Judith Gruber

# Intercultural Theology

Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn

V&R

V&R Academic

# Research in Contemporary Religion

Edited by
Hans-Günter Heimbrock, Stefanie Knauss, Jens Kreinath
Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati, Hans-Joachim Sander
and Trygve Wyller

In co-operation with
Hanan Alexander (Haifa), Carla Danani (Macerata),
Wanda Deifelt (Decorah), Siebren Miedema (Amsterdam),
Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Nashville), Garbi Schmidt (Roskilde),
Claire Wolfteich (Boston)

Volume 25

## Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

Judith Gruber

# Intercultural Theology

Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht

This is a strongly revised translation of
Judith Gruber, *Theologie nach dem Cultural Turn.*
*Interkulturalität als Theologische Ressource*
© 2013 W. Kohlhammer GmbH, Stuttgart.

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

This book has come a long way. In many ways, it is both a faithful companion and the fruit of my intercultural ventures over the past few years. It started its journey as a PhD thesis at the Department of Systematic Theology at the University of Salzburg, Austria and was completed in 2012. When the German edition was published by Kohlhammer in 2013,[1] I had already made my way across the Atlantic to New Orleans. It was during my time as Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Loyola University New Orleans that this revised English translation took its shape. Impacted by my frequent journeys between Europe and the US, it searches for a home in between cultures that differ from each other in so many minute ways, academically and otherwise. As the book is now coming to completion, I am preparing for yet another move – new challenges lie ahead in Leuven, Belgium.

The ideas suggested in this book thus find their roots/routes in soils of different kinds; they were formulated along countless walks through both the mountains of Austria and the swamps of Louisiana. Journeys such as these cannot be undertaken alone – as I was sojourning through the interstices, I was offered shelter and nourishment, food for thought and academic companionship by generous friends; indeed, along the way, I have had the privilege of making myself at home in welcoming communities. Looking back, it is time to give thanks to all those who helped me on my way.

First, I owe a great deal of thanks to Gregor Maria Hoff, teacher and advisor of my PhD thesis in Salzburg, whose love of language and insistence on concise thought laid a reliable foundation for my theological meanderings. He and the members of the Department of Systematic Theology at Salzburg University – Sigrid Rettenbacher, Franz Gmainer-Pranzl, Ulrich Winkler, Hans-Joachim Sander, Alois Halbmayr –provided me with my first academic home, to which I love to return for summers and sabbaticals. Upon my arrival in the US, I was also warmly received by the members of the Religious Studies Department at Loyola University New Orleans – Terri Bednarz, Adil Khan, Ed Vacek, Bob Gnuse, Cathy Wessinger, Denis Janz, Ken Keulman, Tim Cahill – whose interdisciplinary approach has offered rich resources for challenging and invigorating my theological mindset. I would like to thank Dean Maria Calzada for offering a junior leave, and Provost Marc Manganaro for awarding me with the generous funds of a Marquette Fellowship, both of which were instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. I am also deeply grateful to

---

1 Judith Gruber, *Theologie nach dem Cultural Turn Interkulturalität als theologische Resource*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013.

the vibrant communities at Loyola and the neighborhoods of New Orleans, who taught me so much about beauty, resilience and a defiant joie de vivre.

Henry Jansen, writer and translator, prepared the English translation of the German draft of this book. His linguistic skills, theological expertise and, most importantly, his patient persistence, have proved to be invaluable for this exercise in academic interculturality. I am grateful to the editors of Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht's series Research in Contemporary Religion for accepting the manuscript for publication, and to Moritz Reissing and Bernhard Kirchmeier, who steered this book through its production.

It is my family, though, who I know to be the one constant in my nomadic life. Thank you to my parents, Brigitte and Leonhard, my safe haven, who are still giving me both roots and wings. Thank you to my sisters, Eva and Sarah, for their companionship and friendship. Thank you, most especially, to my husband Mark who is with me always.

# 1. Introduction

May God us keep
From Single vision
William Blake

Abandoning the traditional, well-traveled paths of interpretation that have
been followed throughout Christian history can be a daunting undertaking for
theologians. Risking all by stepping off the beaten path, they soon find
themselves in a vast, untamed, and largely uncharted territory of precarious
and unstable identity constellations. Decrepit border fences and thick stone
walls of separation and division cut across this immense area, converging and
then dividing again as they define what is self and what is other. Deep trenches
crisscross the terrain and break up its homogeneous monotony. This territory
beyond the familiar interpretations of church history is deeply scarred by the
powerful and violent struggles over the right to determine Christian identity,
but it is also marked by free trade zones between nomadizing groups. There is
no broad, straight, well-maintained road cutting straight across this frontier
region of Christian identity construction; there is no route that begins at a
secure, clearly defined point and leads us safely past the abysses of heresy and
the ravines of schism to an equally clearly defined destination on the distant,
hazy horizon, while all confessional deviations from this road appear to be
nothing more than dead ends or byways leading eventually back to the main
road. Instead of finding ourselves on that road, we find ourselves in a
bewildering warren of paths, an impenetrable, infinite web of precarious
identification routes through the space of others, leading to cul-de-sacs of
silenced voices, to roadblocks barring the way to heterodox areas, and to
overgrown trails of forgotten traditions.

