Hitting the Road to Shorten Distances

Theologie interkulturell in Frankfurt in its Thirty-Third Year

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Introduction

This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides. [...] This calls for rejecting the various means of masking reality: angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom. (Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2013, 228, 231)

These characteristics as a “sign of the times” mentioned in the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium of 2013 could, without objection, also be found in the preamble of the project Theologie interkulturell, located at the Faculty of Catholic Theology at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main (cf. Schreijäck 2014; “Fachbereich Katholische Theologie” 2017). The invitation of the Second Vatican Council to understand culture and cultural diversity as a “sign of the times” and take them into account in theological discourse was the key motivation for the founders of the project. Ever since, respect for each contextual theological perspective has been regarded as the foundational choice, based on the conviction that discourses must always be imparted in a specific context (just as they emerge in a specific context) to lead to insights and believed truths. This has remained our core commitment until this, the thirty-third year of Theologie interkulturell. Last but not least, the paradigm of the connection between Gospel and culture proclaimed in Gaudium et Spes and the self-conception of a non-complacent church and a self-committed Catholicism or a committed world church were also decisive. This concept of church and theology does not assume a smooth integration or a colonialist subordination of all local churches nor a levelling of contextual theological approaches. It rather perceives that the demands of the world church require the necessity of a constantly challenging dialogue process. After the Council, the local churches began to open up to the world and to their own context in order to inculturate the Gospel, taking account of the respective contexts. This was considered a way to achieve a “mutual
enrichment” of the universal church respectively to a world church characterized by the respect of cultural diversity.

The Self-conception of “Theologie interkulturell”

Opening up academic theology to approaches from non-Western contexts and theological methods with situation- and experience-related approaches and interdisciplinary research was almost unprecedented when Theologie interkulturell was founded. The awareness of worldwide interdependencies, not only regarding the cultural and theological potential connected to them but also the possible conflicts raised by the new approach, had to be developed step by step. In addition, an appropriate evaluation of one’s own cultural background and of its consequences for the own self-conception in the fields of theology and church, including the limitations resulting from this self-conception, was carried out.

In this context, the initiators of Theologie interkulturell in Frankfurt am Main made a working assumption that is still operative and constitutes the fundamental choice for intercultural dialogue in the theological context: “The pursuit of theology in an intercultural way means, on the one hand, examining what foreign experiences with the Gospel—for example, Christians and communities from another cultural background—make us think and, on the other hand, that we need to look at what our experiences with the Gospel make culturally different Christians and communities think” (Kessler/Siller 1986, 12). The initiators deliberately chose the phrasing Theologie interkulturell for the project to ensure from the beginning that its concern was not a theology encompassing all cultures or enriched by all cultures, as the term “interkulturelle Theologie” could have suggested. The analysis of the situation then led to reflections on the task of the project. This theology would have to be done under circumstances of long-standing interdependencies, and major shifts caused by technological developments, economic and fiscal decisions, technical and political catastrophes, and exploitation and oppression processes as well as those of solidarity and reconciliation. Here the changes in or even destruction of cultural and religious identities leading to the destruction of social contexts and relationships are also important (Kessler/Siller 1986, 12-13).

From today’s perspective, the question arises as to whether the threats have become more radical as structures and contexts became more complex through the globalisation of neoliberal political and economic systems and in view of social frictions of single groups and cultures. Migration has
resulted in an escalation of religious and cultural conflicts. Globalisation and its homogenising effects encourage the emphasis of cultural peculiarities as a counter-model. Supposedly forgotten traditions and culturally determined forms of expression as well as anti-modernist positions are mobilized for resistance’s sake and often result in serious conflicts. The urgent need for intercultural understanding has become even more obvious (cf. Kessler and Siller 1986, 16).

*Theologie interkulturell* continues to hold that religious faith, theological thought and solidarity action resulting from a central religious belief are not limited to a Christianity of the Western European type or character. The central challenge remains the willingness to open up to the spirituality, religiousness and theology of women and men in other cultural contexts and to a mutual adoption of approaches. Obviously, by no means does this signify a rejection of one’s own traditions but rather that these can only become really clear in the encounter with other traditions. The awareness of one’s own religious and cultural traditions and the associated responsibility is required as a base. Intercultural communication and action competence allow a dialogue in an attitude of mutual perception and appreciation that does not exclude criticism and conflicts. A theology adopting only a comparative approach, however, does not meet this requirement. *Theologie interkulturell* thus wants to be a platform of exchange and contribute to a successful learning of communication and interaction on the global horizon. A conception of the church as a world church corresponds to the ethos of universal solidarity and living together in a culture that respects diversity. It sees it as its task to cross the narrow boundaries of its own religious, cultural, social or national interests and to respect the needs of the Other; to be on the side of the poor and the oppressed and to realise the solidarity between all local churches, serving God and the people.

