

Trajectories in Intercultural Theology

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Interest in intercultural theologies has been evident since the mid-1970s. Called by various names throughout this more than forty-year history—contextual theologies, local theologies, theologies of inculturation—the initial focus in these theological approaches was to provide a more appropriate vehicle for Christian faith that was attuned to cultural circumstances outside Europe and North America by attending more to the cultural context in which theological thinking was to be articulated. These efforts came at a time that might be described as the first “post-colonial” period, wherein newly liberated colonies were seeking identities that did not depend upon or mimic those of their colonial masters, but rested rather upon the cultural heritages of their respective places. Their methodological conversation partners were cultural anthropology and sociology, rather than the Western philosophy that had played that role in theological developments in Europe. In contrast to the classical concept of culture which saw culture as the highest artistic achievements of a people—their literature, music, etc. – the modern concept of culture, dating back to German Romanticism, looked more locally and viewed culture as the union of language, territory, and customs. Such theologies might be construed as “identity theologies,” since they worked toward the development of distinctive Christian identities based upon local cultural constructs.

Alongside these developments, there were two other streams of theological development at the time closely allied to this but nonetheless with a distinctive quality. One was the theologies of liberation that looked also to specific contexts but used categories of social and sociological analysis to track and promote social change. The other was the development of feminist theologies in the North Atlantic region, using analyses of gender and patterns of patriarchal power. One could see a blending of these concerns for liberation in the Black (liberation) theologies that had already begun to appear in the late 1960s where categories of race and racism gave a special focus to the analysis of oppression.

This understanding of intercultural theology also continued this path into the late 1980s. At that time, Europeans turned to intercultural theology as a potential means of church revitalization in the face of a

growing secularization of society. Sociological models were used to inform contextual theologies. There were even attempts at that time to create a kind of “Western missiology” or “missiology for Europe.”

These various strands were brought together in Stephen Bevans’ *Models of Contextual Theology* in which he surveyed the various forms that contextual or intercultural theologies had taken, speaking of them in terms of models. These encompassed the “identity theologies” of the first post-colonial period, the theologies of liberation, and some that tried to incorporate patterns of European philosophical thought.

By the latter half of the 1990s, the impact of globalization gave a new focus for intercultural theology. This was evident in two distinctive but interrelated ways. First, the modern concept of culture gave way to what became known as “postmodern” concepts of culture. If the modern concept of culture was marked by a unity of language, territory and custom, the postmodern concept of culture recognized that modernization often threatened the survival of local languages, migration to the cities was breaking down the idea of bounded territories, and rural and village customs likewise were affected by urbanization and advances in social communication. Given these challenges to the modern concept of culture, postmodern concepts saw themselves more as a kind of force-field where fragments of traditional cultures and emerging hybrids growing out of cultural contact (or cultural clash) contested together to form new cultural configurations, which themselves were not stable but continually underwent new contestation and change. “Culture” then became a more fluid and ever-changing category for giving shape to Christian faith in different contexts.

Second, the impact of globalization traces particular patterns that these postmodern manifestations of culture take. At times, it leads to *homogenization*, in that powerful global flows flatten out or even seem to erase local cultures, replacing them with signifiers from powerful sources (such as the media culture of the United States). At other times, a *hyperdifferentiation* takes place, building upon the fact that large urban cultures tend to become ever more differentiated, something that Niklas Luhmann posited already in the 1980s (1987). When this is tied to globalization, we find that those who have the economic means will tend to seek out like-minded people and come to inhabit virtual or social enclaves that shield them from encountering any contestation from those who think and live otherwise. The growth of social media has only enhanced this capacity to avoid difference or otherness. A third effect is

an increasing *deterritorialization*, caused by migration both of peoples and the flows generated in social media. These results in signifiers that, having lost their local moorings, go on to take on different meanings in ever-changing circumstances. Fourth, *hybridization* takes place, as these floating signifiers are fused together in ever new, ever changing patterns. Deterritorialization and hybridization in turn can provoke reactions to claim virtual and social space and to imagine a “purity” of culture that excludes those different from ourselves. When these two are combined with hyperdifferentiation, a new kind of “identity theology” can emerge that is not so much emancipating as a strategy for survival and assertion in a rapidly changing world over which people and groups feel they no longer have any control.

