

Article

Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology

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Abstract: Since the beginning of the 21st century, the term intercultural theology has been gaining more and more traction. At the same time, the terms world Christianity and anthropology of Christianity have also become established. This article inquires into the profile of intercultural theology against the other two terms and defines the subject as in-between theology with regard to such factors as audience, media, power, methodology, plurality, and connectivity. Looking forward, the author identifies current challenges and proposes that intercultural theology should be understood as a both descriptive and normative discipline, that the driving force behind it is the universal-missionary truth claim of the New Testament message of salvation, and that—as a subject with a primarily systematic orientation—it is committed to a comprehensive understanding of reality and theology.

Keywords: intercultural theology; mission studies; world Christianity; anthropology of Christianity; semiotics; discourse theory; intercultural hermeneutics; theology of religions



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1. Intercultural Theology over against Ecumenical and Interreligious Studies

What is intercultural theology about? In terms of academic history, the discipline emerged out of the field of mission studies (Cartledge 2011; Wrogemann 2016, pp. 1–28; Phan 2008; Flett and Wrogemann 2020). So, is this just a new label for the same old subject? Does it mean that everything remains the same? Or is it the other way round: Is it about bidding farewell to the subject of mission in a global and plural world, and celebrating the diversity of cultures and religions under the term intercultural theology instead? Does the novelty of the term consist in not only acknowledging diversity but also leaving it unchallenged as a friendly gesture of approval? Additionally, what exactly would that look like? Is intercultural theology a collection discipline that meticulously compiles every new form of Christian presence from the various continents in an album entitled “the diversity of Christianity”? Does intercultural theology not also have to do with critical and thus evaluative questions? To take it one step further: Is intercultural theology about “theology” in the sense of written texts? Is it merely about the products of contextual theologians, such as the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)? Or would a focus on the elite discourses of the EATWOT not simply circumvent the mass of Christian life on the grassroots level?

To provide orientation in this subject area, I would like to propose the following theses:

1. Intercultural theology is not only concerned with “theology” in the sense of academic texts, that is, with explicit theologies, but also with implicit theologies expressed in other media, such as songs, poetry, dances, or graphic representations.
2. Intercultural theology is not only about “culture”; rather, this term also covers other categories such as context (economic, social, societal, ecological, religious, etc.) and locality. Since a technical term has to be succinct, it cannot represent all these aspects in and of itself. However, it must be clear to those who use this term that “intercultural” does not only refer to “culture” in the narrow sense.

3. Intercultural theology should not be confused with ecumenical studies in the sense of traditional denominational studies, since, in the subject of intercultural theology, the whole range of religious and cultural studies methods is or may be brought to bear, depending on the topic.
4. Neither can intercultural theology simply be allowed to disintegrate into “inter-religious” theology in the sense of a pluralism of arbitrariness, since intercultural theology primarily reflects on Christianity as a global presence with many local variants. Among other things, intercultural theology reflects about *boundary work* to other religions. (Wrogemann 2019)

Intercultural theology is therefore neither a new label for mission studies, nor a completely different subject; intercultural theology has a broader horizon than ecumenical studies and a decidedly Christian-denominational profile in contrast to pluralistic approaches. It deals with the subject area of Christianity as a globally present religious configuration. Furthermore, intercultural theology needs to be distinguished from the two disciplines represented by *world Christianity* and *anthropology of Christianity*.

2. Intercultural Theology as Opposed to World Christianity and Anthropology of Christianity

Since the beginning of the 21st century, two academic terms besides intercultural theology have become established at the university level, namely, *world Christianity* and *anthropology of Christianity*. What are the differences between them? In short, world Christianity takes a primarily (though not exclusively) historical approach: Since the 1960s, Christianity has continued to expand globally, developing an increasing variety of forms in the process (Sanneh 1989; Bediako 2011). The task of world Christianity is to describe these developments (Robbins 2003; Tan and Tran 2016; Cabrit et al. 2017; Frederiks and Nagy 2020). The first main challenge facing the discipline is to provide as balanced an account of Christianity as possible, since the question arises as to who claims what to be essential or significant, and from which perspective. Protestant scholars, for example, have often dismissed Orthodox traditions (Daugherty 2013; Hann 2014; Nagy 2017); a focus on Latin America, Africa, and Asia has often led to the exclusion of Australia and Oceania; and, from a global perspective, the dominance of English-language contributions marginalizes French and Spanish research.

A second challenge is how to *frame* the production of knowledge: Which schemas are employed (Frederiks 2020)? Is the focus on center and periphery? Is there talk of multiple centers? Is the conceptualization framed in terms of network structures? Is the normative goal defined as an attempt to offer as “neutral” a representation of the whole as possible, or is the talk about the greatest possible neutrality viewed as an effort to “obfuscate” the “true” power relations, as postcolonial criticism contends (Gruber 2017)? Among many other issues, a third challenge is, of course, to understand local variants of Christianity as much as possible on the basis of their own presuppositions.

As the name suggests, *world Christianity* approaches attempt to consider the big picture, whereas the *anthropology of Christianity* focuses on describing *one* local variant of Christianity at a time and—in certain instances—on deriving applications to other phenomena from it as well (Cannell 2006; Engelke and Tomlinson 2006; Barker 2012, 2014; Robbins 2014). While *world Christianity* proceeds along a predominantly historical tack, the orientation of the *anthropology of Christianity* is ethnological and thus empirical in nature. *Field work* takes center stage in the latter discipline. It goes without saying that historical work is part of the process. A prominent point of focus is the relationship between continuity and transformation, that is, the question of the extent to which a local ethnic group integrates Christian elements into an existing structure, or conversely, the extent to which this structure is transformed by Christian elements. Questions regarding the relationship of *agency* in cross-cultural interactions are also important, as is the question of the interplay between local and global phenomena.

In contrast to both the historical focus of world Christianity and the empirical focus of anthropology of Christianity, intercultural theology operates with a systematic focus. As with the other two disciplines, this is a matter of emphasis; that is to say, adherents of the discipline may also conduct historical, empirical-anthropological, and cultural and religious studies research. However, as the term “theology” indicates, intercultural theology is not only a matter of descriptive research; rather, normative statements (formulated after due philosophy of science deliberations) are also appropriate to this discipline (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 22–25).

3. Intercultural Theology as Opposed to Metatheologies

With regard to normative statements, intercultural theology is sometimes viewed as a kind of ethical metatheology. Those who hold to this viewpoint believe that specific local theologies give rise to doctrinal imports, that is, to ethical imperatives that every theology must take into account. For instance, scholars may point to Latin America to make reference to “Andine” theologies, which are particularly concerned with a theological appreciation of the Earth as an ecological context. The thesis is that—contrary to the “European reason” profile—other concepts of reason must be considered (Walz 2020, pp. 190–96). However, though theological reflection on ecological issues is certainly worth considering, the question remains whether the respective recommendations are not perhaps formulated too broadly. The same can be said, for example, for theologies deriving from Oceania, which point out that locally contextual phenomena such as *communality* and *interconnectedness* may be seen as “pacific” values (Bird 2016) that all theologies worldwide should emulate.

Does this mean then that *intercultural theology* is a metatheology encompassing all manner of cultural-contextual expressions of Christianity, a trendsetter, so to speak, of global challenges and attempts at theological responses? Is it a “broker” of such values, which, illustrated locally, can lay claim to global validity?

This interpretation is quite possible. The question is, however: Does this not amount to an idealization of local cultures accompanied by a generalization of what is typically desirable? In short, hardly anyone would disagree with claims that humanity should strive for more freedom, justice, peace, and ecological sensitivity; on the contrary, these are truisms that can almost be described as clichéd.

Intercultural theology in this sense would be a theology proceeding by way of abstraction from specific contexts that runs the danger of exhausting itself in an ethical-moral outlook. Thus, what is at stake here is the in-between space of the continental, which makes it difficult to determine what the whole thing is supposed to be about exactly. The talk of European reason, for example, is so broad that sketches of the alleged profile of such “reason” may easily slip into the realm of ideology and arbitrariness. Such broad generalizations do not seem helpful in view of the abundance and specificity of profiles of what all may be defined as reason (Möller 1986; Habermas 1988). We will need to proceed, therefore, by inquiring into more specific in-between spaces that are essential for *intercultural theology*.

4. Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology

Before explaining in what sense intercultural theology should be understood as an in-between theology, I propose to define the subject as follows:

Intercultural theology reflects the missionary/boundary-crossing interactions of the Christian witness of faith motivated by the claim to universal validity of its message of salvation. In the interplay between the respective cultural, religious, societal, and other contexts and actors, these interactions lead to the formation of multiple strands of local Christianities. Knowing that they belong together places before these strands the task of continually renegotiating normative contents of Christian doctrine and praxis in the tension between universality and particularity (Wrogemann 2019, pp. 441–42).

