Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation

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Intercultural Theology as a Three-Way Conversation: Beyond the Western Dominance of Intercultural Theology[1]

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Abstract: Intercultural theology intends to engage in dialogue with theological expressions from different parts of the Global Church, but often works with western assumptions about what dialogue partners and texts are considered academically credible and what the proper focus of the academic study of such voices should be. This article argues, first, that intercultural theology can only move beyond the western dominance of its own discourse and become truly intercultural if it takes into account the theological voices that are expressed in non-academic texts, oral traditions, and practices; second, that intercultural theology can only engage in true dialogue and truly theological dialogue if it becomes a three-way conversation characterised by joint attention to God as He has revealed Himself in the canonical Scriptures as the object – or subject – that brings the conversation partners together.

Keywords: Contextual Theology, Intercultural Theology, Missiology, Method, Religious Studies, Pentecostalism, God-Talk

Last year, a student from Nigeria spoke with me to share his amazement. He was attending a one year international study program on evangelism and apologetics in Oxford and I saw him every week in my doctrine lectures. 'I do not understand England', he said, 'my English fellow students have a much better understanding of the Christian faith than I see in Nigerian Christians. I truly appreciate that. But at the same time it seems as if the Gospel lacks power over here. If we organize an evangelistic campaign in Nigeria, hundreds will come to faith. If we pray with people for healing it happens. Over here people organise so many activities, but so few people come to faith. It seems as if the Gospel does not have any power over here. How can that be?' I mumbled something about secularisation and cultural differences and that I shared his incomprehension, but in the end I stood there lost for words. Yet, these are the type of questions that intercultural theology needs to address.

The use of the label 'intercultural theology' for a particular discipline is a recent development and the field is still in flux.[2] My predecessor, Professor Volker Küster, was still called professor of 'cross-cultural theology', itself a new label at the time he was appointed in 2002. These name changes are an indication of the rapid developments in this academic field. Though the name itself is older, 'intercultural' has probably only been used as a label

[1] This paper is based on the author's inaugural lecture as Professor of Intercultural Theology at the Protestant Theological University, Groningen, the Netherlands, on 11 November 2014. He wishes to express his thanks to Klaas Bom, Berdine van den Toren-Lekkerkerker and Peter Verbaan for their comments on earlier versions of this text and to Samuel Bussey for editing of the English translation.

[2] Volker Küster, 'Interkulturelle Theologie', in: Hans Dieter Betz *et al.* (eds.), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart Handwörterbuch für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2001, 197-199.

for a theological project since 1975 when Jochen Margull, Walter Hollenweger and Richard Friedli began the tri-lingual series *Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums*.[3]

Opting for 'intercultural theology' is, in my opinion, a positive development. Previously, theological conversations around similar questions were often addressed under the heading of 'contextual theology'. This term rightly emphasises that theological reflection is inextricably related to the particular context in which it occurs. This was an important step in comparison to forms of theology that address a multitude of theological questions as if the context plays no role whatsoever in the process. The contextual theology project presupposes that not just certain elements or aspects of theology are contextually shaped, but the *entirety* of the theological edifice. The project stresses furthermore that *all* theology is contextually shaped. This is not only the case for theology in Africa, Asia and Latin-America, but equally for Western theology that is profoundly shaped by the influence of modernity and, more recently, postmodernity.[4]

With this understanding we left in 1997 as a family for the Faculté de Théologie Evangélique de Bangui (FATEB) in the Central African Republic. As a lecturer in systematic theology, I hoped to contribute to the formulation of a theology that was contextually relevant and insightful. From the beginning, however, we believed that we did not just depart for French-Speaking Africa to contribute something, but also, and possibly even more so, in order to learn, to share in the life of this church in another part of the world as the eyes and ears of the church in the Netherlands, and to return enriched with these lessons from a young and growing church to an old and perhaps somewhat tired church in Europe. It is a great privilege that I am able to accept a Chair for teaching and research in the area of intercultural theology and so contribute to the conversation between Dutch theology and the global church.

Intercultural theology orchestrates and studies this conversation between Christian communities from different cultural settings. Contextual theology mainly focuses on the relationship between theology and specific contexts, but intercultural theology enables a critical consideration of that relationship by engaging in a conversation between different contextual theologies.

The development of both contextual theology and intercultural theology has been shaped by the use of and dialogue with the social sciences. Inculturation theologies, a major stream of contextual theology, mainly relate to cultural anthropology and religious studies.

Liberation theologies, another major stream, mainly relate to sociology, economics and political science. Intercultural theology also includes insights from various other fields of study, for example communication studies and interdisciplinary migration studies. This focus on the description and analysis of processes of cultural change and intercultural encounters with the help of social scientific tools raises an important issue as to what extent intercultural theology can still be called 'theology'. How does it contribute to speaking about God and about the world in the light of God's intentions? Or is this only what Robert

[3] Frankfurt am Main *et al.*: Peter Lang.

[4] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1991, 448-449; cf. Benno van den Toren, 'Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?' in: David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1991, 448f; cf. Benno van den Toren, "Can We See the Naked Theological Truth?," in *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, ed. Matthew Cook *et al.* (eds.), *Local Theology for the Global Church: Principles for an Evangelical Approach to Contextualization*, Pasadena: William Carey Library 2010, 94-95.