Future Trajectories of Intercultural Theology

What might constitute some of the future trajectories of intercultural theology? The future is always hard to predict, but I would like to make three suggestions about possible developments.

Although the concerted interaction between theology and culture has been around more than four decades and has gone by many different names, “intercultural theology” is now more than ever the best designation for this phenomenon. The effects of globalization have brought its “inter” character to the fore in an important way. By focusing on points of contact and encounter, we stand in what Homi Bhabha called a “third space” that sheds light on both sides of the encounter (Bhabha 1994). With it, the postmodern understanding of culture figures especially strongly, as any sense of the solidity of “culture” on either side becomes attenuated. Larger dynamics and pressures present themselves as shaping intercultural interaction.

A different kind of “identity theology” may be appearing, one that is different from the immediate postcolonial ones of the 1970s and 1980s, or those claimed by marginalized groups (such as that of indigenous populations, Hispanics in the United States, or of African Americans). These new identity theologies may be claimed by populist movements in the majority cultures of their special areas and may be put to the task of asserting that theirs is a “Christian culture” over against perceived “outsiders” (such as Muslims). The growth of populist movements in Europe and the United States as a reaction against the forces of globalization, a sharpening of divisions between rural versus urban populations as well as between settled versus immigrant populations

are all indications of this phenomenon. They bear some resemblances to earlier attempts to claim theological exceptionalism such as the rise of the so-called “*Deutsche Christen*” in the Lutheran Church in Germany in the 1930s. This tying together of nationalism and populism may be understood in terms of social and cultural dynamics, but it seems far from the central beliefs of Christianity. At the same time, a rather unreflective use of terms like “world Christianity” or “global Christianity” may not escape the imperial thinking of “Christendom” as easily as a change of terminology. “Global” is not simply a neutral, descriptive term; it has roots in the very same colonialism from which contemporary thinkers in Christianity are now trying to distance themselves (Schreiter 2016). Hence, caution must be exercised so that intercultural theology does not become a tool in the hands of exclusionary populism and nationalisms nor embrace a neo-colonial understanding of the World Church.

In terms of intercultural theology’s interlocutors, it seems that the social sciences will continue to play a pre-eminent role, be that cultural anthropology, sociology and social analysis, or post-colonial studies. An important question to put here also is how intercultural theology relates to missiology or studies of Christian mission. Because of its implication in colonialism, there have been widespread efforts to distance older understandings of Christian mission and to move toward a more neutral description of the spread and the growth of Christianity in intercultural terms. Thus, professorial chairs and departments or faculties of missiology have rebranded themselves “intercultural studies” or “intercultural theology.” The long-standing missiological journal *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* renamed itself *Interkulturelle Theologie*. These attempts were honest efforts to extricate missiologists from the stigma of colonialism and point to a new direction in the study of contemporary Christianity. In some instances, the rebranding was also an effort to justify a field of study in an increasingly secular and sometimes hostile university environment.

Especially here a caution for intercultural theology can be found: it has to be more than an innocent description of intercultural interaction. To be part of intercultural studies, intercultural theology has also to be able to contribute to the advance of knowledge about intercultural interaction. In other words, to claim a place for itself as a discipline, it must develop existing methods for understanding intercultural interaction

and not simply ride the coattails of any already established discipline. Just as in church history World Christianity has to show the difference that a new perspective makes, so too intercultural theology needs to include methodological advances that go beyond simple descriptions (Schreiter 2010; 2012). Here some of the promising developments in interreligious studies might prove to be indicators of how intercultural theology might go. Interritual studies that explore, among other things, how people of different faiths share religious pilgrimage sites are an example here. From what I have been able to read so far, there are some excellent ideas on how to understand religious practices (See, for example, Moyaert and Geldhof 2015). Intercultural theology might explore here what kind of theology emerges in those shared practices—not just in the “official” positions of the respective traditions or what might be derived from contemporary models of folk religion but also some creative renderings that reach beyond these two existing ways of approaching such phenomena. With something like this, intercultural theology can enter a new and productive phase.

References

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