Traditional hermeneutical models of church history, here portrayed by the
image of a broad road, depend on an essentialist understanding of Christian
identity and on teleological constructs of its historical development in the
church. These models presuppose that the church's essence is "unchangable
by nature" and must "remain just as … [Christ] instituted it right at the
beginning."[1] The development of its specific structures and doctrines that

---

1 Matthias Höhler, *Das dogmatische Kriterium der Kirchengeschichte: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie
der Geschichte des Reiches Gottes auf Erden*, Mainz, 1983, p. 43, quoted in Hubert Wolf: "Was
heißt und zu welchem Ende studiert man Kirchengeschichte?" in: Kurt Nowak, Wolfram Kinzig,
Volker Leppin et al. (eds.), *Historiographie und Theologie: Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte im
Spannungsfeld von geschichtswissenschaftlicher Methode und theologischem Anspruch*, Leipzig:
Evang. Verl.-Anst, 2004, pp. 53–65, here p. 55. This 'dogmatic theological' conception remained
influential until the end of the 20th century, and "there were direct lines to prominent church
historians of recent decades like August Franzen (1912–1972), Hubert Jedin (1900–1980), and
Erwin Iserloh (1915–1996)" (ibid., p. 56).

developed against the background of and in dynamic relation with Jewish and Hellenistic traditions is viewed as "the unfolding of what was implicit or embryonic from the start"[2] in the church itself. In the classic metaphor for the development of doctrine, the *depositum fidei* was seen as an organic whole whose fruit matures over the course of history. This preset and thus static essentialist identity was thought to be clearly distinct from other entities; Christianity was seen as an idependent and isolated phenomenon "to be analysed as if fundamentally isolable and explicable in its own terms."[3]

The poststructural and postcolonial deconstruction that emerged from the Cultural Turn is gouging deep potholes in this broad road of traditional interpretation built on the foundation of a modern – static, essentialist, isolable – concept of identity. These holes reveal the fundamental instability of identity: identity cannot be traced back to an unchangeable essence but is constituted only in and through discursive processes. To use the road metaphor once more: instead of finding our roots, we can only follow the complex routes of identifications through a maze of inclusions and exclusions.[4] This critical rereading thus brings to light the fragility and contingency of every human witness to Christian hope: Christian identity is not simply given and static but must be renegotiated again and again. The idea of an 'essence' of Christianity that is explicated in the tradition in different places and times has been undermined.[5] The kernel/husk model, which presupposes an unchangeable core of Christian identity in changeable cultural expressions, has become untenable. Instead, we trace the endless intertwining of constellations of Christian identity in diverse and unstable identification discourses.

This precarious concept of identity calls for a 'different' look at the history of Christianity – and yet, it does not make the theological question of Christian

---

2  Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 2.

3  Ibid.

4  James Clifford, *Routes, Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997.

5  Cf. Mariano Delgado, "Das Christentum der (deutschsprachigen) Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Wesen des Christentums, Auslegung des apostolischen Glaubensbekenntnisses, Kurzformeln des Glaubens," in: Mariano Delgado (ed.), *Das Christentum der Theologen im 20. Jahrhundert: Vom "Wesen des Christentums" zu den "Kurzformeln des Glaubens,"* Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2000, pp. 9–14, here p. 9: "The explicit question of the essence of Christianity is a specifically modern concern. We encounter it as an 'epochal leading question' in mysticism and humanism, in the German Reformers and in pietism, in the Enlightenment, in the Romantic movement, and in late idealism (often, admittedly, with concepts like 'Spirit,' 'Idea,' or 'principle' of Christianity, in liberalism, and historicism, in the critique of religion, and in academic theology [among rationalists and suprarationalists, liberals, positivists, cultural and church theologians]). In German theology, in the period from Schleiermacher to the Second World War, it almost acquired the status of a classical doctrine. Michael Schmaus' *Vom Wesen des Christentums* (1947) and Emanuel Hirsch's *Das Wesen des reformatorischen Christentums* (1963) can be viewed as the swan song of a theological epoch that was stamped by the question of essence."

identity irrelevant, and it certainly does not mean that any formulation of that identity is simply arbitrary. Precisely because postcolonial deconstruction has undermined the clear demarcations of this identity, it remains a central theme – we still need to identify, define, witness to, and proclaim the "hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15), even if we have now become aware of its discursive contingency throughout the history of tradition. Rereading Christian tradition through the lens of critical theories has made us see the unavoidable plurality and hybridity of Christian identity, but that does not exempt us from having to account for the universality that the Gospel of Jesus Christ claims. A rereading of Christian tradition through the lens of critical theories retrieves its disparity and plurality – and it is here, at the end of that critical-descriptive task, that the normative-theological task only begins. The epistemological changes brought about by the Cultural Turn puts the universal claim of Christianity's message into a precarious tension with its particular local formulations. A theological accounting of faith thus demands that we relate the normative unity of faith to its plural testimonies and consider the normativity of formulations of Christian identity in relation to their historical and cultural contingency. Theology after the Cultural Turn requires a model of universality that is based on epistemological particularity: How can we maintain the universality of the Christian message without erasing the disparate particularities of Christian identity? What does it mean to be a Christian in plural cultures? How can we define Christian identity without concealing the fluidity of its boundaries? How can we draw clear demarcations to other religious traditions if the "incursion of the other" (Levinas) plays a constitutive role in the formulation of identity and if Christian identity has, therefore, always been permeated by the other? How can we identify the culture-transcending 'essence' of Christianity without falling back into essentialist and substantialist thinking?