Schreiter calls 'theological tourism',[5] an interest in exotic expressions of the Christian faith that remains a hobby for specialists but rarely touches wider theological debates?

This is the question I intend to address in this article. To gain insight into the importance of this question, I will first draw attention to how the specific Western cultural setting that has given birth to the project of intercultural theology has shaped its current form. This secondly raises the question of whether intercultural theology is sufficiently open to the particular character of theological voices from the global church. In the light of these explorations, I will finally discuss the place of God in intercultural theology.

The Cultural Location of Intercultural Theology

Because intercultural theology studies the role of the context for the shaping of theological views and insights, it cannot itself escape from such an analysis. How is the project of intercultural theology itself shaped by its cultural and social context?[6] Such a critical self-examination is a precarious enterprise, because we normally find it harder to perceive our own tacit cultural presuppositions than those of others. Intercultural theology, however, has an advantage compared to some other disciplines because it studies the critical perspectives of others on its own context and because it aims to nurture the ability to look at oneself through the eyes of others.

The shape of the discipline is partly determined by the institutional history of the professorial chairs concerned. In Europe a number of chairs in intercultural theology have come into existence because of the restructuring of older chairs in missiology or mission studies.[7] This partly reflects a growing unease with the notion of 'mission', [8] but also means that missiology itself is still a part of the area that intercultural theology will need to cover;[9] resulting in a tension that may not always work out well for the teaching of missiology.
It is fortunate that some institutions such as the Protestant Theological University (PThU) have opted to maintain chairs in both Missiology and Intercultural Theology. This means on the one hand that the church's call to mission receives full attention. Mission is part of the essence of the church. And as Frances Oborji notes in a reaction to the changes in German Theological Faculties from missiology to intercultural theology: not all mission is intercultural and not all missiological questions can be reduced to questions of intercultural

[5] Robert J. Schreiter, 'Foreword', in: Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ: Intercultural Christology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2001, xii.
[6] Werner Ustorf, 'The Cultural Origins of 'Intercultural' Theology', in: Mark J. Cartledge and David A. Cheetham (eds), *Intercultural Theology: Approaches and Themes*, London *et al.*: SCM Press 2011, 11-28.
[7] *Missionswissenschaft Als Interkulturelle Theologie Und Ihr Verhältnis Zur Religionswissenschaft*, 2005, website of the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Missionswissenschaft*, http://www.dgmw.org/Missionswissenschaft.pdf; Frans J.S. Wijsen, 'New Wine in Old Wineskins? Intercultural Theology instead of Missiology', in: Martha T. Frederiks, Meindert Dijkstra and Anton W. J. Houtepen (eds.), *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of Jan A. B. Jongeneel*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2003, 39-40.
[8] Werner Ustorf, 'Rethinking Missiology', in: Anton W.J. Houtepen and Albert Ploeger (eds.), *World Christianity Reconsidered: Questioning the Questions of Ecumenism and Missiology: Contributions for Bert Hoedemaker*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2001, 67-78.
[9] Cf. a number of recent German manuals: Klaus Hock, *Einführung in die interkulturelle Theologie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 2010; Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie*, Stuttgart: UTB 2011; Henning Wrogemann, *Interkulturelle Theologie und Hermeneutik Grundfragen, aktuelle Beispiele, theoretische Perspektiven*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2012.

theology.[10] More mission work is taking place today than ever before which asks for critical missiological reflection.[11] It also asks for our attention from an intercultural perspective, because many non-Western believers have a strong missionary drive,[12] a drive that also leads to mission in the opposite direction, from non-Western to Western contexts.[13] On the other hand there is a risk that making intercultural theological studies part of missiology will lead to a pragmatic use of intercultural theology for which interculturality is only relevant in view of cross-cultural mission. If intercultural theology is an independent chair, it shows that this discipline is not only considered to be of importance in view of the missionary calling of the church. All our theology is being questioned in the mirror of the intercultural 'other'.

Intercultural theology contributes to the self-understanding of believers, of Christian communities and pastors in relation to the global Christian community – and in this light also contributes to a renewed understanding of God.

More important than the institutional history of the discipline is the wider cultural context.

This context is in the first place shaped by the often discussed shift of the demographic centre of global Christianity from Europe and North-America to Latin-America, Africa and Asia.[14] This development runs parallel to declining church participation in Europe and it is justified that we look to the church in the Global South to learn from the zeal, the confidence, the missionary drive and the social involvement of Christian communities in those regions.[15]

The wider context that shapes the genealogy of this theological discipline is furthermore shaped by a number of developments that are linked to the label 'globalisation'. The older notion of contextual theology focuses mainly on local cultural contexts and their particularity.[16] Intercultural theology is appropriate for a context of globalisation in which different regions of the world are becoming increasingly intertwined. It fits a context in which economic developments in China impact the stock market in Amsterdam. In the global church we also find a great complexity of flows of information, money and migrants. Particularly in the global church the hubs of these flows are no longer all located in the North-Atlantic cultural sphere. There are around a million migrant Christians in the Netherlands,[17] including, for example, over 30 congregations of the Redeemed Christian Church of God led by Pastor Enoch Adejare Adeboye with its headquarters in Nigeria and a broad and professional presence on the Internet.[18] Theology in this context can no longer be described as 'local', but with a neologism 'glocal': it has a local colour, but is linked to global flows and networks.

