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Intercultural Theology and the Historicity of Thinking: Reconstructing the Current German Discussion in Philosophical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze the German-speaking discussion on the discipline of Intercultural Theology. Among others, I criticize Schmidt-Leukel's suggestion to define it as interreligious theology. This definition being somewhat arbitrary, I suggest reconstructing it under the parameters of philosophical and cultural insights that acknowledge the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification. This move allows to allow "transmission-centered approaches" to be replaced by "context-sensitive" ones that honor the subject status of the Christian Other.

Keywords

Schmidt-Leukel, transmission-centered approach, Ustorf, neo-Kantianism, ethnocentricity, historicity, (Christian) Other, Feldtkeller, Küster

In this article, I suggest reconstructing the basic characterization of intercultural theology. As will become clear, this is particularly important since intercultural theology is a young discipline whose definition is not yet firmly fixed.

Being trained in philosophy, I will approach this task from a particular philosophical angle that acknowledges the *historicity of thinking* and the *ethnocentricity of justification* in order to deconstruct traditional superiority claims and discursive privileges.

Approaching the intercultural theological discourse from a philosophical angle is less common than approaching it from a theological angle. Yet, I think that the philosophical approach suggested can be fruitful for the purposes of reframing the discussion on intercultural theology, thus helping develop it in a constructive manner. In particular, it can help to break through impasses that plague the theological discussion on intercultural theology.

Introduction

Christianity's center of gravity is moving to the Global South. In 1910, 66% of all Christians lived in Europe and less than 2% in Africa. In 2010, however only 25.6% lived in Europe and 22% in Africa. While the percentage of Christians among the world population remained more or less stable in the period from 1910 to 2010 (roughly, one third), it grew rapidly in Africa. In 2010, nearly 50% of all Africans were Christian (sub-Saharan Africa being well over 70% Christian) coming from less than 10% in 1910. Probably most important, the general projection concerning the developments until 2050 is that Christianity will still grow in Africa, particularly in Western and Middle Africa (Werner 2011, 5).

The same projection holds for East and South East Asia where Christianity is expected to grow as well. At the same time, however, it is expected to contract in the Global North, particularly in Europe. It is thus reasonable to assume that its center of gravity shifts to the Global South. One of the motivations behind the pursuit of intercultural theology is to reflect on the consequences this shift has for Christian theological theorizing (others are mentioned below).

The discussion on intercultural theology is very diverse. Here, I restrict my analysis to the recent German-speaking discussion on the issue. Recently, a number of books¹ and articles (Schmidt-Leukel 2011 and Feldtkeller 2013) have been published which raise fundamental issues concerning the basic shape and definition of intercultural theology. This round of discussion is particularly pertinent since it demonstrates how contested the basic characteristics of intercultural theology are.

The Emergence of Intercultural Theology and the Current German Discussions

The term "intercultural theology" became popular in the 1970s, especially with the publication of the series *Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity*, edited by Hans Jochen Margull, Walter Hollenweger, and Richard Friedli. According to Ustorf (2008, 13), this term is used "explicitly and with a theological program in mind" only since the publication of this series.

¹ Küster 2011 (primarily a systematization of the English and German-speaking discussion; see also the review in Ustorf 2012), Hock 2012 (primarily a historical overview and periodization), Wrogemann 2012 (a reflection of the practice of the intercultural theological discourse in light of theoretical considerations; see the review in von Sinner 2013).

Ustorf proposes that the intention behind the use of the term was nothing less than a “paradigm change” (2008, 15) in mission studies: “intercultural theology broke away from the past of the transmission-centered approach in mission studies” (2008, 19). Rather than conceiving mission to consist mainly in transmission, it was conceived to consist mainly in appropriation (2008, 27). He suggests that the emphasis upon critical self-reflection implied in this change was of crucial importance: “intercultural theology does not think in behalf of others but reflects its own premises in the presence of those others and, if things go well, together with them” (2008, 27).

Although the importance of this paradigm shift is widely acknowledged, its consequences are hotly debated in the current German-speaking discussions. One of the contested issues is intercultural theology’s relation to missiology. The leading German experts in mission studies and religious studies agree that the label “intercultural theology” should be used next to the label “missiology” without, however, substituting it (cf. *Missionswissenschaft* 2005, 377; see also Feldtkeller’s discussion 2013, 4–5).

This consensus is the outcome of an intense discussion and avoids drastic revisions of traditional missiological concepts. Not surprisingly, scholars critical of those concepts criticize it for retreating into “theological orthodoxy” since it underestimates the conceptual change brought about by the 1970s paradigm shift (Ustorf 2008, 15).

