

How to do Intercultural Theology

FRANZ GMAINER-PRANZL

Salzburg University

An understanding of intercultural theology (like any other discipline) always depends on one's own biography as an academic, the society in which one lives, the particular challenges that have had to be overcome, one's personal experience and the scientific methods which have "unlocked" the various problems encountered.

The Academic Discipline of Intercultural Theology

In my view, intercultural theology belongs to the discipline of systematic theology. It is called *theology* insofar as it argues from within the practice of the (Christian) faith. For theology, "faith" is not merely a topic but a principle of scientific theory: participation in a religious practice and life in a faith community are prerequisites for theological thought. As a subdiscipline of *systematic* theology, it reflects systematically on the Christian faith in wider contexts with regard to its communication in other environments and has a particular interest in epistemological and methodological prerequisites.

That there are universities with specific departments of Intercultural Theology is the outcome of the 20th century globalisation dynamic, the processes of decolonisation in Africa and Asia, the pluralisation of Western societies and the change in the significance of religion throughout the world. The experience of a "world Christianity" living out *one* faith in a global intercultural field of tension and coming into contact with other religions has contributed significantly to the emergence of the discipline of intercultural theology. However, the establishment of intercultural theology as a subject in its own right ought not to obscure the fact that Christian theology as a whole functions interculturally.

Intercultural Theology: Areas of Research and Work

Like any fairly new academic subject, intercultural theology is imbued with creativity and innovation, but it is not always clear how this subject can be structured and what criteria can be employed to distinguish between respective topics and areas of work. Given the tension between free creativity and strict systematisation, I propose two criteria for grouping the subject matter of intercultural theology under four headings. One criterion is "cultural/religious," the other is "applied/basic." Naturally, I am well aware that these are emphases, not a question of clear segregation

into different fields. It is possible to differentiate between specific societal contexts from cultural and religious perspectives but not, of course, to divide them between the two subject areas of culture and religion. And while academic issues can be analysed from a concrete and practical angle or from a fundamentally theoretical one, they cannot simply be broken down into “practical application” and “theoretical principles.”

Consequently, I have defined four areas of work. It is clear that these areas of work frequently overlap and cannot be definitively isolated from one another.

(a) From a *cultural* perspective, the interaction between the Christian faith and society is to be understood in the light of actual encounters (a1: *contextual theologies*) or in the light of theoretical questions (a2: *intercultural theological epistemology*). Whereas contextual theologies investigate the transformation processes of the Christian faith in different societies (e.g., theology in India or in Africa, Latin America liberation theology etc.), intercultural theological epistemology explores the conditions and correlations required for an understanding and methodology of intercultural theology (e.g., What do we actually mean by “context,” “culture” and “mission”? What is the difference between “interculturality” and “transculturality”? etc.)

(b) The *religious* perspective deals with both the history of actual encounters between different religions and the learning processes involved (b1: *comparative theology*) and with a fundamental theological reflection on religious plurality (b2: *theology of religions*). Here, too, it is true that the two areas cannot simply be isolated from each other. However, it is one thing to link specific religious traditions and to compare texts, rituals and ethical rules (comparative theology), but quite another to ask what significance a different religion has for one’s own faith conviction and pluralism in religion.

This differentiation between four fields of work and research (contextual theologies, intercultural theological epistemology, comparative theology and theology of religions) highlights correlations and distinctions between different themes and issues without fashioning an excessively rigid systematic approach.

Current Problem Areas

Given that intercultural theology is required to deal with certain classic subject areas (e.g., the introduction to specific contextual theologies, engagement with culture/interculturality/religion/interfaith dialogues, the analysis of different models of the theology of religions, etc.), it faces

a special challenge in adopting a position with respect to current developments. This engagement has triggered various productive discourses within intercultural theology, including the following:

A *theology of mission* that will ask what it means for Christians to pass on their faith, for the message of the Gospel to be communicated in new cultural traditions and societal contexts and for preachers to enter into dialogue with non-Christian religions. Such a theology must grapple with the crisis in missionary thinking in the Western world and with the new dynamics of mission in Pentecostal Christianity, it must show how freedom of religion relates to proclamation of the faith and look at the effect of “reverse mission” (the fact that missionaries from the global south now come to Europe) on the church’s self-understanding.

A *theology of migration* not only embraces the insights of sociology, political science and theories of globalisation and development but also asks what the experience of migration means for faith. It will examine the degree to which migration experiences differ between continents and how they lead to a better understanding of the Gospel. In addition, a contemporary theology of migration has political and socio-critical significance because it relates the Christian interpretation of migration experiences to the growing nationalism and right-wing populism. And finally, it is interesting to explore what changes and new insights migration brings to faith itself in critical contrast to economic and political globalisation.