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[10] Francis Anekwe Oborji, 'Missiology in Its Relation to Intercultural Theology and Religious Studies', *Mission Studies* 25/1 (2008), 113-114.

[11] Wijsen, 47.

[12] Wijsen, 54.

[13] Cf. Israel Olofinjana, *Turning the Tables on Mission: Stories of Christians from the Global*, Watford: Instant Apostle 2013.

[14] Cf. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford *et al.*: Oxford University Press 2002; Todd M Johnson *et al.*, *Christianity in Its Global Context, 1970-2020*, South Hamilton, MA: Centre for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary, June 2013, website of *Gordon Conwell*, http://wwwgordonconwell.com/netcommunity/CSGCResources/ChristianityinitsGlobalContext.pdf.

[15] *Contra* Ustorf, 'Cultural Origins', 21.

[16] Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, London: SCM 1985.

[17] Marten van der Meulen, 'Assessing the Impact of Migrant Christianity. A Case Study of the Netherlands, with a Special Focus on Amsterdam', forthcoming.

[18] Website *RCCG Netherlands Mission - Parishes*, http://rccgnetherlands.org/index.php/parishes-list, accessed 8 September 2014.

A third factor is the growing influence of the social sciences on the self-understanding of the contemporary European academy and also on theology.[19] We are increasingly aware of how deeply our values and truths are influenced by our social and cultural environment. Contextual and intercultural theological studies have themselves contributed to this awareness in the wider church and in academic theology. In studying new Christian communities, it has become clear how the great variety of Christian expressions is not primarily determined by doctrinal variations and contrasts, which for centuries determined the relationships between church communities in the old world. This diversity is rather related to the varying socio-political and cultural contexts that continue to raise new issues that the Gospel needs to address.[20]

The relationship between social and cultural developments on the one hand and the desirability of changes in the theological enterprise on the other is, of course, complex. Sometimes social developments simply mean that academic theology will need to develop accordingly in order to remain relevant in this new environment. This is exemplified in the development of intercultural theology. In a globalising world and in the context of global Christianity, academic and ecclesiastical theology cannot allow itself to invest its energy only in the study of local history and traditions.

Social and cultural changes may also present a more positive opportunity to gain new insights that were harder to access beforehand. In this way the growing influence of the population of the new cities and the growing literacy among this population in the time of the European Reformation contributed to the (re-)discovery of the importance of the accessibility of the Scriptures in the vernacular languages and to a consideration of the *claritas Scripturae*. In a comparable manner the process of globalisation has led to a new consideration of the meaning of the 'catholicity' of Christian theology. According to Robert Schreiter, globalisation challenges us to look for a 'new catholicity' according to which the church can only be truly catholic if she listens to voices from different geographic and cultural contexts.[21] In this process marginalised groups and voices need our special attention.[22]

In this way intercultural theology contributes to the wider theological debate in the Western church and to the training of pastors and chaplains. It does so by giving a voice to the global church. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is so multifaceted and has a much richer meaning than we can perceive from our limited historical and cultural perspective. In this context Andrew Walls points to the Epistle to the Ephesians, in which we find the notion that it is only 'with all the saints, [that we have the power to comprehend] what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge' (Ephesians 3:18-19, NRSV).

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[19] Stefan Paas, 'Alles Wordt Vloeibaar', *Wapenveld* 63/1 (2013): 2-10.

[20] Ustorf, 'Cultural Origins', 17-18; cf. for the related influence of postmodernism Anton W.J. Houtepen, 'Intercultural Theology: A Postmodern Ecumenical Mission', in: Martha T. Frederiks, Meindert Dijkstra and Anton W.J. Houtepen (eds.), *Towards an Intercultural Theology: Essays in Honour of Jan A. B. Jongeneel*, Zoetermeer: Meinema 2003, 30-31.

[21] Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1997.

[22] Cf. World Council of Churches, *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, 2012, website of the *World Council of Churches*, http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/mission-and-evangelism/together-towards-life-mission-and-evangelism-in-changing-landscapes.

> Christ's completion … comes from all humanity, from the translation of the life of Jesus into the lifeways of all the world's cultures and subcultures through history. None of us can reach Christ's completeness on our own. We need each other's vision to correct, enlarge and focus our own; only together we are complete in Christ.[23]

Obviously, social developments are not always only positive for theology. This is also the case for the developments that contributed to the rise of intercultural theology.[24] This type of intercultural theology in the tradition of Margull and more recently Ustorf considers theological identities as fundamentally determined by 'the pressing needs of ... social, political, religious and cultural contexts', joined with the conviction that social engagement is a, if not the fundamental mode of being Christian.[25] This understanding of intercultural theology can relatively easily be combined with epistemological constructivism: the content of theology is not in the first place determined by its orientation towards the God of Israel and his self-revelation in the Scriptures, but principally in the light of what this theology means for the self-understanding of concrete Christian communities and how it helps them to live in a particular social and cultural context. In the analysis of the meaning of religious beliefs and theological convictions the role of God and his revelation is diminished in comparison to the context. As in the 'cultural-linguistic' understanding of doctrine and theology of George Lindbeck, one does not necessarily deny that the God of Israel may be the referent of theological statements. For understanding the meaning of such statements, however, this reference is less important, because they are understood first and foremost in relation to the life and practices of concrete Christian communities.[26]