Feldtkeller (2013, 11–12) rejects criticisms of this sort. He conceives of the Christian missionary self-understanding as participating in a particular social form of religion that is not hierarchical or expansionary. He suggests (cf. 2013, 13) that it would be counterproductive to exclude such insights generated by mission-studies.

Another question concerns the role post colonialist and political concerns should play in defining intercultural theology; awareness of the mechanisms of colonial oppression that emerged in the 1970s led to the reevaluation of classical missionary efforts. Oftentimes, they had aided colonial and imperialist oppression, providing ideological support for political, social, economic, and cultural mechanisms of oppression.

Yet it is contested what role precisely political and related concerns should play in the *current* characterization of intercultural theology. For example, Küster (cf. 2011, 53–108) emphasizes intercultural theology’s roots in liberation theology and “contextual theologies” and insists on the importance of its sociopolitical dimension. But others put much less emphasis on those concerns.

In sum, many basic features of intercultural theology are contested in the current German-speaking discussion on the issue. Küster thus suggests that “*Der Begriff i[n]terkulturelle] Theol[ogie] bez[eichnet] noch kein festumrissenes Teilgebiet der Theol[ogie] oder eine bestimmte Methode*” (“The term ‘i[n]tercultural] theol[ogy]’ does not y[et] depict a firmly defined theo[logical] discipline nor a particular method;” 2001, 197). Hock holds that intercultural theology lacks a clear definition and an overarching theoretical and methodological framework that could unite the discipline and declares the lack of a well-defined system even to be part of its basic characterization (2011, 21, 25).

There is a difference, however between a discipline not being well defined and it being arbitrary. Lacking a “clear definition” or “an overarching theoretical and methodological concept that unites a discipline is not uncommon in certain theological (and other) disciplines and can be tolerated to a certain extent. Still, if the basic characterization of a discipline is arbitrary, it could lead to the impression that its definition is contingent upon personal preferences: upon the religious, political, ideological, or related preferences of the scholars pursuing it.²

However, if this were the case, this discipline would be seriously discredited inside and outside of the Academy. Given its importance, this would be a very undesirable state of affairs. The following suggestions are motivated by the desire to avoid this impression of arbitrariness and to protect intercultural theology’s integrity and reputation within theology and academia at large.

In order not to be misunderstood, let me emphasize here that I do *not* mean to defend some kind of essentialism or some other form of objectivism. I do not suggest that intercultural theology possesses an invariant essence nor that characterizing it could ever be a purely objective matter.

Nonetheless, acknowledging subjectivity is different from acknowledging arbitrariness. Thus, acknowledging that every characterization of intercultural theology—including the one I suggest here—harbors a subjective element is different from providing a license for defining it according to personal preferences.

² cf. Küster’s (2001, 197) remark that the characterization of intercultural theology is contingent upon the research interests of the people pursuing it; although to be appreciated for its openness, I find this remark to be very disconcerting.

Schmidt-Leukel's Suggestions

Schmidt-Leukel's suggestions for reconstructing intercultural theology are of interest not only because they are refreshingly bold but also because they betray some of the shortcomings criticized above in an exemplary fashion.

Schmidt-Leukel's basic suggestion is to “[M]uss sich interkulturelle Theologie als interreligiöse Theologie vollziehen” (“Intercultural Theology should be done as Interreligious Theology;” 2011, 9). Characteristic for the latter are a number of principles, such as a “Hermeneutik des Vertrauensschusses” (2011, 9). By that term, Schmidt-Leukel means the assumption that not only one's own religious tradition but other religious traditions contain theologically relevant truths as well. Another principle is that of the unity of reality (*Einheit der Wirklichkeit* 2011, 10) according to which all truths must be ultimately compatible.

The task of interreligious theology (= intercultural theology, according to Schmidt-Leukel) is to analyze the compatibility of the different faiths: What seems to be a contradiction at first sight can become compatible in a higher synthesis (*höhere Zusammenschau* 2011, 10). This synthesis can even lead to an understanding according to which the different perspectives complement each other. That is, they are more than only compatible with each other; they *enrich* each other by way of their differences.

In a nutshell, Schmidt-Leukel's argumentation is as follows:

- intercultural theology should be reconstructed as interreligious theology
- pursuing interreligious theology implies necessarily taking a pluralist stance
- thus, pursuing intercultural theology implies necessarily taking a pluralist stance.

By way of identifying intercultural theology with interreligious theology and assuming the latter to be intrinsically pluralist, pluralism becomes an integral component of intercultural theology. Schmidt-Leukel thus weaves it into the basic characterization of intercultural theology.

Nonetheless, I doubt the success of Schmidt-Leukel's move. I regard it to be problematic to turn pluralism into the basic characterization of intercultural theology. Although pluralism is a legitimate option *within* the intercultural theological discourse, it should not be considered to be its defining mark.

Attempts of this sort take advantage of the fact that the basic characterization of intercultural theology is still unfixed and can be characterized in whichever ways suit a researcher best, be they pluralistic or not. Yet, if so, the pursuit of intercultural theology would be more or less arbitrary—and, as indicated above, the impression that it is arbitrary needs to be avoided at all costs.

However, this criticism does not do full justice to Schmidt-Leukel's claims. After all, he holds that there is *no other choice* than to reconstruct intercultural theology as interreligious theology (in his sense of the word, i.e. as being defined by a pluralism). If this were true, we would *have to* identify intercultural theology with interreligious theology.

Yet I think that none of the arguments he provides for this claim are convincing. His principle of the unity of reality cannot show that we have to construe seemingly incongruent theological truth claims as being compatible, let alone complementary. The discussion on coherence theories (of truth) has revealed that operationalizing the notion of the unity of reality (truth) is an extremely complex endeavor. Tolerating incompatibilities is a widespread phenomenon and defining how long certain incompatibilities can be tolerated is a thorny task that cannot be operationalized as easily as Schmidt-Leukel assumes.

Moreover, the principle of the unity of reality can easily be used for legitimizing the opposite option and end up playing off competing claims *against* each other. For example, an argument can be made along the following lines: Postulating the unity of reality implies that “truth is one” (rather than many). Therefore, we cannot tolerate competing truth claims but have to find out which ones are false and eradicate them. Invoking the principle of the unity of reality can thus be used as easily for *exclusivist* religious purposes. It is multi-interpretable and can therefore not be used to support pluralism, as Schmidt-Leukel assumes.

What about Schmidt-Leukel's suggestion to provide a higher synthesis (*höhere Zusammenschau*) of seemingly incompatible theological truth claims? I agree that endeavors of this sort are theoretically very interesting and regard them to be valuable antidotes to the currently fashionable tendency to overdramatize religious incompatibility claims in order to exploit them for political purposes (as is common coin among right-wing groups in Europe).

Yet, although being sympathetic towards their intention,³ I doubt that they can carry the conceptual burden Schmidt-Leukel wishes them to carry. In order to use them for legitimizing pluralism, it would be necessary to show that it is *always* possible to provide such a synthesis. It would be necessary to demonstrate that *all* incompatibilities between competing theological truth claims in the different religious traditions can be synthesized. Yet, although I think that this is *sometimes* possible—and should be done, where possible in an unforced and fruitful fashion—serious doubts can be raised as to whether this is possible in all cases.

In sum, although I sympathize with certain aspects of Schmidt-Leukel's approach, I reject the core of his program to reconstruct intercultural theology as interreligious theology. Contrary to what he suggests, reconstructing it in this fashion is *not* the only option. The arguments he provides for the alleged necessity to reconstruct it along pluralist lines are not convincing. There is thus no convincing reason why religious pluralism should be included in the defining characteristics of interreligious theology. Doing so remains thus an arbitrary move.

On applying the Neo-Kantian Dialectics of Deconstruction and Reconstruction

The German-speaking discussion on intercultural theology provided above has thus demonstrated that many features of the basic characterization of intercultural theology are contested and that attempts to define it are often arbitrary.

How then can we provide a basic, less arbitrary characterization for this discipline? My suggestion is go back to its roots and reconstruct them in light of our current cultural–philosophical insights. This suggestion is methodologically inspired by Marburg neo-Kantianist methodology that I will now explain.

The Marburg neo-Kantians, above all, Hermann Cohen, wished to cut through what they considered to be a hopelessly divided and arbitrary cultural–philosophical discourse. They attempted to deconstruct it until a pure “origin” (*Ursprung*) (Cohen 2005, 30–35) was reached which was uncontaminated by (what they considered to be) the historicist, materialist, empiricist and related prejudices of the time. This *Ursprung*

³ In Grube 2015, 420, 424–425, I recommend a similarly positive attitude towards other religions than our own but use different means than religious pluralists do: I recommend accepting (legitimate) differences rather than searching for common ground.

served then as a vantage point for a reconstruction along purely transcendental-philosophical lines. The guiding idea was that proceeding in this fashion would provide an uncontaminated foundation from which the philosophical, ethical, political, and cultural foundations could be laid in a fresh and unprejudiced way.

I think that the neo-Kantian dialectics of deconstructing current discourse patterns until the roots of the phenomenon at stake are laid bare and then reconstructing the discourse from those roots with the help of philosophical means is helpful in this case. This approach helps minimize the arbitrariness implied in attempts to define intercultural theology.