This definition interweaves the subject areas of mission, culture, and religions. It expresses the conviction that the missionary impulse of the universal Christian message has always led and will always lead to the Christian message crossing boundaries (of all kinds). Mission is the driving force behind *intercultural theology* (van den Toren 2015; Paas 2017; Flett 2018). This simultaneously establishes the theme of universality and particularity: Only that one particular that is claimed to be universal—that is, the salvation history of God in the history of Israel and of the mediator of salvation, Jesus of Nazareth, who becomes known as the Son of God—can prevent the message from being confined, as it were, within a particular cultural context. That being the case, this particular (God’s story with Israel and in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and Son of God) challenges and transforms all cultures.

The assertion that this particular is universally valid—a *theological* assertion—immediately raises normative questions. The interplay between this particular that is claimed to be universal and the individual cultures (with the word “cultures” again serving as an umbrella term covering all conceivable contextual conditions of human sociality) establishes the topic of intercultural understanding in several ways. These phenomena constitute the subject area of the discipline of intercultural theology. For this reason, intercultural theology is to be understood as in-between theology.

In what sense does intercultural theology move in in-between spaces? Below, we will point out some of these in-between spaces and in-between positions. Basically, the preposition “inter” entails keeping in perspective at least two different expressions of Christian presence in terms of doctrine, praxis, and medial form. This usually refers to a comparison between presences in different continents, countries, and cultures. One example may be a comparison of the social engagement of liberation-theological approaches in Brazil or Honduras, on the one hand, and that of forms of West African Pentecostal churches such as the *Church of Pentecost* in Ghana or the *Redeemed Christian Church of God* in Nigeria, on the other (Asamoah-Gyadu 2013; Wrogemann 2018, pp. 297–305). Another might be a comparison between “*low intensity religion*” in, say, Orthodox churches, on the one hand, and Roman Catholic presences in southern Italy, on the other. Time and again, such comparisons are a matter of considering Christian presences in very different world regions and countries, each with their own specific cultural, religious, social, economic, and political conditions.

However, how are these phenomena to be presented from the perspective of researchers in one country? What do these researchers select? How much sensitivity does it take for them to understand that, depending on the context, Christians may consider quite different things to be meaningful? And which authorities may claim that certain phenomena are ostensibly meaningful for their particular group (whatever form that may take)?

4.1. Between the Academy and the Grassroots Level—Intercultural Theology and Its Audience

Intercultural theology shifts between different audiences in what it does. On the one hand, it faces the task of truly seeking out those things that are meaningful on the ground (in a given local context). For example, these may be different forms of dignity and honor, different patterns of cultural distribution of goods, or certain notions of justice, time, space, or of what has value. Furthermore, there are also different understandings of scholarship and of what is considered academically acceptable, depending on the local context. The academic discourses of different continents, countries, and regions vary considerably. Not only do the scholarly standards and discursive “identity-markers” differ between countries and languages, but they also often differ considerably between one university and the next, and between one seminary and the next. *Intercultural theology* must therefore remain aware of its own conditionality; for instance, of its commitment to a certain academic culture (an Anglo-Saxon one, say, or an Indian, Japanese, or German one).

This in turn means that researchers have to begin by reflecting on their own academic tradition with its strengths and weaknesses, its preferences, and its blind spots. It is

imperative to conduct an inquiry into this conditionality which is also informed by the philosophy of science. Researchers need to come to a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their own tradition, as well as of other traditions.

In addition, it is also important to understand what kind of theological education predominates in a particular country. What constitutes the bulk of what may be designated as theological education? Here, the aim is to arrive at a proper interpretation of the situation in a given country. To give an example: In the case of South Korea during the 1970s and 1980s, it was easy to obtain the impression from the international discourse associated with the World Council of Churches that the so-called Minjung theology was a predominant theological trend in South Korea. This interpretation, however, is merely due to the fact that material on the topic sold particularly well on the international book market. In reality, churches with a more conservative orientation make up the vast majority of Christians in the South Korean Christian scene. Similar observations can be made with regard to many countries: Particularly radical theologies tend to draw theological attention, since they stand out from among the multitude of voices with their (sometimes deliberate) *offensiveness*. While on the one hand, *intercultural theology* is called upon to identify such voices, on the other hand, it is also called upon to demonstrate their limited significance for a particular context. Frequently, very different issues play a role on the grassroots level than in the few seminaries participating in the international discourse.