   This book approaches this theological task from the perspective of a nascent theological field in which these questions of the relation between Christian identity and culture(s) take center stage. This theological approach is emerging in response to a current paradigm shift in Christian self-understanding. In place of the Eurocentric model of 'Christendom,' a new understanding is beginning to take shape of Christianity as a 'world' movement with considerable cultural variety. Concomitant with this changing self-perception, Intercultural Theology is being developed as a new theological discipline that analyzes the inter- and transcultural character and practice of global Christianity. This book discusses this theological approach in two parts. First, it offers an analysis of the historical development of Intercultural Theology out of missiology and contextual theologies by looking at the theological problems that arise in each of these respective paradigms. Missiology was the theological discipline that originally dealt with the tensions between the unity and plurality of Christian identity, between the universality of the Gospel of the Christ event and the particularity of its mediation in

cultures, and reflected on the intercultural processes of transformation emerging from those tensions. Via the metaphor of 'accommodation,' missiology viewed the precarious relation between the universality and particularity of Christian God-talk initially more as a practical problem than a theological one. Contextual theologies, however, which emerged as an anti- or postcolonial response to the missiological paradigm, began to consider the differences produced by these transformation processes as *theologically* relevant. These theologies take the particularity of all theologizing as their conceptual starting point and use their unavoidable contextuality in a reflective and productive way for doing theology. But how can we relate these particular formulations to the theological claim of the universality of God's presence? It is with this question that Intercultural Theology begins: How, in light of the unavoidable contingency of its testimony, can the universality of the Christ event be described and theologically accounted for within the interpretative space of the church?

The crucial systematic issues of theological interculturality are already beginning to emerge clearly from this brief historical outline. The questions at stake are the theological relation of culture(s) and the Gospel, the particularity and universality of God-talk, and the issue of unity and difference in Christian identity. Tracing the development of Intercultural Theology will allow us to discuss these questions in the theological-historical contexts in which they arose. The second part of the book offers a constructive theological approach to Intercultural Theology. It does that by bringing systematic theology into conversation with cultural studies. The goal is to outline a theological interpretation of interculturality after the Cultural Turn. To that end, we will develop two separate lines of argument that, at first glance, are distinct. The first line outlines a narrative of Christian identity *after the Cultural Turn.* Relying on postcolonial theories and critical cultural studies, it will bring the irrevocable interculturality of Christianity to light. In this narrative, Christian identity is described as plural, fragmented, and permeated by the other. The second line addresses the *theological* issues at stake. It is rooted in a theology of history and, more precisely, in incarnation theology and describes Christian identity as testimony to the historical event of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. We will draw on philosophies of the event that stress the contingency of history and thus help us to trace the unsettling theological ramifications of the central Christian belief that God became human. While *Paul Ricoeur* still postulates an absoluteness at the heart of this contingency, which sets the interpretation of the testimony in motion, *Michel Foucault* refers to the endless interpretativity of "eventualizations." He does so in order to do justice to the radicality of the contingency of the event – the event emerges from interpretations and cannot be traced back to an absolute starting point. Contrary to Ricoeur, Foucault argues that interpretations of the event are not rooted in an absolute, interpretation-free origin. When we take the incarnation as the starting point of theology, it becomes impossible to talk

about God in an absolute and non-fragmented way. The incarnation witnesses to the revelation of God's presence in the mode of contingency. We will draw on *Michel de Certeau* to develop such a theology in the mode of particularity; a radically hermeneutical theology will unfold the theological ramifications of Foucault's radical hermeneutics of the event. Given the lack of an absolute place of its own and a universal, self-evident language, Christian identity is formulated in the 'displacement' of other places – it is always only to be found in 'other places and other words.' Theology, we will see, is a "movement of perpetual departure."

At this point, the two lines of argument will converge: Christian identity can be described – both *after the Cultural Turn* as well as *in the theological narrative* – as emerging from negotiations in the intercultural space and thus as a precarious phenomenon. Through this radically hermeneutical rereading of theology, the critical exposure of the interculturality of Christianity can therefore become a resource for theological epistemology. The ruptures and differences in Christian identity that are coming to light after the Cultural Turn have a theological quality to them; they make it possible to refer to the universality of God's presence as always interpreted through culturally conditioned theologies; they can therefore be used as tools for a theology that truly and faithfully takes incarnation – and hence contingency – as the conceptual starting point of its God-talk.

The final chapter develops a reading of the canon of Scriptures through this intercultural, radically hermeneutical lens. Zooming in on the Roman Catholic tradition, it traces the hermeneutical dependencies between the corpus of scriptures and the social body of the church, which mutually constitute and legitimize each other. While the canon functions as an 'icon for stability' for established theological interpretations, a postcolonial rereading reconceives of the canon as a sign and instrument not of stability but of the de/*stabilization* of meaning and identity. Read through a postcolonial lens, the canon becomes a material, tangible signifier of the negotiations of collective identity, which are pursued through on-going processes of semiosis – such a postcolonial rereading reveals that the processes of identity formation and the asymmetries of power which inform them, have inscribed themselves deeply into the text. In line with the argument developed across this book, I will argue for a 'resourcement' of such a critically destabilized canon for a radically hermeneutical theology, for which the corpus of scriptures becomes a sacrament of loss – a sign and instrument of God's absent presence.

