Intercultural Theology as a (Post)colonial Project? Reflections from Central Europe

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Intercultural Theology (IT) and postcolonial studies are closely related. Both react to the emergence of non-Western voices with a call for an epistemological shift which challenges the dominance of Western models of knowledge and truth. IT thus aims to develop theological reflections on issues for which postcolonial theory has generated a rich set of analytical instruments: it investigates entangled histories and cultural contact zones in and between Christianities, maps the hybridity of Christian traditions, and traces agency and complicity in cultural transformations of theology. It is not surprising therefore that there has been a strong call for a reception of postcolonial studies in IT—also in approaches from the German-speaking context, which will be the focus of my contribution (cf. for example Küster 2011; Nausner 2013; Walz 2016). Yet, as indicated above, a shift to postcolonialism also has far-reaching epistemological repercussions and the theological stakes of such a reception are high. In this article, then, I will explore the relation between IT and postcolonial studies—the questions I aim to answer are these: How can the postcolonial paradigm shift be adequately implemented into IT, and what does its reception entail for the theological status of IT?

A discussion of Henning Wrogemann’s approach offers rich resources for addressing these questions. Wrogemann is Professor of Mission Studies, Comparative Religion and Ecumenics at the Protestant University Wuppertal/Bethel (Germany) and the Director of its “Institute for Intercultural Theology and Interreligious Studies.” His three-volume work Lehrbuch Interkulturelle Theologie/Missionswissenschaft (Wrogemann 2012–2015) is both a seminal introduction to the field and

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1 I would like to thank Michael Nausner for his thoughtful comments on an earlier draft of this contribution.
2 For a fuller exploration of these issues see Ashcroft et al. 2006a, Keller 2004, Ustorf 2008.
4 An English translation of Volume 1 has recently been published: Wrogemann 2015.
an original contribution to its consolidation. Like most approaches to IT, he starts with the observation that contemporary Christianity has become a global religious formation (2012, 342) marked by polycentric diversity; this is substantiated with a range of case studies on Contextual Theologies from Africa, Asia and Latin America (2012, 161–224). Wrogemann, then, outlines IT as the theological reflection of this pluralization, having a twofold task: first, the descriptive task of classifying, analysing and processing such (non-European) inculturation theologies (2013, 439) and, second, the task of discussing normative questions such as the (il-)legitimacy of specific cultural expressions, and criteria of evaluation (2013, 442). Wrogemann emphasizes that, although the descriptive and normative dimensions are closely related, they have to be separated methodologically (2013, 24, 34). Volume 1, then, develops a strong argument that postcolonial studies provide IT with indispensable tools to fulfill its descriptive task. The power-critical focus of postcolonial studies and its understanding of culture as a contested site of identity negotiations allow IT to produce more nuanced descriptions of the cultural contexts of Christianity that expose their internal, conflictive plurality: one context can produce more than one contextual theology that can either stabilize or dynamize this context’s established structures of hegemony (2013, 220–24). The contextuality of Contextual Theologies, Wrogemann concludes, is far more complex than expected (2013, 224), and he substantiates this with a postcolonial study on African contextual theologies (2013, 161–224).

**Colonial Temptations**

Wrogemann’s work thus presents a major contribution to the reception of postcolonial studies in German-speaking IT, but it includes presuppositions that call for further investigation from a postcolonial perspective. Crucially, we have to address how it conceives of the epistemological status of IT: as Ustorf has pointed out, IT always runs into the danger of assuming the position of a “meta-theology” which mediates between contextual theologies (cf. Ustorf 2008, 237). Of course, Wrogemann recognizes this problem (cf. Wrogemann 2013, 37)—and yet, his approach does seem to claim precisely such a meta-position.

This is explicitly so for the “descriptive” dimension. Here, Wrogemann relies heavily on examples from non-European contexts but remains largely silent on the positions and discursive agency of
intercultural theologians: while he conceives of postcolonial studies as a vital instrument for his project, he applies them unevenly to it. His silence on IT’s discursive agency allows him to stake a claim for its mediating meta-position: IT “is positioned in-between the constellations of power” of contextual theologies; it “cannot be done in a positional way” (2013, 446, 447). The silenced epistemological status of IT goes hand in hand with a hierarchical division of labor (cf. Walz 2015, 263) in its knowledge production, which cannot fully extricate itself from a colonial logic: for Wrogemann, (non-European) contextual theologies seem to provide the “raw material” that IT then processes (cf. 2013, 439) for transfer to the theological academy (2013, 438). Ultimately, as Samuel Pang has argued, such an (alleged) meta-theology is prone to regenerate the epistemo-political privilege of the (Western) center (Pang 2008, 85).