As such, this understanding of intercultural theology reflects the late-modern or post-modern context in which it originates. It fits the modern and postmodern scepticism concerning a historical revelation. It reflects the growing influence of the social sciences on theology. It fits the postmodern attention for the thickness of the concrete life of (religious) communities. At the same time it creates space to practice theology in a secular academic environment. Even more, it shows that religious beliefs are relevant in a way that secular people can understand because these beliefs play a major role in providing meaning and supporting community cohesion and social engagement. In this form, intercultural theology is not only a discipline that fits a globalizing world and a global church, but also a discipline that reflects a number of typical late-modern or post-modern Western values.[27]

Therefore, the project of intercultural theology is paradoxically on the one hand an expression of a new openness for the global church and her theologies, but on the other hand, in certain principal forms, also a quintessentially Western project. This Western character may be unavoidable. Intercultural theology itself stresses that Western

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[23] Andrew F. Walls, 'The Ephesian Moment: At A Crossroads in Christian History', in: Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in The Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2002, 79.

[24] In addressing this issue, we need to ask ourselves what we refer to with the label 'intercultural theology'. Ustorf believes, for example, that the renaming if the Fuller 'School of Mission' to 'School of Intercultural Studies' is an inappropriate appropriation of the label, because this institution does not share the radical basic assumptions that should characterise the intercultural project; see Ustorf, 'Rethinking Missiology', 15.

[25] Ustorf, 'Cultural Origins', 17; Küster, *Einführung*, 56.

[26] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press 1984, 19, 35; cf. for an analysis of Lindbeck's position Benno van den Toren, *Breuk en brug. In gesprek met Karl Barth en postmoderne theologie over geloofsverantwoording*, Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum 1995, 76-79; Benno van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics as Cross-Cultural Dialogue*, London *et al.*: T. & T. Clark, 2011, 63-64.

[27] 'Interkulturelle Theologie ist ursprünglich ein europäisch Projekt' (Küster, *Einführung*, 110).

theologians themselves should not pretend to be able to practice context-free theology. Yet, postcolonial theologians such as Kwok Pui-lan show in their analyses how important it is to ask who shapes a certain theological discourse and whose interests it serves.[28] This raises the question of how an open intercultural conversation should be conducted and who gets to set the agenda.

Barriers in the Dialogue with the Global Church

In light of what has been discussed, we need to address the question of how we can truly listen to the cultural 'other'. Is true intercultural dialogue possible if one of the parties sets the agenda and the parameters of the conversation? In light of my experience[29] I would like in what follows to discuss two closely related obstacles that need our attention if we want to engage in an open intercultural conversation and so contribute to a new catholicity. These obstacles relate to the nature of the sources used and the place of God in intercultural theology.

The first obstacle concerns the nature of the sources that tend to be central in the Western theological enterprise. Western theologians – and particularly Western systematic theologians such as myself – are mainly used to working with written texts. These texts also need to be written in a certain style and comply with certain formal criteria in order to be considered adequate theological dialogue partners. If we look for similar texts of non-Western[30] origin we often end up with doctoral theses of African and Asian theologians published by Western publishing houses. These are by definition written for a Western academic audience and therefore do not always address the themes that are locally most important and are not always in line with forms of theologising that are common in non-Western churches. This is still the case – though slightly less so – for the compendia and conference volumes that are easily accessible to Western theologians. Western interests – also Western intercultural interests – and Western criteria – also Western criteria for what counts as good intercultural theology – still determine who are invited to academic conferences, which books are published and which non-Western theologians are invited to teach at Western institutions where they have the best platform to contribute to the Western intercultural conversation.

This does not always mean that these theologians are always the most influential thinkers in the context from which they originate or where they continue to work. On the one hand, training institutions in those countries often study Western theological sources.[31]

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[28] David Bradnick, 'Postcolonial Theology', *The Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd 2012, 1850-1851; see for an example Pui-lan Kwok, 'Unbinding Our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse', in: Laura E Donaldson and Pui-lan Kwok (eds.), *Postcolonialism, Feminism, and Religious Discourse*, New York: Routledge 2002, 62-81.

[29] If we do not want to decide beforehand the ways in which other cultures differ from our own, it is impossible to determine *a priori* what the obstacles are to intercultural encounters. These can therefore only be discovered in concrete encounters with others.

[30] The notion 'non-Western' is itself problematic because it defines theological contributions from other parts of the world in relation to the West and thereby presents the West as the centre of the theological conversation. At the same time this label is unavoidable in the context of this article, because it explores the meaning of global theology for the Western world.

[31] See for example Martin Accad, 'Middle Eastern Theology in Evangelical Perspective', in: Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (eds.), *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2012, 148-162.