4.2. Between Explicit and Implicit Theology—Intercultural Theology and Media

Intercultural theology has the task of sifting through, analyzing, and explaining the significance of explicit scriptural theologies from other continents. Why, for example, are there theologies in which Jesus Christ is understood as a master of initiation, a proto-ancestor, or a Dalit (Wrogemann 2016, pp. 87–111, 171–228)? Moreover, what do these designations mean against the background of the respective cultural-religious contexts? Another question touches on the media in which theology manifests itself. Is the culture in question a scriptural culture or an oral culture (Prior 2019, pp. 143–62)? In many cases, it is a question of theology in the form of song texts or of melodies, of dances and their symbolic meaning, of stories that are told or of patterns of social order in which the life of the community is organized. It is about the places where and the times when worship services are held, it is about connections to and distinctions from local cultural-religious traditions, values, and media. Thus, the work of intercultural theology takes place between forms of explicit and implicit theology, whereby it is the task of intercultural theology to make the hidden meaning of implicit theologies visible, that is, to describe them explicitly.

4.3. Between Semiotics and Discourse—Intercultural Theology and Power

Since people share both implicit and explicit theologies, and since people have to agree on certain semiotic codes in order to be able to understand each other, the question arises as to which phenomena are regarded as meaningful signs in a certain culture. Here, the work of intercultural theology takes place between the poles of semiotics and discourse: In a particular local Christian culture, meaning is not simply ascribed to certain things as a matter of happenstance; on the contrary, there are always people or people groups who claim to interpret on behalf of the group what has meaning and what does not. Thus, culture is never simply “there” or a “given”; rather, it is always contested (Wrogemann 2016). When, for example, in African or Oceanian cultures, male authorities (such as male theologians who also have the cultural-ethnic status of a “chief”) claim that for a given local culture, male domination has always been an essential aspect of the culture and must therefore now also be continued in the local Christian church, then this will often encounter fierce resistance from women (Prior 2019; Strahm 1997), who, for their part, invoke cultural traditions emphasizing gender equality.

Intercultural theology is thus tasked with recognizing and describing not only local forms of Christianity but also *conflicts* among these local Christianities. The question arises

whether intercultural theologians are permitted to take sides in such conflicts. Moreover, what about the respective *discursive locus*? Consider the observation Matt Tomlinson makes in the case of a Pacific theology where Pacific theologians studying as scholarship holders at foreign seminaries call for theology to be contextualized, and even put that in writing in their dissertations—but after returning to their home churches and becoming members of the church hierarchy, they seek to prevent the very same changes (Tomlinson 2020, pp. 64–65)! People’s attitudes toward issues such as contextualization thus also depend to a considerable degree on the particular discursive locus they occupy.

One question we may ask in return is who may be considered an intercultural theologian in the first place. Are intercultural theologians by definition theologians who come from one country or culture and investigate a local form of Christianity in another country (preferably also on a different continent)? Or are they locals who interpret their own culture as intercultural theologians in order to take sides in certain questions? It remains to be seen how things will develop, since there are so few professorships for intercultural theology in African, Asian, Latin American, Australian, and Oceanian countries to date. Nevertheless, the minimum requirement for intercultural theologians must be that in terms of subject matter, they deal with significantly different local expressions of Christianity and thus do justice to the preposition “inter”.

4.4. Between Descriptive and Normative—Intercultural Theology and Methodology

These observations bring us to the question of the extent to which the subject of intercultural theology is descriptive or normative. Should intercultural theology not operate on a purely descriptive level? Based on what has been said so far, is that even possible or likely? Different scholars will tend either to limit themselves to a descriptive approach or to make theological statements as well. The significance attached to normative statements will vary greatly depending on the church background of the theologian (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Pentecostal, etc.). Thus, normativity becomes an issue on a meta-level.

At issue is not only (a) *which phenomenon* is regarded as normative (Christian tradition, say, or the church’s magisterium, the evidence of spiritual experience, or Scripture references) but also (b) which significance is attached to *which kind of normativity* and (c) *in which media* normativity manifests itself.