# 2. Intercultural Theology in Historical Perspective

Over the last few decades, rereadings of the Christian tradition through the lens of critical cultural studies have done a tremendous job of revealing the cultural plurality within Christianity: they have shown how tradition has taken its shape through the exclusion of alternative theological interpretations and they have exposed a host of silenced voices underneath its orthodox master narrative. While the identity theories of the Cultural Turn have thus highlighted the intercultural nature of Christianity, the theological processing of these unsettling rereadings is still very much under construction and a work in progress. The numerous publications in recent years on this topic document ongoing explorations – we are still looking for appropriate theological languages for the plurality of Christianities and their intertwined histories. The first part of this book will map these explorations (focusing particularly on the development of Intercultural Theology in the German-speaking context) and trace the historical development of Intercultural Theology out of missiology and contextual theologies. A crucial theological question will be our guide through these historical explorations: How – as a response to which theological problems – has the interculturality of Christianity come to be considered a theological problem?

## 2.1 Missiology

Narratives of the disciplinary history of Intercultural Theology commonly trace its formation back to missiology – a theological sub-discipline that was institutionalized around the turn of the 20th century, concomitant with a massive surge of missionary activity in the colonial world, which put missiology into a complex relation with colonialism.[1] At that time, numerous missionary institutes were founded in Europe, and a vast number of 'mission churches' were established outside Europe.[2] Thus, the new discipline of

---

1 Generalizing statements that either equate Christian mission and colonialism or exonerate mission from any involvement with colonial oppression do not do justice to the complexity of their relation. Instead, careful case studies in mission history are called for, cf., e.g., Dana L. Robert, (ed.). *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706–1914* (Studies in the History of Christian Missions), Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008.
2 On historical case studies, cf. the contributions in Klaus J. Bade (ed.), *Imperialismus und Kolonialmission: Kaiserliches Deutschland und koloniales Imperium* (= Vol. 22), Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1982.

missiology and the historiography of missions can be seen as an attempt to respond to the theological 'alienation' the European churches were exposed to through their missionary activities:

It is indeed remarkable that old-fashioned mission history as a literary genre began at a specific point in time, namely when western culture broke out of the territorial shell of Christendom encountering 'the other', and when, internally, a conflict of interpretations began to tear its spiritual topography apart.[3]

At that time, missiology was first and foremost conceived as a theory of practice. Missiologists studied the history and practice of the missionary activity of the church in order to support and advance this activity; they conceived of missiology as the 'theory of the art of mission.'[4] This practice, of course, took many different forms, given the many different churches doing mission in different cultural contexts. Still, there is one defining feature that characterized missionary practice across its many variants: mission was understood and practiced as the expansion of the European church.[5] Joseph Schmidlin, the first professor to occupy the chair for missiology in Münster in Germany, which was established at the instigation of the German imperial government for the purpose of academic reflection on missions in the colonies, went so far as to say that mission is "the colonial edition of the whole of theology."[6]

In its early period, missiology was thus practiced primarily as an applied science responding to the theological problem of the 'alienation' of European theology with a theory of mission praxis. It focused on a territorial understanding of mission: the goal of mission was understood as planting the (visible) church. Paradigmatically, Joseph Schmidlin described mission as "the church's activity directed at spreading faith in God and the kingdom of God, the Christian religion, and the Catholic Church among non-Christian individuals and peoples."[7] With this focus on "evangelization activities among non-Christians," he clearly distinguished his own view from other concepts of mission, such as that of mission as "the propagation of the Catholic faith among Christians of other denominations." As

---

3  Werner Ustorf, "What's Wrong with Mission History?" in: Volker Küster (ed.), *Mission Revisited: Between Mission History and Intercultural Theology. In Honor of Pieter N. Holtrop*, Berlin, Münster: Lit, 2010, pp. 3–14, here p. 9.

4  Cf. Joseph Schmidlin, "Missionswissenschaft und Missionspraxis," in: *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 10 (1920) 1–11, 3.

5  Two observations can serve to substantiate this claim. First, a geographical understanding of mission was predominant – mission was Christianity when practiced in non-European regions. Secondly, until the mid-20th century, the Congregatio de Propaganda Fidei was staffed exclusively by European members – it was the European church that administered and carried out mission in non-European countries.

6  Joseph Schmidlin, *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, [1]1919, p. 10.

7  Ibid., p. 15.

the critical and systematic reason-based knowledge, investigation, and presentation of the spread of the Christian faith or the conversion of the pagans, both its actual practice in the present and the past as well its foundations and rules,[8]

missiology is reflection on missionary praxis. As "a science by missionaries for missionaries," it develops, in a circular hermeneutical fashion, a "theory of mission."[9] Schmidlin maintains that the goal of mission is to Christianize peoples, distinguishing thereby between the conversion of the individual and such Christianization. Both aspects should, however exist in "harmonious association with each other."[10] This distinction served the "successive unfolding"[11] of the goal of mission: individual conversion finds its "capstone"[12] in the incorporation of the individual into the church through baptism:

Internally … mission is the expansion of Christianity, and externally the social expansion of the church. Both are organic and inseparably connected to a whole: Christianization in its widest scope.[13]

Hence, initially, missiology tended to consider the 'goal of mission' the *implantatio ecclesiae*.[14] This approach is problematic if it relies on an understanding of the church as a hierarchical, visible institution that coincides with the kingdom of God and if the proclamation of the Gospel is understood as serving the establishment of the church.[15] For Schmidlin, the goal of

