity.