WHAT IS INTERCULTURAL ABOUT INTERCULTURAL THEOLOGY?

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Abstract

This article explores what is intercultural about intercultural theology. It starts with some of the founding fathers of intercultural theology who saw it as a new form of missiology. The author argues that intercultural theology and missiology can enrich each other but that they must not be confused. Intercultural theology is based on intercultural hermeneutics which has a long tradition of understanding the relation between sameness and otherness. Based on intercultural philosophy, the author defines interculturality in terms of cultural overlaps between "us" and the "others". From this perspective he argues that much of what is presented as intercultural theology is more comparative than intercultural, and suggests new fields of research: the genetic and linguistic links between people of different continents; information-processing of the brains; and the primal beliefs that underlie particular traditions. He suggests that the Dialogical Self Theory offers an fruitful perspective for such research.

Keywords: intercultural theology, missiology, hermeneutics, identity, cultural differences.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menyelidiki apa yang dimaksud dengan interkultural dalam teologi interkultural. Artikel mulai dengan menyebut beberapa pelopor dari teologi interkultural yang menganggap interkulturasi sebagai bentuk baru misiologi. Pengarang berargumentasi bahwa teologi interkultural dan misiologi dapat saling memperkaya, tetapi bahwa mereka tidak boleh disamakan. Teologi interkultural didasarkan pada hermeneutika

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interkultural, yang sudah cukup lama telah berupaya untuk memahami hubungan di antara kebersamaan dan perbedaan. Berdasarkan filsafat interkultural inilah maka pengarang mendefinisikan interkulturalitas sebagai ketumpangtindihan antara "kita" dan "yang lain". Dari perspektif ini pengarang berargumentasi bahwa apa yang dimaksudkan dengan teologi interkultural bersifat lebih memperbandingkan daripada interkultural, dan ini mengasumsikan adanya bidang-bidang baru untuk diteliti: hubungan-hubungan genetis dan linguistik antara bangsa-bangsa dari benua-benua berbeda; pengolahan informasi dalam otak; dan kepercayaan-kepercayaan primordial yang mendasari tradisi-tradisi partikular. Pengarang mengusulkan bahwa Teori Diri Sendiri yang Dialogis menawarkan perspektif yang bermanfaat untuk penelitian semacam itu.

Kata-kata kunci: teologi interkultural, misiologi, hermeneutika, identitas, perbedaan-perbedaan budaya.

Introduction

Since 2013 the Faculty of Theology of the Duta Wacana Christian University has been developing intercultural theology as a focus of education and research. In a series of guest lectures and seminars the staff and invited speakers discussed various aspects of intercultural theology. I was asked to address the questions: (1) what exactly intercultural theology is, taking into account differences between Western and Eastern thinking; (2) how hermeneutics for intercultural theology develops; (3) how in intercultural encounter—which for those who are seriously involved means a process of change—own identity can be maintained, but also transformed and enriched; and (4) what the relationship is between intercultural theology and missiology, taking into account that missiology is a discipline that is taught in the undergraduate program at Duta Wacana Christian University. In this contribution I will deal with these four questions in reversed order.

Intercultural Theology and Missiology

Although I was not asked to write about the history of intercultural theology, I must introduce briefly two of its founding fathers, because

they say something about the relation between intercultural theology and missiology.

In 1978 the Münster-based pastoral theologian, Adolf Exeler, wrote a "provocative" article in which he proposed developing a comparative theology instead of missiology. He argued that the end of political colonialism meant there was no room anymore for a paternalistic missiology that was at home only in the North Atlantic region. The Second Vatican Council, moreover, said clearly that mission should be a dimension of all theological disciplines and that local churches should develop their own theologies. To the extent that both these precepts of the Second Vatican Council are realized, missiology becomes a doubtful enterprise and comparative theology should work on "the issue that is at stake in missiology", thus Exeler (1978: 199).

The term "intercultural theology" was first propagated by Walter Hollenweger in 1979, who regarded missiology and ecumenism as a coherent whole, studying the common witness of formerly divided churches amid rapid development of church and theology in the "third world" and the emerging gospel of the newer Pentecostal, Evangelical, and Independent Churches. Hollenweger wrote, "This exactly is the theme of intercultural theology (formerly called missiology), namely that the cultural context which is beyond our visual, cultural, and educational perception is important for our theology" (Hollenweger, 1985: 56).

These are just two examples of attempts to replace missiology by intercultural theology, comparative theology, third world theology, contextual theology, theology of liberation, theology of dialogue, in Europe since the early 1970s. These attempts must be placed in the context of developments outside and inside the churches. Outside the churches there were the end of the colonial era and the independence of new states in Asia and Africa; skepticism about the European civilization project and the growing secularism as a result of two World Wars; and the massive critique on mission as a dominating enterprise. More or less in reaction to these extra-ecclesial developments there were the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church between 1963 and 1965 in Rome and the fourth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, with their programs for dialogue, stressing that there is truth and goodness in other religions. So many people thought that mission was no longer needed and that dialogue could take its place.

I have never been in favor of replacing missiology by intercultural theology, because the assumptions that Exeler and others started with are

clearly falsified by history. There is more mission going on in the world than ever before, mission which needs thorough study and critical reflection. And from a mainline perspective, missiologists would simply be misunderstood, not only by their Pentecostal and charismatic colleagues, but also by their Muslim brothers and sisters, if they would give up thinking about mission. According to me, missiology and intercultural theology are simply two different things that must not be confused. One cannot be replaced by the other (Wijsen, 2003).

Hermeneutics for Intercultural Theology

It is generally accepted that hermeneutics as it developed in Europe was and to a large extent still is culture-specific: it is individualistic because its aims is ultimately to understand oneself; it is focused on harmonization or fusion of horizons; it is instrumental as the reader aims to take possession of the text; and it is rational as it is based on propositional logic (cf. Scheuerer, 2001).

In reaction to a Western hermeneutics, the German-Indian Philosopher Ram Adhar Mall (2000) develops a Theory of Analogous Hermeneutics. He distinguishes three models of cultural encounter, which he labels the identity model, the alterity model, and the analogy model. The identity model is based on the assumption that we and the others are basically the same; the others are like us, they are equals. The alterity model is based on the assumption that we and the others are essentially different; the others are not like us, they are strangers. The analogy model is based on the assumption that there are cultural overlaps between us and the others; there is unity in diversity.

Basically the identity model is the enlightenment model of the *animal rationale* or *homo religious*. Human beings differ not in essence, but in degree. In reaction to the enlightenment model, post-modern and post-colonial thinkers stressed the right to be different. Africans and Asians are not carbon copies of Europeans. The analogy model emphasizes hybrid or "glocal" identities. Human potential is universal, but this does not mean that people are the same as they are also product of socialization and acculturation.

These models may also be referred to as the mono-cultural (a society with a dominant culture which respects minorities), the multi-cultural

(a compartmentalized society where groups live side by side), and the inter-cultural model (a plural society where groups interact and mix); or the dependence (colonial), the in-dependence (post-colonial), and inter-dependence (post Cold War) model; or the modern, the post-modern, and the trans-modern model, to use an expression of Enrique Dussel (2012).

Continuity and Change of Identity

Having said this, let me reflect on the third question, how in intercultural encounter, which for those who are seriously involved means a process of change, own identity can be maintained, but also transformed and enriched. Particularly the relation between cultural identity and societal change is at stake.

During the "golden age" of American anthropology, which existed roughly between the two world wars, culture was seen as analogous to language. It was perceived of as a meaning-system (language) that existed independently of actors (speakers) and was shared by the members of a group (speech community), and was durable. It united them and differentiated them from others. Cultural identity was perceived of in primordial terms, as some "thing" (Hannerz, 1992: 12).