---

8   Ibid., pp. 2 f.
9   Cf. Klaus Hock, "Grenzziehung und Grenzüberschreitung: The Making of 'Mission' als Thema der Missionswissenschaft," in: Arnd Bünker and Ludger Weckel (eds.), *"… ihr werdet meine Zeugen sein …": Rückfragen aus einer störrischen theologischen Disziplin*, Freiburg im Breisgau, Basel, Vienna: Herder, 2005, pp. 249–59, here p. 255.
10  Joseph Schmidlin, *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1923, p. 243.
11  Ibid., p. 244.
12  Ibid.
13  Ibid., p. 44.
14  Ibid., p. 292: "For some decades the church has, in a rather unusual way, become the goal of mission."
    The 'planting thesis' was advocated primarily in the missiological school in Leuven and influenced there by Pierre Charles SJ (*Etudes missiologiques*): "We cannot give an answer to the question of why the church any more than we can to the other question: Why the kingdom of God? The church is the final goal: it is not subordinate to anything else. Here as well, everything begins and ends with an absolute, and there is nothing more absolute than the order that the truth, which God himself is, has established. The boundaries of the visible church are always advancing further to bring this task of growth to its final end, to fill the whole world with prayer and worship – *ager es mundus* – to deliver the Redeemer's whole property to him – that is the work of mission." Cited in Ludwig Rütti, *Zur Theologie der Mission: Kritische Analysen und neue Orientierungen* (= Gesellschaft und Theologie Systematische Beiträge, vol. 9), Munich: Kaiser, etc., 1972, pp. 29 f.
15  Thus, the Reformed missiologist Hendrik Kraemer held that the claim "Not so much the message must be proclaimed, but the church as a keeper of infallible truth and as a hierarchical

mission is indeed the proclamation of the Gospel, but, in line with the neo-scholastic ecclesiology of his time, he nonetheless tends to equate this with the planting of the visible church.[16] Here, as the "objective institution of salvation,"[17] the church is the visible realization of the kingdom of God;[18] the church and the kingdom of God are equated "in a kind of identification of sacrament and res."[19] Thus, when referring to "salvific community," mission, according to Schmidlin, always and everywhere "has the church in mind … because both coincide … according to the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus.*"[20] This ecclesiocentric limitation in the church planting theory was subsequently strongly criticized[21] and undermined by concepts of the church that subvert the juridical-institutional restriction of the visible *societas perfecta.*[22] Biblical reorientation to Jesus' message about the kingdom of God helped to develop new interpretations of mission.[23] Before these changes occurred, however, the *plantatio ecclesiae* was thought to be the means for reaching the mission goal. The establishment of the local church was thus seen as an integral moment in communicating the faith.[24] This framework strengthens local churches,[25] thus undermining an exclusively centralist view of the church – and it is against this background that the demand for a

---

institution must be planted" was essentially "true and exact." Cited in Thomas Ohm, *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker: Theorie der Mission*, Freiburg im Breisgau: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1962, p. 297.

16 Schmidlin, *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, pp. 21 f. "Catholic mission constantly keeps in mind that it is called beforehand by the only authoritative divine 'mission instruction' here to spread the Gospel to combat pagan superstition…. It is clear that the most immediate goal of mission activity is the conversion of the individual unbeliever…. But mission still has another goal that admittedly converges with the one just sketched above: according to Catholic doctrine, there is no abstract Christianity but only that Christianity that is embodied and realized in the kingdom of God on earth … in the visibly organized and hierarchically structured Roman Catholic church."

17 Schmidlin, *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss*, pp. 281–90.

18 Cf. note 16 above.

19 Siegfried Wiedenhofer, *Das katholische Kirchenverständnis: Ein Lehrbuch der Ekklesiologie*, Graz, Vienna, Cologne: Verl. Styria, 1992, p. 153.

20 Schmidlin, *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, p. 22.

21 Cf. Rütti, *Zur Theologie der Mission*, pp. 25–36.

22 Vatican II, which describes mission as instrinsic to the nature of the church, sees it as a fundamental obligation for all people of God (Ad Gentes 2).

23 Couturier, *Mission de l'Eglise:* "Planting the church is not first building the actual edifice, creating a local clergy, nor even laying the foundation of Catholic worship; rather, it is to proclaim: 'The kingdom of God is near, the kingdom of God is among you'." Cited in Ohm, *Machet zu Jüngern alle Völker*, p. 299.

24 Karl Müller, "Das Missionsziel des hl. Paulus," in: *ZMR* (1957), pp. 99–100, here p. 100: "The building of the native church is, today more than ever, a necessity if the faith is to be established and rooted in the mission people."

25 Schmidlin (*Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, p. 144) points to the curial reorganization of 1908, which significantly limited the ability of the *Propaganda Fidei* both spatially and in substance.

native clergy emerges.[26] Even if theory and reality diverged for a long time on this point – initially, a local hierarchy was only very slowly established in the various mission areas where paternalistic biases lasted for a long time[27] – this demand nevertheless gave rise to an awareness of cultural variety within Christian identity.

The issue of culture became a problem for Protestant mission as well. The pietistic understanding of mission focused more strongly on the individual conversion of non-Christians than Roman Catholic theology did. The individualistic orientation of the revival movements brought the cultural alterity of the 'objects of mission' into a stronger and more positive light.[28] This "incursion of the other" subsequently provoked a distinction between universal Christianity and its cultural forms of expression. Gustav Warneck, the first professor of missiology at a Protestant theological faculty, writes:

Namely, this Gospel, because of its supernatural and internal character, is such that it is attractive to all national and social contexts of human nature. Because Christianity is not form and rule but spirit and love, it is able to penetrate the whole life of the individual and the community, whatever other folk, state, social, or cultural forms it may have adopted. In this context, Christianity possesses an ability to adapt universally…. Christian mission protests energetically against the conscious or unconscious alignment of Christianization and Europeanization … or even Christianization and civilization. The admission into the kingdom of heaven presupposes inner qualities and not the external forms of Europeanism in language, customs, etc.[29]

---

26  The Apostolic Letter by Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud* (1919), requires the promotion and establishment of a native clergy.

27  "Father Gabet in China to Rome, 1847: 'With respect to the need for a native clergy, it is–viewed abstractly – generally accepted. But when it becomes a matter of turning it into fact, there seems to be little consensus. The reason given for this is almost always that the men in this country have such a weak understanding and are of such an unsteady character that they are not able to grasp the grandeur and dignity of the priesthood and to fulfil its duties.'" Cited in Andrzej Miotk, *Das Missionsverständnis im historischen Wandel am Beispiel der Enzyklika* "*Maximum illud*," Philos.-Theol. Hochschule, Dissertation St. Augustin, 1999. (= Veröffentlichungen des Missionspriesterseminars St. Augustin bei Bonn 51), Nettetal: Steyler Verl., 1999, p. 112 .

28  David Bosch mentions the Herrenhuters as an example: "They identified with the indigenous peoples and lived and dressed the way they did, mostly to the utter disgust of the European colonizers." Nonetheless, the Herrenhuters are one of the few exceptions; in most cases, the observance of cultural difference turned into "benevolent paternalism." Cf. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, pp. 291–98.

29  Gustav Warneck, *Evangelische Missionslehre: Ein missionstheoretischer Versuch. 1. Abteilung. Die Gründung der Sendung*, Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthas, 1892, p. 292.
An oft-quoted instruction by the *Propaganda Fidei* from 1659 also criticized the identification of Christianization and Europeanization: "Do not make any attempt in any way to persuade those people to change their rites, customs, and ways insofar as they do not offend openly against religion and morals. For what is more absurd than to introduce France, Spain, or Italy or any other part of Europe into China? It is not that, but the faith you must bring there!" Cited in Joseph Pathrapankal, "Religiöse Erziehung im Kontext interkultureller Bildung," in: Thomas

Schmidlin, too, appeals to Warneck's argument of the underlying difference between religion and culture and considers the goal of mission primarily as a 'religious' one. He sees the cultural aspect as a 'secondary goal': "at the same time the planting and furthering of culture … both the material and economic as well as the intellectual and ethical" so that "the non-Christian races and nations … wake from a thousand-year long sleep and eagerly soak in the influences of modern civilization."[30]

The cultural differences, which have become inconcealable through the missionary activities of the European churches are thus countered with a hermeneutic of assimilation and subjection:[31]

We are internally justified in subduing the native peope to our rule only if we bring them a higher good in exchange for the loss of their freedom, if we communicate to them, as a return gift … our higher culture, our moral concepts, and our better work method. In the name of civilization, the Europeans have divided Africa to raise the black people from the state of savagery to a human existence, and they should always keep this reasoning in mind. If the subordination is not to become unjust, this reasoning entails the right of the natives to protection, education, and Christianization, a threefold right to which a threefold duty on our part corresponds.[32]

Schmidlin's successor at Münster, Thomas Ohm, already distanced himself from the Eurocentrism of this intercultural hermeneutic of early missiology.[33] Its air of superiority results in a subject-object schema: "Therefore, to be even clearer on the concept of mission, we have to view the subject and object of

---

Schreijäck (ed.), *Religion im Dialog der Kulturen: Kontextuelle religiöse Bildung und interkulturelle Kompetenz*, Münster: Lit, 2000, pp. 65–75, here p. 69. The question of criteria is not discussed.

30  Schmidlin, *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, pp. 21, 43.

31  Johann B. Metz, "So viele Antlitze, so viele Fragen: Lateinamerika mit den Augen eines europäischen Theologen," in: Johann B. Metz and Hans-Eckehard Bahr (eds.), *Augen für die Anderen: Lateinamerika – eine theologische Erfahrung*, Munich: Kindler, 1991, pp. 11–61, here pp. 60 f. "But this recognition of the others in their otherness did not serve … their acknowledgment; it was a recognition of the others in service to their predictability and outsmarting them. It was an expression of a hermeneutic of domination, but not a hermeneutic of acknowledgment that is alien to all violence, every 'will to power' in the recognition of the others in their otherness."

32  Joseph Schmidlin, "Deutsche Kolonialpolitik und katholische Heidenmission," in: *Zeitschrift für Missions-wissenschaft* (1912), pp. 25–49, here p. 35.
    This cultural imperialistic mission ideology, which describes the 'duty' to 'civilize' non-European peoples was given classic expression by Rudyard Kipling in his famous and controversial poem, "The White Man's Burden," published in *McClure's Magazine* 12 (Feb. 1899)

33  Thomas Ohm, *Ex contemplatione loqui: Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1961, pp. 145 f.: "We are still not completely free of our way of seeing and our one-sidedness. We have far too high a view of ourselves and underestimate the Asians. Some still think that it is our culture that should be propagated. We still do not distinguish sufficiently between the essence of Christianity and its European dress …. And we are still working in a European way."

mission separately."[34] In missiological theory, European missionaries were conceived as the active ones in the missionary process: they administered the existing mission churches, they were the churches' priests and bishops, while non-Christian peoples – as the objects of mission – were required to adapt to European culture; their conversion was equated with the acceptance of European values. They were denied any independence for a long time.[35] This binary coding of the mission process into active giver and passive receiver, into Christian civilization and heathen savagery, left no room for reflection on the processes of mutual exchange and transformation in which the communication of the Gospel between two cultures occurred.

### The Basic Metaphor: Accommodation

As Schmidlin's work demonstrates, at the beginning of the 20th century, missiology was understood as a theory of praxis, as reflection on past missionary undertakings and as an applied science of present mission praxis. Against the background of a neo-scholastic ecclesiology, it developed a territorial understanding of mission that saw the *implantatio ecclesiae* as the goal of mission and was thus aimed at the geographical expansion of the visible, institutional church. Its ambivalent relationship to European colonialism during its time of institutionalization allowed it to draw on this ideology of cultural imperialism[36] and to present missionization as civilization. But even if the intercultural hermeneutics at the foundation of this concept of mission tended to be paternalistic and contributed to the legitimization of oppression, the irreducible alterity of other cultures emerged as an unavoidable theme. In mission activity, the European export of Christianity encountered cultural plurality and diversity, and thus the understanding of the universality of the Gospel became problematic. Missionary border experiences, which made cultural alterity visible and tangible, clearly demonstrated the culturality of European Christianity. The confrontation with cultural plurality made it impossible to present this type of Christianity as universal and and to transmit it to other cultures without further ado. The relation between the universal Gospel and particular cultures as well as the problem of the processes of intercultural communication were thus unavoidable problems in missiology right from the start.

Early missiology used the metaphor of accommodation to describe the

---

34  Schmidlin: *Einführung in die Missionswissenschaft*, p. 15.

35  Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, p. 5: "They [remain] under the tutelage of Western mission agencies, at least until the latter should decide to grant them a 'certificate of maturity', that is, until the younger churches had proved that they were fully self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating."

36  Andrew Porter ("Missions and Cultural Imperialism," in: Aasulv Lande [ed.], *Mission in a Pluralist World*, Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1996, pp. 65–80) calls for a differentiated view of the concept of cultural imperialism that does not obscure the instability and fragmented character of the 'imperialistic' culture and also takes the agency of the colonized into account.

relationship between Gospel and culture. Given the alterity of other cultures, it became clear that Christianity – viewed in a neo-scholastic way as a permanent, unchanging entity – needed to be accommodated, adjusted, and adapted to these other cultures. These processes were first discussed in missiology as problems of method:[37] "What was of primary importance were practical attempts to solve the problems, not fundamental considerations."[38] This approach obscured the wide-reaching theological implications of the relationship between culture and Gospel.[39] Accommodation was thus understood as a one-sided process that placed the teaching activity of the subjects of mission in the foreground: the missionaries were the actors and adapted themselves to the objects of mission. Thomas Ohm already broke with the one-sidedness of this idea in a reading of Thomas Aquinas when he distinguished between accommodation, assimilation, and transformation, thus bringing the process of the reception of the Gospel and its repercussions for Christianity into view.[40]

Both versions of the accommodation theory, however, rely tacitly on a normative idea of the 'essence of Christianity' that distinguishes between essential and non-essential or accidental properties. 'Peripheral' matters in the area of liturgy, religious customs, or church architecture, for example, were considerered accidental and could thus be adjusted to other cultures. The essence, however, cannot be accommodated; its supernatural, supratemporal, and immutable character does not allow this. Accommodation could thus be considered a methodological problem of praxis, without any reflection on its theological and hermeneutical implications:[41]

---

37  Schmidlin formulated it very bluntly in *Katholische Missionslehre im Grundriss* (p. 357): "Accommodation becomes applicable, namely, in methods that mission uses to be able at all to get to the pagan people in the first place."

38  Müller, *Missionarische Anpassung als theologisches Prinzip*, p. 2.

39  This pertains to German missiology. An approach that was theological in nature right from the start was developed in Spanish, French, and Belgian theology. For an overview, cf. ibid., pp. 2–62.

40  According to Ohm ("Akkommodation und Assimilation in der Heidenmission nach dem heiligen Thomas von Aquin," in: *Zeitschrift für Mission* [1927], pp. 94–113), accommodation is (p. 94) "the adaptation of the subject of mission, along with all that was to be communicated to the pagan, to what was particular about the pagan." Assimilaton is "the inclusion of the pagans' own perceptions and values in Christian truth and value assets" (p. 94). In another step, that of transformation, what was taken over was transformed, refined, and, as it were, baptized.