However, I distance myself from the neo-Kantian transcendentalist claims; I do not believe that philosophical reconstructions using transcendental means are neutral with regard to all cultural, personal or other preferences. Thus, I do not claim my method to be completely objective. Yet I do claim that it is *less* prejudiced by cultural or personal preferences than some of the suggestions criticized above. Applying the neo-Kantian dialectics of reconstruction and deconstruction—if liberated from all-too-strenuous transcendental pretensions—can thus help to reframe the discussion on intercultural theology.

The procedure I suggest is to deconstruct the current discourse on intercultural theology and return to its “origin,” its roots; the paradigm shift of the 1970ies from which the basic features of intercultural theology are to be reconstructed.

I suggest, however, reconstructing them not by Kantian philosophical, transcendental means but by using contemporary philosophical insights, in particular, by acknowledging the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification. Let me first explain these terms.

The Historicity of Thinking and the Ethnocentricity of Justification

“Historicity of thinking” implies the acknowledgement that our ways of reasoning are products of history. It opposes the age-old philosophical search for the necessary rather than the contingent, whatever the necessary is supposed to consist of, say, transcendental postulates à la Kant, Reason (with a capital R), teleological or essentialist schemes. It rejects pretensions of timeless and universal validity. It acknowledges the context-bound, historical, and contingent character of reasoning and thinking.

Acknowledging this historicity has far-reaching consequences for the way we conceive of our academic pursuits, including ethics and politics

(Margolis 1995). In my view, acknowledging this historicity is not only an intellectual activity but a “way of being in the world,” a way of positioning oneself vis-à-vis the world and other humans.

This last point is particularly important since it determines our interaction with other people; how we approach the “Other,” who differs from us in religious, cultural, moral, political, or related aspects. Broadly speaking, once we realize that our ways of thinking are historically conditioned we will be able to relativize our own claims to truth, rightness, rationality and related issues.

One of the most important consequences of acknowledging this historicity pertains to *the theory of justification*: It implies an awareness of the context-dependent, culture-bound and historically-conditioned character of the resources with the help of which we evaluate and justify our different religious, cultural, moral and related points of view.

In this context, “justification” is used in a *philosophical rather than theological sense*. It does not refer to the Protestant idea that the sinner is justified in God’s judgment. Rather, in an *epistemological sense* it is the activity with the help of which we legitimize our cognitive and moral practices. Examples are the empiricist justifying a belief with the fact that it is based upon empirical observation, the Biblicist justifying a way of conduct because it is based upon God’s will as laid down in Scripture, or the secular ethicist justifying a way of conduct because it conforms to (a universally construed) notion of Human Rights. “Justification” as intended here does not pertain to particular practices such as an ethics of love but to how such practices are legitimized (among others by God’s word).

Justification in this sense is relevant for our discussion on the consequences of cultural, religious, moral, cognitive and intellectual differences. As long as it can be assumed that there are universally valid, culture-transcendent justifications, those differences can be “managed” more or less successfully. There may exist *practical* problems. But, theoretically, those problems can be solved.

More precisely, deviating practices, say, of a religious and/or moral sort, may prove to be difficult in political respects, for example, when conceptualizing a multi-ethnic or multi-religious society. Yet, as long as it can be assumed that there are religion-, culture-, and context-free standards to judge such practices, those deviances do not provide insurmountable problems from a *theoretical* point of view. The reason is that those differences can be judged in a (supposedly) neutral and

objective fashion. Those practices are to be preferred which conform to a culture-free standard, such as universal notions of Human Rights, Reason, Rationality (watch the capitals) or related standards that determine what is “good and bad,” “rational and irrational.”

Still, a consequence of acknowledging the above mentioned historicity of thinking is that the existence of those allegedly neutral justificatory standards comes to be doubted. This process of doubting began around the 1960s. Milestones in this process are the discussion on the incommensurability-thesis following Kuhn’s insights in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (1970), the discussions on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, on Evan-Pritchard’s account of Azande rationality, on the Strong Program in the sociology of knowledge associated with the “Edinburgh School,” and similar movements (see Krausz 1982 and 2010).

The upshot of those discussions is that it could no longer be assumed that there are culture- and context-free justificatory standards. More precisely, what we had considered to be neutral, culture- and context-free turned out to be strongly culture-tainted: Reason, Rationality, Human Rights, the reference to empirical standards turned out to be constructions from a particular world view. Rather than transcending culture, they are based upon Western Enlightened cultural and intellectual presuppositions.