In harmony with that understanding of culture acculturation or culture change through cross-cultural communication was seen as a linear process, moving from one culture to the other. In harmony with this, inculturation in mission theory and practice was seen as interaction between Christianity on the one hand, and culture on the other hand, as more or less bounded wholes.

However, since the early 1990s this notion of culture has been questioned by post-modern and post-structuralist thinkers who state that culture does not exist, at least not in the way cultural anthropologists thought that it existed. What exists is a multiplicity of cultural orientations that are related to education, profession, sexual, and political preference, religious affiliation (Van Binsbergen, 2003: 459).

In harmony with the latter notion inculturation can be said to be the mission model of the 20th century; the "mission model of the 21st century is interculturation, or interculturalisation". The term interculturation was coined by the Dutch mission bishop Joseph Blomjous (Shorter, 1988; Bosch, 1992: 456). Coincidently, Blomjous was the bishop of the diocese that I served, and I dedicated my doctoral dissertation to him.

What is Intercultural Theology?

One can understand intercultural theology as the theological reflection upon the process of interculturalisation, the interconnectedness of cultures, the "global ecumene" or "creolization of cultures", as described by Ulf Hannerz (1992) in his book on *Cultural Complexity*. This is how I have understood intercultural theology until recently (Wijsen, 2001). But here I would like to go one step further than this.

For me, intercultural theology is not the theological reflection about "the differences between Western and Eastern thinking", as I was asked to address, but about the factual overlaps between people, the existing cultural universals or anthropological constants, knowing that cross-cultural communication does not show differences, but brings them about, as Fredrick Barth (1969) shows in his ground-breaking book on *Ethnic Boundaries*.

Just as intercultural philosophy, intercultural theology assumes that a "common heritage could possibly (be) constructed to a much larger degree than would be suggested by the emphatic affirmation of a difference that is irresolvable" (Van Binsbergen, 2003: 389). Theologically this bring us back to what is in fact the oldest recorded theory of culture: the myth that sees in the construction of the Tower of Babel the origin of cultural and linguistic diversity (Van Binsbergen, 2003: 520).

This opens a new field for future research, namely looking for an explanation for the genetic and linguistic links between peoples of various continents (Van Binsbergen, 2003: 520, 389), pointing possibly at early migrations and massive inter-marriages; the information-processing of the brains (Wiredu, 1996) which would bring us to the relation between intercultural theology and cognitive sciences; and ultimately to the common or primal beliefs that underlies particular religious traditions. For example, why are shrines and pilgrimages in Africa and Asia more or less the same?

From this perspective, I think that introductions to intercultural theology written by my esteemed colleagues such as Klaus Hock (2011) in Rostock and Volker Küster (2011) in Mainz are not inter-cultural in the above given sense, but comparative. They describe contextual theologies in and for themselves, from their core experiences, and look for similarities and differences.

At the danger of being condemned of advocating a neo-scholastic type of theoretical universalism, my present work brings me much closer

to a "new universalism" (Krieger, 1991), not in a normative sense as something that should be the case, but in an empirical sense as something that is already the case.

In his book *Fremdheit als Heimat,* Richard Friedli (1974), yet another founding father of "intercultural theology" wrote about "cultural circulation", and about the "Indonesian complex in Africa", hypothesizing a correlation between the Central African concept *imana* and the Indonesian *mana*. Having immersed myself in an African and Indonesia context over the past twenty years I think that Friedli had a point. From historical, linguistic and genetic research we now have much more evidence in favor of such a correlation.

To the extent that there are differences between "Western" and "Eastern" people, and of course, such differences do exist, they are not cultural but inter-personal. They have little to do with geographical differences or places of birth, but much with independent or inter-dependent self concepts, irrespective of whether they were born or live in the East or the West (Kim, 2002). In trying to make sense of this, I draw upon the dialogical self theory (Hermans, Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Hermans, Gieser, 2012), that I am working on in my current research. I cannot only take the position of the other; the other is already part of me. He or she is not totally strange to me. Thus intercultural encounter needs not threaten the own identity. But this goes beyond the scope of this article.

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