Different factors may contribute to this situation. Maybe Western sources are more easily accessible, either in terms of their content or in terms of their availability; maybe academic contextual theology is experienced as alienating; or still other factors may play their role, such as an unexpressed tension between theologians working in their region of origin and those working in the Western diaspora. On the other hand, local students and pastors may use local publications that Western theologians will not recognise as academic sources and that may not be written by academically trained theologians, but that are locally experienced as the most relevant texts available. Consider, for example, publications such as *The Blood Triumph*[32] of David Oyedepo, presiding bishop of the Living Faith Church World Wide (also known as the Winners' Chapel network), pastor of the Faith Tabernacle with an auditorium that seats 50,000 in a suburb of Lagos, and founder of two universities. Today there is an important production of Christian texts in churches that show little interest in the West and least so in Western academic theology.

Even more important than such printed sources is the theology that is done in other forms: theology that is expressed in sermons, songs, liturgy, and in pastoral practices such as a prayer for healing or a service for the inauguration of a new president. Because a number of these newer Christian movements are prominently present on the internet, much material can be found on church websites and on social media. This means that the study of intercultural theology is only possible if we are learning to look beyond the boundaries of dominant forms of Western academic discourse. This also demands the development of new skills needed to locate and interpret the relevant sources and investment to make these accessible so that they can contribute to the wider theological conversation.

When after decades of studying secularisation the American theologian Harvey Cox turned his attention to international Pentecostalism, he discovered that the research methods he was used to were not adequate in this new field:

> As a theologian, I had grown accustomed to studying religious movements by reading what theologians wrote and trying to grasp their central and most salient doctrines. But I soon found out that with Pentecostalism this approach doesn't help much.[33]

In this respect missiologists have an advantage over classically trained systematic theologians because many of them are also trained to use social sciences such as cultural anthropology. Social sciences provide tools to interpret, for example, the meaning of church meetings and to describe and analyse the implicit theology in religious practices.[34]

The use of social science tools, however, does not always result in a true intercultural theological conversation. Social scientists were ahead of mainstream theologians in recognising the importance of the spectacular growth of global Pentecostalisms. Researchers studying these movements, however, are mainly interested in pertinent contextual factors, social causes and the social impact of these movements. These

[32] David O. Oyedepo, *The Blood-Triumph*, Ikeja, Lagos: Dominion Publishing House 1995.
[33] Harvey G. Cox, *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, Reading, MA *et al.*: Addison-Wesley Pub 1995, 7.
[34] See for example Allan Anderson, Michael Bergunder, and André F. Droogers (eds.), *Studying Global Pentecostalism: Theories and Methods*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2010; Miranda Klaver, *This Is My Desire: A Semiotic Perspective on Conversion in an Evangelical Seeker Church and a Pentecostal Church in the Netherlands*, Amsterdam: Pallas Publications 2011.

researchers study, for example, how Latin American Pentecostalism has contributed to the formation of a work ethic that has a similar effect as the influence of European Calvinism on the development of modern capitalism, as analysed by Max Weber. The influence of Pentecostal types of Christianity on social mobility is indeed remarkable and an important area of research. The discovery that conversion to a Pentecostal community results in social mobility does not, however, mean that we can conclude that people are converted *because* of the economic advantages. This conclusion only follows if one has a thoroughly materialistic anthropology, an anthropology that most theologians would not share. The motives of believers themselves will often be of a religious nature and should be studied as such. What is more important: these implicit or explicit theological convictions should be taken seriously in a theological intercultural dialogue.

How easily this can be overlooked is seen in Cox' analysis of the global Pentecostal movement. For Cox Pentecostalism is not merely a social phenomenon, but a truly religious movement. He considers its rise as a revival of what he calls 'primal spirituality', a spirituality that originally belongs to what it means to be human, which was suppressed in our secular world, but that is revived in Pentecostalism and similar movements. In a surprising, critical analysis the Nigerian theologian Nimi Wariboko asks whether Cox in his *Fire from Heaven* has indeed departed from his earlier secularisation thesis, as is often assumed. For Cox, this 'primal spirituality' is after all an immanent characteristic of human existence that is not necessarily related to a truly transcendent God. Cox uses the Pentecostal movement to create space for a spirituality that is furthermore individualistic, undogmatic and post-institutional. According to Wariboko, it is therefore a type of religion that does not counter secularisation, but fits well within the *Secular City* that Cox described decades before.[35]

It is clear that Cox conducted many conversations with adherents of a variety of Pentecostal movements. He, however, mostly engaged in conversations about their religious experiences and explained these within his own theological framework. The engagement did therefore not yet result in a *theological* conversation. Pentecostalism remains for Cox first of all an object for study and not truly a theological dialogue partner. It is difficult, for example, to imagine that after such a dialogue Cox would still unquestioningly place Pentecostal spirituality in line with religious expressions such as forms of shamanism and the African Instituted Churches.[36] Most Pentecostals themselves would see such movements as the result of the influences of demonic powers that are directly opposed to the Holy Spirit of God.[37] It is of course possible that Cox does not agree with this theological evaluation, but he gives the impression that his own judgement is formed mainly on the basis of a phenomenological analysis of 'primal spiritualities' rather than after engaging in conversation about different theological convictions and judgements. In the end for Cox, Pentecostal believers are research objects rather than conversation partners.