A *theology of globality* will not—in critical contrast to economic globalisation—ask how Christianity can propagate itself globally with the greatest efficiency but how it can meet the challenge of the global context. The term “universal church” is not to be understood as if the church were an international business concern opening branches across the world, but a pilgrim, a “migrant”—always on the move and constantly finding new routes. As such, intercultural theology develops the profile of “catholicity”—not in the sense of a denominational characteristic, but as the ability to live out and think through the Christian faith in global contexts.

A *theology of violence* will engage in a special way with fundamentalism and extremist positions. Here, intercultural theology will be underpinned by research in social and political science, as well as insights from psychology, in treating fundamentalism as a theological problem: that is, is there a “logic” of violence within religion? Are there recognisable

common tendencies to violence or to peace in different religions? What lies behind the religious legitimation of violence? Is a fundamentalist understanding of religion linked with the claim to “revelation”?

A theology of the secular will address the question whether religion and religions are becoming stronger or weaker in certain societies, i.e., which indicators support a theory of secularisation and which support the thesis that there is a resurgence of religion. Intercultural theology will undertake a critical examination of the presumed understanding of “culture” and “religion,” “secularity” and “religiosity” and ask whether the Christian traditions have a secularising or a de-secularising effect. The complex relationship between religion/religions and society presents intercultural theology with a wide field for research.

A theology of religions will also address the challenging question of how believers from Religion A should react to claims made by Religions B and C regarding salvation and truth. It will be less inclined to discuss abstract models of the theology of religions but look instead at the cultural and societal conditions of religious “truths,” while taking seriously the impossibility of resolving the diversity and contradictory nature of different religious “pathways to salvation.” Last but not least, the theology of religions will also integrate secular perspectives and will perceive interfaith dialogue as an exchange between adherents of different religions and between believers and non-believers.

The Methodology of Intercultural Theology

Given my background in academic theology, intercultural theology will have three principal distinguishing methodological characteristics:

Intercultural theology—as stated—utilizes first and foremost the working methods of *systematic theology*. It sees itself as the discourse of a particular faith community, while nonetheless manifesting an ecumenical spirit. A very intensive intercultural theological debate is occurring in some Christian churches while it is almost unknown in others. Intercultural theology is not restricted to the Christian sphere: Buddhism, Islam, Judaism etc. are all developing intercultural theologies.

Intercultural theology is *interdisciplinary*, part of the “interdisciplinary avant-garde” of theology as such. “Interdisciplinary” implies the ability to enter into dialogue with different sciences, to consider issues from a variety of perspectives and to keep on correcting one’s own methodology and

analytics. Amongst the most important reference disciplines are philosophy (particularly philosophy of religion), religious studies and the social, cultural and communication sciences. Even though the cultural science approach to intercultural theology has gained importance in recent decades, socio-scientific methodology ought not to be neglected, since it allows for the recording of precise data concerning the interaction between religion(s) and society.

Here I would like to address briefly the relationship between intercultural theology and religious studies. I do not see religious studies either as a substitute for intercultural theology or as a “danger” to faith; it is one of the most important disciplines for intercultural theology because it evinces enormous expertise concerning both the content of religious traditions and appropriate research methods. Intercultural theology should take seriously empirical methodology and scientific practice in religious studies unconnected to any particular denomination. The criterion “empirical,” when applied to religious studies, does not refer to an empiricism that takes the form of ideological prejudice, but to a method for collecting and interpreting experience-based data. Their very dissimilarity (empirical criteriology/faith reference) makes religious studies and intercultural theology an ideal pair.

Finally, intercultural theology is *socially oriented*. It does not reflect on “religion as such” but on actual religious convictions and practices in a specific society. Precisely in times when political discourse is becoming religiously charged, intercultural theology’s critical reference to societal relationships together with its socio-critical competence is more important than ever; specialist approaches like gender studies, migration studies, theories of the stranger, global studies and development studies have become important dialogue partners for intercultural theology.

Intercultural theology is a discipline within systematic theology which reflects upon the truth and salvation claim made by the Christian message at the intersection of cultural diversity, social heterogeneity, global dynamics and religious plurality.

Franz Gmainer-Pranzl is Director of the Centre for Intercultural Theology and the Study of Religions. Email: Franz.Gmainer-Pranzl@sbg.ac.at