I think that this process of recognition still goes on and its consequences are, at least, in some cases, not yet fully appreciated (witness, e.g., the frequently unqualified reference to notions such as “right to free speech” in the West which still seems to assume that there are such things as universally valid rights). Yet, it is obvious that, once the existence of supposedly culture- and context-free justifications is questioned, reference to universal human rights and other universal pretensions become questionable.

Once recognized in its full force, references to supposedly universally valid justificatory standards are no longer available as a neutral resource to judge differing practices. It is no longer possible to rely on, say, Reason and favor an autonomous way of thinking over a heteronomous one or to rely on supposedly culture-transcending Rights which legitimize the “right to free speech” in an unqualified fashion (including an unlimited right to insult others).

I summarize this point about the disillusionment of the supposedly culture-free justificatory resources by the term “ethnocentricity.” My thesis is that a consequence of acknowledging the historicity of thinking is the *recognition that justification is an inescapably ethnocentric affair*. By

that, I mean the recognition that not only our moral, cultural, intellectual, cognitive and related practices are thoroughly tainted by cultural prejudices but that the standards with the help of which we *justify* them are as well.

Yet, this acknowledgment of the ethnocentricity of justification is interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, Rorty and his neo-pragmatist school and some (French-speaking) postmodernists draw radically relativistic consequences.

On the other hand, pragmatists such as Putnam (1981), Margolis, Kuhn (at least, in my interpretation: Grube 2013, 382–386), and Bernstein (1988) relativize traditional claims to objectivity and an ahistorical validity *without* succumbing to a full-fledged relativism.

My sympathies lie with this latter approach. While borrowing the term “ethnocentricity of justification” from Rorty, I use it differently: Rorty uses it to emphasize that we are “imprisoned” within our own justificatory game: Justifications are valid only for “us.” That way, he undermines the activity of justification as such.

However, I think that this is yet another example of Rorty’s tendency to over-dramatize by construing overly sharp alternatives: justifications are universally valid or worthless. But this alternative is far from convincing. I think that acknowledging that justifications are ethnocentric in some sense reminds us that we should not “absolutize” our justificatory resources. Yet this does not mean that they are worthless—let alone that this is a reason for giving up all efforts at justification

Thus, my suggestions for reconstructing the basic characteristics of intercultural theology are *not* committed to a relativistic viewpoint. Although they endorse acknowledging the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification, they do not underwrite the view that one justification is as good as the other and that there are no resources left for distinguishing between good and bad ways of thinking.

Criticizing Traditional Missiology

An obvious consequence for our current project of reconstruction is that traditional concepts of missiology become doubtful insofar as they consist in a “transmission-centered approach.” More precisely, those concepts become questionable if they are based upon Western *superiority* claims.⁴ They will not survive the double acknowledgment of

⁴ Obviously, I do not mean to suggest that those superiority claims are always made explicit. Often, they remain *implicit* and steer patterns of behavior or judgment.

the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification.

More precisely, their capability to serve as neutral judges is threatened by circularity: *Western Christian practices are superior, more civilized or more enlightened—but only in light of Western standards of what being civilized and enlightened means.* By non-Western standards those practices are not necessarily superior. For example, they may appear to be decadent or deviating from true Christianity. My point is that there is no non-circular way to convince people from non-Western cultures that their Christian practices are inferior to Western Christian practices.

In sum, insofar as traditional concepts of missiology, “transmission-centered approaches in mission studies,” are based upon explicit or implicit superiority claims, they cannot survive the double acknowledgment fleshed out above.

Western Enlightenment Patterns of Thinking: The Example of the Evidentialist Ideal of Justification

The double acknowledgement of the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification undermines not only superiority claims implied in transmission-centered approaches in mission but also similar claims in other Western practices.⁵ I think particularly of *Enlightenment patterns of thinking* with their notorious universalist pretensions.

By “Enlightenment patterns” I mean the ways of thinking which emerged in the transition from premodernity to modernity in the West. Examples of these are an emphasis on autonomous rather than heteronomous forms of reasoning,⁶ the view that evidence-based justifications are superior to tradition-based ones, or that empirically-grounded arguments are superior to non-empirical, metaphysical ones.⁷

⁵ Let it be noted that, by parity of reasoning, it also threaten *non*-Western practices insofar as they are based on comparable superiority claims. Yet, in this article, I restrict myself to analyzing only Western practices.

⁶ As, for example, in Kant’s classical imperative for the Enlightened person: “*Sapere aude! Habe Mut, dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!*” (“Dare to Know! Have the courage to use your own mind!” 2008, 55).