This selective use of postcolonial theory does not only silently reinforce established structures of interpretative sovereignty in contemporary theology. It can also contribute to the essentialization of Christian tradition and the naturalization of its hegemonic master narrative. Wrogemann’s insistence on the separation between a descriptive and a normative dimension in IT be read as an indication of this powerful dynamic. While he is aware that norms are not set in stone, but interculturally negotiated (2013, 449), he does seem to presuppose that the established theological tradition provides criteria that are external to these contestations and are thus not subjected to postcolonial critique; Wrogemann, power-critically, describes contemporary Christianity as a struggle for sovereignty of theological interpretation (2012, 370) and recognizes the vast plurality of culturally informed ways of biblical readings today; the Bible itself, however, appears as an absolute foundation, giving rise to multiple contested interpretations, but itself unafflicted by the powerful contingencies of knowledge production: “If churches […] cannot agree on shared traditions, then the Bible alone remains the foundational reference of faith” (2012, 370). This approach thus does not apply postcolonial insights to the established Christian tradition; instead, it perpetuates the silencing of multiple forgotten traditions, whose exclusion led to the consolidation of the Bible in the first place (Ehrman 2003); it loses out on the opportunity to read the Bible as a prime document of the tug of war between hegemonic and subversive narratives that have forged Christian tradition in asymmetrical power relations. Ultimately, this strategy immunizes theology against the

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5 For the potentially violent character of the “interculturality” paradigm, see also Suess 2015.
challenge of postcolonial theory, which sets out to expose the entanglement of power and knowledge in any tradition and calls for an epistemological paradigm change that reflects the radical contingency of all truth claims. It stops short where, from a postcolonial perspective, the real challenge only begins: how can theology fulfil its normative task, once the contingency of its normative foundations has been exposed?

This approach to IT, which runs the risk of absolutizing the established master narrative of the Christian tradition, translates into a specific vision for its academic and institutional implementation: there is a strong call in the German-speaking world to establish IT as an independent discipline within the theological canon; this goes hand in hand with the foundation of a number of “Centers for Intercultural Theology” across Central Europe, as well as the inclusion of IT as an autonomous subject in theological curricula. This move, however, falls short of the original vision of its founders who clearly saw that the irruption of culturally different Christianities unsettles the established theological paradigm. With Marcella Althaus, we can argue that such an endeavor complements “traditional” theology rather than disrupts its epistemological framework (cf. Althaus-Reid 2000, 6). What is more, this compartmentalization effectively conceals the contingent perspectives of all other theological disciplines taught and researched in the European academy and thus becomes a powerful aid to their universalization. There is a powerful relation between the institutional disciplining of IT, its simultaneous epistemological marginalization and the regeneration of established power/knowledge regimes in the Christian tradition. The emerging field of IT is thus faced with a dilemma: its successful implementation as a recognized discipline risks pacifying the critical impact that the irruption of non-European Christianities has on the established theological discourse. An exposure of these connections might be able to shed some explanatory light on Wrogemann’s observation that, thus far, the polycentric character of global Christianity does not really seem to have affected Western theology’s self-understanding (Wrogemann 2013, 437).

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6 Hock 2011, 25ff., too, addresses this conundrum: “[Lacking a clear disciplinary profile], Intercultural Theology is currently in a theoretically and institutionally unsatisfactory situation”; and yet, this lack “is one of its crucial characteristics” and might therefore not be overcome.
Intercultural Theology as a Postcolonial Project

What other options, then, do we have for IT? A few words must suffice. I have argued that the selective use of postcolonial theory in IT reinforces the hegemonic systems of thought of the established theological discourse. A full application of postcolonial theory, on the other hand, aims to expose these power differentials in the production of knowledge on all levels. This changes the scope of intercultural theologizing: With Robert Heaney we can argue that, within a thoroughly postcolonial paradigm, theological reflection between culturally different Christianities no longer aims for a “panopticon” of the polycentric formations of global Christianity; instead, it manifests itself through a destabilizing effect in which theologians not so much “adopt” the subject position of Non-Western scholars but begin to view Non-Western theologies as “as a means to a more critical appreciation of their own tradition and/or method” (Heaney 2008, 74).

Postcolonial theologians are developing methods for this destabilization of the established discourse through the exposure to its excluded others (e.g. Sugirtharajah 2003; Segovia 2000). Such critical rereading has profoundly unsettling effects: it not “only” critiques the hegemonic patterns of Eurocentric theology but affects the epistemological foundations of the Christian faith: a theological reflection that follows through with a power analysis of the Christian tradition discovers an ambivalence at its very core; it begins to see that is has been forged in an uneven struggle between hegemonic and subversive narratives; its “texts [then] remain complicated […] and can never become ‘safe’” (Grau 2004 164ff.). The challenge is, as Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider put it, “how to understand [this constitutive contingency] theologically” (Keller and Schneider 2011, 9).

Via such a power-critical interrogation of the whole Christian tradition, IT can live up to its original intention to reflect on the cultural particularity of any theology. If we resist the temptation to outsource IT into an independent discipline and instead perform it as a power-critical rereading across the theological canon, we can engage in a reflection that takes account of the cultural contingency of all theology, exposed through the cultural plurality within Christianity.
References


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