Methodologically intercultural theology does not, therefore, just ask to engage with a wide range of sources. Church historians are equally used to studying different genres and religious practices as sources for our understanding of the life of faith of the church through

[35] Nimi Wariboko, 'Fire from Heaven: Pentecostals in the Secular City', *Pneuma* 33/3 (2011), 391-408.
[36] Cox, 213–262.
[37] Cf. the criticism of Ogbu Kalu of forcing African Pentecostalism into line with the African Instituted Churches: 'The predominance of Western Sociologists, coming from cultural contexts that emphasize inclusivism and promote religious pluralism, has informed the study of both the AICs and Pentecostalism. They ride roughshod over distinctions that matter to the practitioners.' (Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008, 67.)

the ages. A fundamental difference with intercultural theology is that the latter discipline can engage in a conversation with persons and communities of faith it actually encounters. This means that we can present them with our interpretation of their texts and practices and test these accordingly.

It is a further characteristic of intercultural dialogue that our conversation partners are not static and fixed, as in the writings and religious expressions of historic persons and communities. They change constantly. They will also change through the intercultural conversations with Western Christians and theologians, as we ourselves also hope to change through our dialogue with them. Intercultural theology can therefore not limit itself to research methods in which the researchers intend to neutralise their own presence as far as possible. It will need to experiment with elements of 'participatory research' and 'action research' in which the interaction between the researcher and the research population is itself thematised. It is after all the experience of those involved in intercultural exchange that one can learn much more in an actual encounter than would be possible if one observed others from a distance. The insights gained in Wilbur Donovan's classic *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai* would not have been possible if he had not allowed himself to be questioned while engaging in a conversation with the Masai concerning the Christian faith.[38]

From Dialogue to Three-Way Conversation

In order to engage in a truly intercultural conversation, we therefore need to critically consider the sources which we use in intercultural theology and the way in which we study these sources – and allow the voices of our conversation partners to be heard. For intercultural encounters to lead to a truly theological exchange, we will also need to create space for a dialogue that touches on God and other theological themes. In this respect intercultural theology is also deeply influenced by its Western context of origin. This represents a second important obstacle to an open intercultural conversation that I would like to address in this article. One contributing factor is the influence of the social sciences already mentioned, because these tend to explain faith convictions – and sometimes also to explain them 'away' – in relation to the social factors that played a role in the formation of these convictions. Another factor is the influence of a dominant methodological atheism in the Western academic world which allows reference to God only as the object of people's religious convictions; He cannot Himself be the object of academic reflection.[39] A final factor is the 'postcolonial *Angst*' about the way in which Western theological models have in the past sometimes been declared universally valid and imposed on Christian communities in contexts in which they were less appropriate. As Frans Wijsen notes:

> Very often scholars feel embarrassed about the mistakes of mission in the past, and therefore want to replace missiology for something else, not only exchange missiology for comparative or intercultural theology, but exchange theology as a whole for science of religion.[40]

[38] Vincent J. Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, London: SCM 1985.
[39] So for example Ustorf, 'Rethinking Missiology'.
[40] Wijsen, 44.

That intercultural theological conversations should in principle be conversations about God is given with the vocation of theological faculties and divinity schools as academic institutions and as centres for the formation of pastors. If intercultural theology intends to contribute to the broader research programs of theological faculties and to the training of pastors, it will need to contribute to the knowledge and service of the God who has made Himself known in Christ. It is beyond the scope of this article to justify this basic conviction. There are, however, also a number of reasons to make God and His work one, if not the central theme of intercultural theology that are bound up with the particular nature of the discipline of intercultural theology.

The centrality of God in intercultural theology is, first of all, required if we want to approach our dialogue partners with utter seriousness. I have the impression that the overwhelming majority of communities in the global church understand themselves primarily as communities who find their identity in their relationship with the triune God. If they are interested at all in an intercultural conversation with us, this is mainly because of a shared belief in God. People are indeed conscious about the social significance of the Gospel and long for signs of the Kingdom of God. More than in the West, many of the more evangelical and Pentecostal believers in the poorer parts of the world expect that their faith has meaning for their struggle against poverty and their longing for healing and for a more just society.[41] But this does not make this faith and the implicit or explicit theologies of these communities a function of their social engagement. Rather, this social engagement is the product of their faith in a God who heals and liberates and of an experienced unity of life in which Christian faith and the challenges of daily life are closely related.[42] These theological motives are equally present in non-Western forms of liberation theology, which are often profoundly theologically motivated. These theologies are not only rooted in experiences of injustice and oppression, but also in a faith rooted in the Scriptures and inspired by Christ that God is a liberator.[43] Menno van Oel thus notes in his study on international theology students in Kampen:

> In the South-African theses (and this is equally valid for those from Korea and Indonesia) secularisation is not present … They are convinced: God exists and He is at work and the church is a witness of this. The main question is: *where* is God at work? On whose side is He?[44]

The decisive role of faith in God and in his work is not only present in the lived faith of communities, but also in the work of academic theologians who work in a context in which God is more easily taken into consideration than in the West. This leads to the paradox noted by Wijsen that non-Western academics working at faculties of religious sciences often understand themselves as theologians while researchers in intercultural theology at