⁷ I think of the Anglo-American version of the Enlightenment with its strong empiricist biases according to which empirical data is the most reliable

It may be retorted now that those Enlightenment patterns differ from transmission-centered approaches in mission in that they are only of a purely formal nature. That is, they do not pretend to bring “civilized culture,” “true Christianity,” or something along those lines. Rather, they imply nothing more than forms of reasoning.

Yet, although implying forms of reasoning only, they still imply superiority claims. The reason is that their range of validity is considered to be *unlimited* under Enlightenment parameters. Rather than being considered to be limited to a particular context, a Western modernist one, they are considered to be *universally valid*.

Thus they provide absolute value standards and are considered to be hallmarks of rationality. This is implied by the evidentialist rule that the rational person proportions her beliefs to the evidence available. This rule is not considered to be rational in a specific context but considered to be rational in all contexts. It signifies rationality as such, universally, at all times and for everybody. The consequence of those universalist pretensions is that value judgments enter inevitably into the game: The person not following this rule does not hold a different sort of rationality but is *irrational* or, at least, less rational.

Yet, when ideals such as evidentialism, autonomy and its Enlightenment siblings are construed as universal value standards, it is often forgotten that they have a history that is closely intertwined with the development of Western thinking. For example, before the 17th century, it was common in the West to consider witnesses by authorities, such as the church fathers, to provide legitimate sources of justification. Yet, towards the end of this century, this so-called “external evidence” was substituted by “internal evidence.” The latter refers to the evidence beliefs have *in themselves* rather than that which is attributed to them by outside authorities (cf. Hacking, 1975, 24–26). This is the sort of justificatory procedure we know today as evidentialism and which has become a hallmark of rationality since the Enlightenment.

Yet, evidentialism’s astonishing career is motivated by a suspicion of all (church) authorities, more broadly, a suspicion of tradition as a legitimate source of justification, accompanied by the emergence of probabilism as an alternative way of reasoning (cf. Hacking, 1975, 31–38), an emphasis upon autonomy and similar Western developments. Reliable are only empirical, historical and related types of evidence. All

foundation for all claims to knowledge.

forms of reasoning not based upon this sort of evidence are considered to be irrational.

The purpose of this sketch of evidentialism's career is not to suggest that it should be abandoned but to demonstrate its culture-bound and context-dependent character. Given this context-dependency, its critic is free to disagree with it. She can point out that the Western presuppositions that lend credibility to evidentialism are rejected in her context. For example, she may reject the individualism upon which it is based and emphasize that acquiring knowledge is a communal affair. Or she may reject the ideal of autonomy underlying it in the name of insisting on tradition as being the most reliable source for acquiring knowledge. Or she may accept the evidentialist ideal but question the restrictions on what is considered to be legitimate evidence, leaving out intuition, deep-seated emotions, or dreams as legitimate evidence.

This critique of Enlightenment patterns of thinking should not be misunderstood as a suggestion to give them up. My critique is directed primarily against using them in a universalist spirit, that is, against the pretension that they characterize rationality as such, Reason, or comparable epistemic virtues.

The Distinction Between a Context-sensitive Use and an Absolutist Use

By “absolutist use” I mean the view that Enlightenment or related patterns of thinking signify Rationality or Reason as such. This use entails ascribing universal validity claims to them. Universal validity, however, implies culture-transcendent superiority claims. If the Enlightenment patterns of thinking are equivalent to Rationality or Reason as such, the obvious consequence is that everybody failing to meet those standards is *irrational* or *unreasonable* or epistemologically deficient in other ways.

A typical way to legitimize an absolutist use is to construe a progressive development via genealogies, such as: “In pre-Enlightenment times, we used to rely on tradition as a source of authority. However, now we have matured and realized that we cannot rely on them any longer.” The implication is that everybody who “still” (!) relies on tradition is backwards, not as mature as we are, in need of being Enlightened, or in related ways deficient.

An absolutist use implies a particular way of dealing with *the Other*. Since she is not only different but irrational, unreasonable, her views need not be taken seriously.

To the absolutist, this provides reasons why she has a right to superimpose her virtues upon the Other. Since her reasoning is based upon autonomous thinking, based upon evidence of the right (e.g., empiricist) sort, it is superior to alternative forms of reasoning. This provides the rationale for the absolutist for thinking she has a right to convert the Other to her form of reasoning.

In the absolutist's eyes, the Other's primary task is to listen and learn as she still needs to be enlightened to the full truth. In sum, the discourse is framed under absolutist parameters as a *one-way street*; it proceeds from the "giver" to the receiver, never the other way round.