The decision to realise *Theologie interkulturell* proved to be innovative. The project has evolved into a research and teaching programme encompassing and penetrating the theological disciplines and it has become a permanent institution at Goethe University. It contributes to the realisation of ecclesiastical-theological communion insofar as the community of faith does not only include a mutual testimony of the faith of persons belonging to different cultures but also challenges those in this context to deep reflection on the culturally determined testimonies of life and of the faith of the Others.
This implies that the question of truth and truth claims have been taken into consideration from the outset and have been reflected upon as a question of the mediation between universalistic and particularistic approaches and perspectives. Despite the emphasis on the particular character of each culture and the outright rejection of claims to the absolute truth of a single culture, society or religion, *Theologie interkulturell* adheres, according to its self-comprehension, to the unity of humanity, the unity of truth and justice and the unity of faith (cf. Schreijäck/Wenzel (ed.) 2012, 9-10). For this reason, *Theologie interkulturell* also means mutual criticism and a committed struggle, so as to also give space in this way to the higher truth and justice of God in the present world.

**Experiences, Outcomes and Remaining Challenges**

In 2014, we were proud to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of an institution that is unique in the university landscape in Germany due to its size, reach and its unbroken continuity. It gives a distinctive profile to scientific theology at Goethe University in Frankfurt. The outcomes have been impressive research results, numerous publications and successful cooperation with a multitude of theological research and teaching institutions on a truly global basis over a period of more than three decades.

Since the founding of *Theologie interkulturell*, many theologians from all continents have visited the Frankfurt Faculty as guest professors and lecturers. In each academic year—usually in the winter term—a theologian coming from a non-European culture is appointed visiting professor of *Theologie interkulturell*. We collaborate with universities in Africa, India, Asian and South America (cf. Schreijäck 2014, 9) in joint projects on site and the common supervision of postgraduates. There are student excursions to Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, for example, as well as study and internships abroad. *Theologie interkulturell* is now a major field of study. From the start *Theologie interkulturell* published its lectures in its own series, and research results of the symposia are also published by German and international publishing houses.

The symposia are intended to sharpen the intercultural profile of theology. That is why an interdisciplinary, international and intercultural circle of academics as well as representatives from civil society sectors (human rights, development cooperation, NGOs) are invited to discuss the challenges and perspectives of intercultural and interreligious communication and acting competence for global society and to outline impacts for the world church. The international programme “Religion
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in Dialogue” (IPP) could be implemented at Goethe University in 2001 to promote doctoral studies in an international, intercultural and interdisciplinary context (cf. Schreijäck (ed.) 2014, 8).

Theologie interkulturell remains an exciting enterprise, with the constant, unfinished task of always taking new steps toward intercultural hermeneutics. We must insist on the differences insofar as diversity in unity becomes possible and different life contexts are always kept open. In view of the multicultural character of the city of Frankfurt and the global challenge of ecumenism on the one hand and—no less important—the question of the common identity of the continental Christianities all over the world on the other, the programme Theologie interkulturell at Goethe University seems to be virtually well set up to deal academically with the threats to humankind in local and global contexts and, as a second step, to combat them in collaboration with others (cf. Schreijäck and Wenzel 2012, 7–8).

These projects are not intended to level or eliminate the wide variety of different ways of life, traditions, cultures, ethics and identities nor to ignore the problem-solving capacities developed by the respective cultures and religions in their social, geographic and economic contexts. As the so-called “First World” will also be confronted with intercultural conflicts due to migration for economic as well as for political and humanitarian reasons, new models must be developed that reflect both particularistic and universalistic perspectives. This is even truer in view of the fact that social, political, intercultural and interreligious conflicts will escalate, and the traditional European proposals for solutions for these kinds of challenges have become more and more questionable. Despite all emphasis on the particular character of a certain culture and the strict rejection of claims to absolute truth of a culture, society, religion or nation, Theologie interkulturell opposes all kinds of postmodern trends but stands for the unity of mankind, the unity of truth and justice, the unity of faith and the importance of one’s own religious and ecclesiastical experience of faith in the present and the future.
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