[41] C. René Padilla, 'The Biblical Basis for Social Ethics', in: *Transforming the World? The Gospel and Social Responsibility*, Nottingham: Apollos (IVP) 2009), 187-204; Adoniram Gaxiola, 'Poverty as a Meeting and Parting Place: Similarities and Contrasts in the Experience of Latin American Pentecostalism and Ecclesial Base Communities', *Pneuma* 13/2 (1991), 167-174; Allan H. Anderson, 'The Hermeneutical Processes of Pentecostal-Type African Initiated Churches in South Africa', *Missionalia* 24/2 (1996), 171-185.
[42] Cf. Anderson, 'Hermeneutical Processes'.
[43] Cf. the classic text of Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1973.
[44] Menno van Oel, *De wereld in huis: buitenlandse theologiestudenten in Kampen, 1970-2011*, Kampen: Protestantse Theologische Universiteit 2011, 66 (translation by the author).

theology faculties in the West will frequently limit themselves to the use of religious science methods.[45]

If intercultural theology limits itself to the use of social science methods in the study of the meaning of non-Western faith communities, this leads to another paradox. It means that the perspective that their dialogue partners consider to be decisive for their self-understanding is excluded as a proper theme of research and dialogue. Apparently the desire to take these communities more seriously in our post-colonial times does not always result in judging their voices on their own merits. This shows how difficult it is to ask critical questions about the supposed superiority of the secular Western perspective.[46]

Focusing on God as a theme of intercultural theological conversation is also essential if one wants to arrive at a critical dialogue. One important aim of intercultural encounters is that they help us develop respect for the cultural 'other' and in this way come to know and evaluate our own cultural presuppositions and blind spots. In his *Exclusion and Embrace*, Miroslav Volf uses the example of Abram as the father of all believers who needs to leave his own family and culture in order to follow the calling of the Lord.[47] Intercultural exchange with other parts of the global church is a prime means to help create this distance.[48] Volf is, however, rightly critical of postmodern thinkers such as Giles Deleuze for whom the nomadic departure of every place and every certainty has no clear goal.[49] Volf points out that such nomadic wandering without going somewhere will therefore arrive nowhere.

> What can those who wish to depart without wanting to arrive do to resist the evildoer? Without subjectivity, intentionality, and goal-orientedness, they will be carried by the stream of life, "blissfully" taking in whatever ride life has in store for them, always saying and accepting everything, including every misdeed that those who have goals choose to commit.[50]

The necessity to arrive at a critical judgement not only concerns ourselves, but also the other. We cannot be welcoming if we do not set boundaries for the other. As Hans Boersma argues, absolute hospitality, and absolute and limitless welcome to others is impossible.[51] This is true if only because in intercultural conversations we meet many others and hear many voices. If we are equally welcoming to all voices, there is a danger that the voices of the strong will drown out the voices of the vulnerable and weak. I also believe that we do not truly take the other seriously if after careful listening there does not come a moment when we are able to say that we do not agree, that the other according to our best insights

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[45] Wijsen, 45. Wijsen refers to Mercy Amba Oduyoye (Ghana), Jesse Mugambi (Kenya) and Felix Wilfred (India) as examples.

[46] Adherents of theological exegesis have pointed to a similar paradox that affects much of modern Biblical studies. Biblical scholars use a long and growing number of methods to study Biblical texts – philological analysis, form and redaction criticism, literary analysis, rhetoric analysis, social analysis, etc. – but the issues that according to the authors of these texts were the true reason to write these texts – the God of Israel and his concern for people shown in Jesus Christ – often remain out of sight as a proper research interest. Cf. Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 'New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers of Friends?' in: Joel B. Green and Max Turner (eds.), *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2000, 8.

[47] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, Nashville: Abingdon Press 1996, 40ff.

[48] Volf, 50ff.

[49] Volf, 40.

[50] Volf, 41.

[51] Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross : Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2004, 28-38.

embraces ideas and walks paths that are false and harmful, false in as far as their view of God is concerned and harmful for creation, for the vulnerable members of society and for the flourishing of true humanity.

The question, therefore, is how we can, in the words of Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, engage in 'prophetic dialogue'.[52] How can we join true listening, in which we are able to be self-critical, with a prophetic voice that has the courage to address ignorance, judge evil and lies, and offer hope? That is, to my mind, only possible if the intercultural conversation is theological in nature and engages in a conversation about the God whom we have come to know in Christ. A non-theological intercultural conversation will also most often arrive at a point where critical issues are addressed and conversation partners will defend values such as freedom, mutual respect and the protection of the vulnerable.

Nevertheless, how do we avoid ending up being prophetic about Western values that we consider universal? It is possible that these are indeed values that have developed in Western culture under the influence of the Gospel,[53] but how do we judge for ourselves and others where our values concern the message of the Gospel and the Kingdom and where these are varieties of evangelical values that are particularly appropriate to our Western context, or where these concern Western cultural additions, or worse, secular varieties of ancient Christian values that have lost their evangelical power and inspiration?