Opposed to an absolutist use is a "*context-sensitive use*." The very characteristic of this use is an awareness of the fact that Enlightenment and related patterns of thinking are embedded in a particular culture and a specific intellectual environment. The person using those patterns in a context-sensitive fashion is highly conscious of the fact that they receive their legitimation *within* the Western context but not necessarily outside of it.⁸

Under context-sensitive parameters, the discourse is a two-way street. The roles of giver and receiver are not fixed but interchangeable, communication depends upon the circumstances. In principle, all participants in the communication can learn from this exchange. Thus, the Other's views are taken more seriously and considered to be a potential challenge to one's own views.⁹

On Pursuing the Intercultural Theological Discourse in a Context-sensitive Fashion

I argue that intercultural theological discourses should be pursued in a context-sensitive rather than an absolutist fashion and be construed as a two-way street rather than a one-way street.

This suggestion captures crucial motives underlying the 1970s paradigm shift to intercultural theology. For example, it captures the essence of

⁸ The distinction between Western and non-Western is a generalization whose purpose is to flesh out the point about the context-bound character of justification. Closer scrutiny would very likely show that both the categories of non-Western and Western need specification or even modification. Yet, my point is here not to work out those categories in detail but to draw the consequences of acknowledging the ethnocentricity of justification.

⁹ I have sketched the way in which the function of arguments shifts once we engage in a two-way-street communication in Grube 2015, 426.

Ustorf's programmatic characterization of intercultural theology: "[I]ntercultural theology does not think on behalf of others but reflects its own premises in the presence of those others" (2011, PAGE). It invites listening to the Other carefully and to *critical self-reflection*.

Treating the Christian Other as a subject along context-sensitive lines implies treating non-Western Christians as peers in the Christian discourse rather than as objects of mission.

However, in that case we must raise the question whether some of intercultural theology's proponents take their own insights sufficiently seriously: Do they truly take the Christian Other to be a *subject* in the above specified sense and are they ready to reflect on their own premises "in the presence of others," as Ustorf suggests?

Let me provide some examples which show the urgency of raising this question. As a reaction to the new interreligious agenda, the 1975 Nairobi assembly of the WCC emphasized the absoluteness of Christianity. But Margull brushed this attempt aside as "the easiest option" (Ustorf 2011, 20) and Ustorf condemned it as being "regressive," calling the church leaders in Nairobi "single-minded," comparing them to radicalized Muslims.¹⁰

Others portray similar blind spots. An example is Küster who emphasizes the liberation theological and contextual theological motives behind the 1970s paradigm shift. Although the founding fathers may have indeed highlighted those motives, the question must be raised to what extent those motives are relevant to the construction of intercultural theology under *current* parameters. Are they part of the basic characterization of intercultural theology? Or are they just one among a variety of partisan voices within the intercultural theological discourse, not privileged as a matter of principle but on *a par* with other, deviant views, thus open to critical examination and self-reflection?

This question is all the more urgent in light of the current developments within global Christianity: Many Christians in Africa and Asia draw entirely different sociopolitical conclusions from the message of the gospel. Brushing their views aside too easily will inevitably appear to be an attempt to establish Western hegemony by other means.

¹⁰ "In Nairobi, however, an equally [equal to radicalized Muslims] single-minded majority of church leaders quickly exorcised the new agenda of interreligious dialogue by regressing [to the] position of the absoluteness of the Christian truth" (Ustorf 2011, 20).

However, my point is *not* to favor those developments but to raise the awareness that they cannot be marginalized as sometimes happens in intercultural theological discourses. This is a straightforward consequence of acknowledging the historicity of thinking and the ethnocentricity of justification and its corollaries; communication is a two way street and the Other should be treated as a subject.

Let me remind you of the intention driving this contribution, viz. to avoid the impression that intercultural theology's definition is "up for grabs." My intention here is to demonstrate that the basic characterization of this young discipline is *not* arbitrary. Although its boundaries may be open to debate, it is not a "free for all" for every scholar to insert his or her favorite religious (e.g., pluralist), political, or other agenda. Although I think that issues such as pluralism are important¹¹ *within* the intercultural theological discourse, they should not be used to define its boundaries. They should not be privileged but should be exposed to the same mechanisms of critique as other discourses.

Nor am I suggesting that *all* deviant Christian viewpoints are to be taken seriously. Some can be put aside when engaging in the intercultural theological discourse. Yet, the question *on what grounds* they can be ignored should be taken seriously since any answer to it is threatened by a circularity of reasoning. The answer *cannot* be that viewpoint x is to be discarded because it does not fit into my religious, political, or whatever agenda. Rather, any answer deserves serious reflection, including a self-critical reflection on the foundations of one's own thinking.