Whereas in many church traditions, a high degree of normativity is demanded in the area of worship, normativizations of, say, pilgrimage are usually defined much less stringently; while sharp boundaries are drawn when it comes to worship, boundaries tend to be more fluid when it comes to veneration. A high degree of normativity is often maintained with regard to certain media, as seen, for example, in the way Orthodox churches treat icons. It is rather unlikely that local symbols such as Pacific coconut palms will appear in icons in the near future. Be that as it may, questions of normativity are not arbitrary, as is evident in the example of discussions surrounding a draft of the WCC paper *Together Towards Life*. The draft declared in pneumatological diction, “The Holy Spirit—Breath of Fire”. Following sharp protests from various participants at a conference in Manila (2012), this wording was promptly removed from the draft. One person indignantly commented, “The Holy Spirit is no dragon!” This example shows that the metaphoricity of the New Testament message is by no means arbitrary. Hence, we keep coming back to *boundary work*.

4.5. Between Unity and Diversity—Intercultural Theology and Plurality

Intercultural theology is concerned not only with the emergence of new strands of Christianity but also with the question of how to determine the relationship between diversity and unity. What is the counterpart to tendencies toward diversification? Is it homogenization? What about the fact that Christianity has been marked by a certain plurality since its very beginning? The manner in which the Bible came into being can be taken as a symbol of this plurality: Early Christianity did not homogenize the early scriptures; rather, over a period of time it recognized a selection of 27 scriptures as the canon of the New Testament. From a theological perspective, the plurality of spirit ex-

periences corresponds to the plurality of writings considered to be inspired. That being said, this plurality remained *limited* in nature and did not give rise to boundless pluralism (Schnelle 2019, p. 480). Hence, *intercultural theology* is tasked with inquiring into a viable concept of plurality.

Theologically, it is about formulating a concept of Christian unity that is able to represent an ongoing, yet limited plurality of Christian presences in doctrine, praxis, and media. At the same time, it is about critiquing concepts of unity that would deny the intrinsic theological value of other expressions of the Christian faith. It is obvious that both concepts, plurality and unity, are extremely controversial issues. With regard to this topic, too, the fact remains that intercultural theology is to be understood as an in-between theology tasked with asking uncomfortable questions and criticizing careless answers.

4.6. Between Local and Translocal—Intercultural Theology and Connectivity

In each of the observations so far, local varieties of Christianity are connected on multiple levels to translocal expressions of Christianity. The *nature* of this connectivity is fundamentally important. This holds true, for example, in the case of the Anglican Church family, whose connective point of reference is the Archbishop of Canterbury. Those who recognize the historical succession and along with it the Archbishop of Canterbury are considered members of the Anglican Church family. This connectivity places certain limits on expressions of local variants of Christianity. The same holds true for other streams of Christianity: Translocal connectivity enables and encourages certain forms of local contextualization and inhibits or prohibits other forms. The centrifugal forces that come into play in the formation of ever new varieties of local Christianity are thus opposed by centripetal forces of connectivity. Centrifugal forces can have a diversifying effect, while centripetal forces have a homogenizing effect.

As in the other issues, questions of power play a pivotal role. For example, conservative Lutheran forces from the United States are trying to persuade Lutheran churches in the Baltics to cease or retract the ordination of women through the promise of funding. Various churches in Europe are attempting by means of various programs to get sister churches in Africa and Asia to grant theological recognition of homosexuality. Connectivity is found in many forms, from joint consultations, scholarship and exchange programs, to communication by means of social media.

5. In-Between Theology: Cultures—Missions—Religions

As an in-between theology and by virtue of its subject matter, intercultural theology is primarily concerned with cultures (and contexts), with cross-boundary interactions and thus with very different forms of missions, (Wrogemann 2018) and with reflecting on interreligious relations (and thus with other religious traditions). For each field, it is necessary to take the different forms of “inter” into account and reflect upon them: How do elite discourses and life on the grassroots level relate to each other? How do implicit and explicit theology relate to one another? What can be said about the relations between semiotics and discourse, descriptiveness and normativity, unity and diversity, and locality and connectivity?

By addressing these issues and the interstices established by them, intercultural theology contributes to the development of a more comprehensive understanding of reality, on the one hand, and of theology, on the other. Hence, it is no longer about discussing theological ideas in a vacuum or simply pondering about cognitive artifacts and their application, but about the forces, spaces, and atmospheres in which the Gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah and Son of God, manifests itself in ever new and life-giving ways by transforming the sinful world towards the love of the triune God.

By contributing to this more comprehensive understanding of reality and theology, intercultural theology helps us understand the complexity of the processes that keep taking place in the cross-boundary interactions of this universal message of salvation: First, processes of emergence of new culturally-contextually-local varieties of Christianity;

secondly, processes of development of new forms of missionary activity; and, thirdly, processes of constructive *boundary work* over against other religions and worldviews with their competing truth claims, values, and practices.

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