
EDITORIAL

**Interreligious Studies, Intercultural Theology
Observing Shifting Paradigms**

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It is a great privilege to introduce to you the first issue of *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, or ISIT. This journal is the result of a joint effort involving scholars from across the globe who share a concern about matters revolving around peacemaking, interfaith, and how to situate their faiths or beliefs in contemporary contexts. Several of them have joined one of the two editorial boards; a total of 11 associate editors, 15 advisory board members, and 2 book review editors have signed on to help develop ISIT and to advise managing editor Henry Jansen and editors Douglas Pratt and myself concerning its contents.

The journal is co-owned by Equinox Publishers and the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies (ESITIS) which was established in 2005 in Amsterdam. The appearance of this first ISIT issue will coincide with the sixth bi-annual international ESITIS conference in Münster, April 2017.

ISIT covers two enormous fields of study. Its primary goal is to provide articles on “a wide range of topics to do with interreligious questions and issues impacting contemporary pluralist society, as well as to foster a deeper understanding of theoretical and practical matters concerning interreligious relations.” Furthermore, the journal seeks to feature and connect discussions taking place in different parts of the world.

The name was the result of a long debate during the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion in Atlanta, 2015. Because we decided to include “Intercultural Theology” in the name of our new journal, rather than rely exclusively on the more generic “Interreligious Studies,” some American board members worried that the term “Intercultural Theology” was too European and would give the journal

a regional identity. But members of the European Society for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies wanted the link between their organization and the new journal to be explicit. In the end, the board members chose the title *Interreligious Studies and Intercultural Theology* in recognition of both their European base and global aspirations.

Based on these discussions, it seemed appropriate to start the journal with a roundtable article discussing the field of Intercultural Theology. John Sheveland and Frans Wijzen volunteered to serve as guest editors for this article that brought together some of the leading voices on both sides of the ocean. They reflect on the history of the discipline, what it means to them, and the numerous unsolved issues its practitioners are still working out.

Apart from the debate in Atlanta, the impetus for this roundtable discussion was the article by Dirk-Martin Grube that addresses the opacity of the field and the way it has been defined by some of its contemporary practitioners. One of the main characteristics of intercultural theology is its interdisciplinary approach: it has been informed by Social Sciences, among other disciplines. Grube argues that recapturing the role of philosophy, the former handmaid of theology, might help in more clearly defining the field. While focusing on the German situation, many of Grube's arguments overlap with those found in the roundtable discussion.

The first entry in the roundtable discussion, by Robert Schreiter from Chicago, not only looks back at the original goal of the field but also ventures into possible future developments. Starting out as an attempt to attune Western Christian theology to cultural circumstances in other parts of the world, the field necessarily became informed by liberation and feminist theologies. Schreiter foresees a growing "third space" in encounters between cultures and a strengthening of forms of "identity theology," especially among marginalized groups. In his view, Social Sciences remain an important partner for the field as does interreligious studies.

According to Frans Gmainer-Pranzl, the director of the Center for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions at Salzburg University, the discipline belongs to the field of Systematic Theology. He considers its partners of interaction to be Contextual and Comparative Theology, as well as the Theology of Religions. He sees Theology of Mission, Religions, Migration, Globalism, Violence and Secularism as future partners and outcomes.

Judith Gruber (New Orleans, US), reflects on how the discipline emerged during the 1970s. Considering (Post)colonial Studies to be its closest ally, she points at the ongoing ambiguity that can be found at the heart of the discipline—its tendency to take a meta position. After all, it can take on any theological guise and, in one way or the other, become part of human culture. Another problem is that, as of now, its practitioners have not addressed issues such as the traditional curricula the study of theology itself is based on. These remain Western-oriented and thus hegemonic.

The German theologian Thomas Schreijack situates his discussion within the Roman Catholic context, while Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier (US) provides a personal insight into the struggle with power dynamics created by the still overwhelmingly Western orientation of Intercultural Theology. Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (Australia) argues for a closer connection with World Christianity and Interreligious Studies. Stefan Paas (Amsterdam) places it within Missiology as well as World Christianity. David Cheetham (Birmingham, UK), discusses its close connection with Philosophical Theology. Amos Young (US) explains that, from the Pentecostal point of view, “all theology is intercultural.” To him, this observation has far-reaching implications in the sense that “the theological disciplines themselves ought to be reconstituted in this intercultural key.”

Leading into the discussion on intercultural theology is the article by Joshua Samuel, a Dalit theologian. He addresses the fact that much of interreligious engagement evolves within a privileged space. His article “Toward a Comparative Theology of Liberation” argues that inter-religious theologians have failed to take into account issues such as caste and untouchability. Furthermore, they often ignore topics connected to racism, social oppression, and class. As a way out, he proposes to moving Comparative Theology into theologies of liberation such as an India-based Dalit comparative theology that is “people-centered” and “engages in deep and respectful conversation(s) “while remaining committed to the flourishing and well-being of all communities.”

This first issue starts with two articles that pay homage to the double ISIT focus and concerns topics of interreligious studies. ISIT is being launched at a time when, across the world, religious and academic discourses seem to be at odds with reality. While programs addressing

matters of pluralist co-existence are burgeoning at universities, colleges, and schools training future leaders of religion, in certain Western countries the interest in pluralist living is waning. I am writing this introduction as the US faces a Trump presidency and the Netherlands expects Geert Wilders to rise in the polls. Both stake their popularity on avowed Islamophobic sentiments and the rhetoric of exclusion.

This situation only increases the need to address pertinent issues that influence or inform how we participate in interreligious engagements and how we include followers of religions not our own in our worldview. It has become especially urgent to look at groups that were overlooked or left out of the various dialogues until now, such as women, and in the Hindu context, members of the lowest caste of untouchables.

In “Who Speaks for Peace? Women and Interreligious Peacemaking,” Jeanine Hill Fletcher fleshes out how the exclusion of women from interreligious programming and peacemaking efforts is not only a symptom of a deeper structural issue, she also shows its negative implications for the building blocks of creating strong interreligious relations and peace. These are often created by the invisible work done by women whose success stories still remain unheard.

Gregory Thomas Basker analyzes how, respectively a Hindu *maharishi* and a Christian theologian each draw inspiration and spiritual insights from Arunachala, a holy mountain in the state of Tamil Nadu. Reference to sites in nature, he argues, can provide new spaces for interreligious understanding and create new metanarratives for further inquiry.

Two book reviews seemed pertinent to the topics covered in this first issue. Both concern writings by Muslim authors wrestling with questions of interreligious and intercultural theology. Wilhelmus Valkenberg discusses how Jerusha Tanner Lamptey’s book, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (2014) has stimulated his own thinking and teaching. Axel M. Oak Takács took it upon himself to write a careful exploration of the opus magnum Ahmad Shahab finished just before his death in 2015. *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2016), is a tour de force that exposes the pitfalls of essentializing religions. To Ahmad, Islam was a process, not an essence. Especially his reflection on otherness as a sign of God will provide fruitful insights for our thinking about religious difference.

The contributions to this first issue lead to several topics of future

focus. Gender remains an immensely important category, ranging from questions of power and hegemony, to interreligious dialogue and queer theologies in the Global South. Another future focus will be the emerging new studies on inter-ritual activities. Religious diversity and Scriptural interpretation will prove an equally fruitful topic, as are questions concerning Islamophobia and other contemporary forms of religious discrimination. Among other things, we plan to address the virtually unexplored field of interfaith studies and theology in the context of Eastern Orthodox churches. Finally, we plan to expand these questions to localized situations.

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