Conclusion: Suggestions for (Re-)constructing the Intercultural Theological Discourse

Given that the Christian Other is to be treated as a subject with agency, the intercultural theological discourse is obviously to be set up in such a way as to accommodate this status. This implies avoiding paternalist forms of reasoning, discourse hierarchies, or principled superiority claims. The goal is to develop the intercultural theological discourse mechanisms so as to understand the Christian Other in a non-judgmental way and with as much empathy as possible.

Part of "understanding the Christian Other" is to understand her *in her Otherness*. This implies the attempt to gain more insight into the reasons why she holds views on moral, liturgical, ritual, hermeneutical or other

¹¹ For my treatment of Hick's and related forms of pluralism, see Grube 2015, 420 and 424–425.

Christian practices which deviate from my own. The story which answers this “why question” will probably be something in the neighborhood of the story I provided above regarding the emergence of evidentialism as the methodological ideal of justification in the West.

For the purposes of understanding the Other in her otherness, it is thus important to understand how she justifies her views and *what role they play within the larger context of her beliefs*. For a “deep” (rather than superficial) understanding of the Other, it is mandatory to come to know how her web of Christian (including cultural, philosophical, methodological, etc.) beliefs is woven together—and to lay open my own web of beliefs and its internal coherence.

The goal of the intercultural theological discourse is to deal constructively with the different Christian voices rather than to attempt to streamline them at all costs. Under certain circumstances, it is more important to identify where the differences truly lie than to level them.

The point of the discourse is to *reflect my presuppositions in light of the Other*—obviously hoping that she will reflect her premises in light of mine. A crucial goal of the intercultural theological discourse is thus to *mirror* one’s own Christian presuppositions in light of other Christian presuppositions.

This point needs to be emphasized particularly since the intercultural *theological* discourse is a form of *Christian theological* discourse and is thus to be distinguished from other sorts of discourses. Characteristic for the Christian discourse is the assumption that our current theological knowledge is principally broken, partial at best, and that full knowledge is not ours to have at this stage in human history (see 1 Cor. 13:12). Given that we do not possess the Truth, we do well to listen to other voices carefully.

In my view, one of the most important functions of the intercultural theological discourse is thus to *identify the differences* between the various Christian viewpoints. The crucial question is thus where *precisely* the differences between Christian webs of beliefs are to be located.

Identifying differences and their reasons can neutralize their separating potential. For example, if my discussion partner and I realize that we use different hermeneutical practices, such as literalist interpretations of the Bible as opposed to non-literalist ones, we may legitimately agree to “bracket” those differences in certain contexts. We may agree to set them aside when it comes, for example, to working on issues of global justice.

Yet this suggestion is *not* a blueprint for attempts to reconcile all differences. The possibility of differences being irreconcilable cannot be ruled out. Nor is it the primary goal of the intercultural theological discourse to level those differences at all costs.

However, judging from my own experience, seriously talking about those differences often helps to overcome them. And even if they are not leveled, their separating potential is often neutralized.

Obviously, my suggestions are of a programmatic nature. Further research needs to be done in order to turn them into an operational scheme for (re)framing the intercultural theological discourse. When being made operational, an important question is *what sort of differences can be tolerated to what extent*. When answering this question, the following issues need to be considered:

- First, a point well known in the philosophical discourse is that there are *logical* limits to tolerating deviances. For example, if somebody rejects the law of non-contradiction, communication will probably break down. It is thus mandatory to identify presuppositions that are a *conditio sine qua non* for a meaningful discourse and cannot be given up. We thus need to develop criteria that help us distinguish between presuppositions that are impossible to give up and those that we feel to be painful to give up but are *not* impossible to part with.
- Second, this distinction must be applied and custom-tailored for intercultural theological discursive purposes. The question must thus be raised as to what a *conditio sine qua non* for participation in this specific discourse is. In all likelihood, belief in Jesus Christ is. Yet, how can that belief be operationalized? Certainly, we wish to rule out bizarre forms of using that belief as, for example, a cover for prostitution (as has been recently the case in The Netherlands). But on what grounds can we distinguish true beliefs in Christ from false ones?
- Third, the discussion on the hermeneutical “principle of charity” has demonstrated that we *have to* reinterpret the Other at times if we wish to communicate successfully (*cf.* Davidson 1984). This is not an act of “chauvinism” but a rational requirement for continuing the communication in a meaning-

ful fashion. This being the case, criteria have to be developed for differentiating between legitimate reinterpretations of other Christian voices and illegitimate, paternalistic re-interpretations.

This list is far from exhaustive. But I hope that this contribution encourages others to add to this list and to help search for answers to the questions raised. Admittedly, answering them is not an easy task. I hope, however, to have shown that intercultural theology is worth the effort.

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