The study of church history and of global Christianity shows a mind-boggling variety of expressions and beliefs and for an onlooker it is sometimes difficult to believe that these are indeed expressions of the same faith. The vast majority of traditions and expressions, however, share a number of characteristics, among which is the conviction that God has revealed His character and His project for this world decisively in Jesus Christ, and that we learn about this Christ and this plan in a collection of texts that have canonical authority.[54]

Consequently, Christians are able to take a step back from their own culture because they have come to know this God and because their loyalty to this God and to the future He has promised surpasses all other loyalties and ties.[55] It is precisely because of this that Christians, according to Volf, are on the one hand open to all the good gifts any culture has to offer, but on the other hand have access to a perspective from which the evil in all cultures can be exposed.[56]

With this appeal to Jesus Christ as we know Him in the canonical Scriptures, we have of course not solved all the issues that have been raised so far. It is the encounter with global Christianity itself in all its cultural variation that shows how many images of Jesus are circulating, how varied the biblical passages are that guide the different believing communities and how believers can interpret and apply the same biblical texts in very different and sometimes even contradictory ways.[57] And yet liberation theologians,[58]

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[52] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Prophetic Dialogue: Reflections on Christian Mission Today*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 2011.

[53] Govert Buijs, *Publieke liefde – Agapè als bron voor maatschappelijke vernieuwing in tijden van crisis. Inaugural Lecture at the Vrije Universiteit*, Amsterdam, 3 February 2012.

[54] Andrew F. Walls, 'The Gospel as Prisoner and Liberator of Culture', in: *The Missionary Movement in Christian History : Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, Maryknoll NY *et al.*: Orbis Books; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark 1996, 23-24.

[55] Volf, 51.

[56] Volf, 52.

[57] See for example Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison (eds.), *Return to Babel: Global Perspectives on the Bible*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1999; R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1991.

prophets in African Independent Churches[59] and charismatic prosperity preachers[60] all appeal to the Scriptures and to the God they encounter in its pages. In spite of the confusing variety of interpretations, this does provide the possibility for a critical and prophetic dialogue.[61]

What happens in such an intercultural theological conversation can be understood with Kevin Vanhoozer and with reference to the analytic philosopher Donald Davidson as a process of 'triangulation'.[62] An intercultural theological conversation is not just an exchange in which we pay attention to each other. This is a conversation that aims – in the language of cognitive psychology – at 'joint attention', joint attention to a third reality, to God in Christ as we have come to know Him in the canonical Scriptures.[63] Intercultural theological dialogue is therefore in principle a trialogue, a three-way conversation between representatives of the global church in which the third or rather the first voice is the voice of God who Himself in the Scriptures and through the Holy Spirit addresses His church. This results in a surprising change of perspective in which we as supposedly autonomous researchers turn out to exist in relationship to a God who has freely chosen to address us and who shows Himself to be at the origin of this encounter.

This provides the global church with an important means to counteract the cultural imprisonment of the church, which was itself the starting point of the argument developed so far. According to cultural relativists it is impossible to step outside our own cultural skin and distinguish between our own cultural perception of reality and reality itself. It is precisely in this context that, according to Davidson, triangulation can play an important role: our understanding of reality develops in conversation with others which allows us to critically compare our own perception of reality with the perceptions of others: 'objectivity itself is ultimately a matter of personal relations and communicative interaction'.[64] Intercultural theological dialogue has a similar critical function. In itself it is unavoidable and legitimate that every Christian community reads the Scriptures contextually, understands the triune God with idioms and images available in that environment, and shapes discipleship in a manner that fits this particular context. Christian communities and theologians have always had a certain means of limiting the distorting influence of culture through their engagement with the Scriptures and their participation in a Christian

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[58] Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (eds.), *Mysterium Liberationis : Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books; North Blackburn VIC: Collins Dove 1993.

[59] Anderson, 'Hermeneutical Processes'.

[60] Joseph Bosco Bangura, 'The Charismatic Movement in Sierra Leone (1980-2010): A Missio-Historical Analysis in View of African Culture, Prosperity Gospel and Power Theology', Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit 2013.

[61] In what follows I set out some initial guidelines for an intercultural theological conversation on the basis of the canonical Scriptures. I am aware that an intercultural conversation is not possible along the same lines with a group of theologians that is particularly represented in India and that believe that in a postcolonial context it is no longer appropriate to give such a privileged status to the Christian Scriptures compared to the sacred texts of other religious traditions. So for example R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'Inter-Faith Hermeneutics: An Example and Some Implications', in: R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1991, 352-363. In my opinion this approach does not do justice to the eschatological character of Gods revelation in Christ (cf. van den Toren, *Christian Apologetics*, 204-208). This does not make an intercultural conversation with such theologians impossible, but it will give such encounters a different character.

[62] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'On the Very Idea of a Theological System: An Essay in Aid of Triangulating Scripture, Church and World', in: A.T. B McGowan (ed.), *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2006, 16ff.

[63] Cf. Van den Toren, 'Naked Theological Truth', 102ff.

[64] This is the rendering of Vanhoozer, 161.

community that stretches across history. In the current context of globalisation the opportunities for a critical consideration of our own culturally coloured perceptions of Christ have exponentially grown because we can now engage in conversations with other parts of the global Christian community. These possibilities have not only grown quantitatively; they have also gained a new quality. We no longer have to limit ourselves to the voices of fellow believers and fellow disciples on paper; we encounter them in person. This allows us to engage in an actual conversation about the person and significance of Jesus Christ. We can invite others to reflect with us on what it means to be a believer and disciple of Christ in our particular contexts in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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