41  Within the framework of neo-scholastic theology, the problem of accommodation produces a tension that occupied Schmidlin's student, Johannes Thauren. Cf. Johannes Thauren, *Die Akkommodation im Katholischen Heidenapostolat*, Münster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1927. Thauren justified accommodation with quotes from the New Testament and the church fathers and grounded its necessity in the "legal position of the object of missions" (p. 21). Against this background, he distinguished between the external and internal unity of the church as "the treasure of the entire deposit of the faith" (p. 29): whereas the internal unity, which consists in the *unitas symbolica* and the *unitas liturgica* (p. 29), is unchangeable, the external unity, the "unity of liturgy and the formal shape of doctrine … is accidental" (p. 29). But because this external unity is "the most imposing manifestation of internal unity," little room is left for accommodation with respect to accidental aspects. Nevertheless, for pastoral reasons, Thauren

The traditional model of accommodation suffered from the fact that highly complicated processes in various areas of church life were solved by an extremely simple and at first also quite superficially understood schema – the schema for distinguishing between (mutable) form and (immutable) content.[42]

With respect to both cultural studies and theology, this schema rests on models that have since become questionable. From the point of view of cultural studies, the separation between culture and religion implied in the accommodation model is no longer tenable. The distinction between essence and accident goes contrary to the complexity of cultural sign systems that develop meaning in the difference and interdependence of their symbols.[43] The identity theories that were developed by critical cultural theories point to the unstable hybridity of every formation of identity and thus undermine the idea that missionaries can simply 'use' accommodation as a methodological means of adapting accidental cultural aspects to an essentially static Christianity. Since the Cultural Turn, the encounter between two cultural sign systems has been considered to be a highly productive place of identification that cannot be completely controlled in the negotiations for meaning. The accommodation model, however, does not afford us a sufficiently complex understanding of this productivity of the intercultural processes of translation. Rather, accommodation is understood as a – restrictively used – method for adapting the fixed content of Christianity to separate aspects of other cultures. The focus on accommodation as a problem of praxis does not deal sufficiently with the hermeneutical, epistemological, and criteriological issues at stake in cultural encounters. The accommodation model can therefore tacitly cling to a normative understanding of culture and thus perpetuates the hegemony of European ethnocentrism even in the adaptations it makes possible.

The theological presuppositions of the accommodation model find their roots in the neo-scholastic paradigm of the 19th century. The distinction between essence and accidents finds its theological foundation in its view of revelation as instruction: Christianity consisted, in that view, of a clearly delineated, unchangeable system of propositions. This ahistorical and acultural conception of Christian identity is linked to a hierarchical-juridical ecclesiology that highlights the visibility of the church as the protector of the unchangeable deposit of faith. This tendency to identify Christianity with the

---

holds on to its possibility and necessity (p. 30) and thus views it as a problem for practical theology.

42 Fritz Kollbrunner, "Die klassische Theorie: Akkommodation," in: Giancarlo Collet (ed.), *Theologien der Dritten Welt: EATWOT als Herausforderung westlicher Theologie und Kirche*, Immensee: Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft, 1990, pp. 133–41, here p. 141.

43 "The complex whole of a culture was thereby dissolved into useful and non-useful elements, as if cultures were assembled like building blocks!" Müller, *Missionarische Anpassung als theologisches Prinzip*, p. 57.

Roman Catholic model of the church allows only very limited space for genuinely different formulations of Christian identity.

The presuppositions of this model, both those grounded in theology and those grounded in the cultural sciences, thus lead the accommodation model into aporias. It turned out to be insufficient for addressing the theological problem of Gospel and culture(s) that arises in mission. Although early missiology began to acknowledge the cultural plurality of Christian identity and the culturality of European Christianity, as a neo-scholastic project it lacked adequate epistemological and hermeneutical perspectives to reflect systematically on the intercultural transformation processes connected with it:

Unfortunately, Catholic missiology could not approach the question of accommodation with a reflexivity that could have been gained from the insights of contemporary philosophy, especially the hermeneutics of recent exegesis and the history of dogma. The neo-scholastic conceptual apparatus that remained after the crisis of modernism was unsuited for tackling the problem of a budding pluralistic world church.[44]

The model of accommodation demonstrates the problem of early missiology. It understood itself as academic research into Christian mission and thus considered its aim to be a reflection on cultural and religious border crossings. Yet, even though the inescapable interculturality of Christianity was its central theme, it developed a theory of the relation between culture and Gospel that proved to be insufficiently differentiated. This theoretical weakness was the result of a claim to universality by European Christianity and Western theology. This claim had extremely concrete effects on church politics and praxis: mission churches were seen as subordinate, dependent 'offshoots'[45] of their mother churches. The accommodation model hampered new processes of Christian identification in other cultural sign systems and the global church was viewed as a monolithic entity that was to have as little cultural variation as possible.[46] This theological problem, which was intrinsically connected with its practical consequences, results from a similarly interdependent connection between historical and theological background discourses. The institutionalization of missiology occurred during the period of colonialism and European imperialism and found its theological background in the ahistorical, deductive system of neo-scholasticism whose ecclesiology and revelation

---

44 Kollbrunner, *Die klassische Theorie: Akkommodation*, p. 137.
45 Müller (*Missionarische Anpassung als theologisches Prinzip*, p. 31) refers to Eduard Loffeld who speaks "of autochthonous, native churches as offshoots of the mother church – with explicit reference to strawberry offshoots."
46 Thauren, *Die Akkommodation im Katholischen Heidenapostolat*, p. 29: "This external unity or uniformity … does not belong to the essence of the church …. But it is of great significance from both an organizational and legal point of view as well as a dogmatic one: it represents the most imposing manifestation of internal unity."

theology were translated into a territorial view of mission and an ahistorical and acultural, essentialist concept of Christian identity. In missiology, these historical and theological patterns often found their mutual grounding and legitimization.[47] While the Western claim to hegemony was religiously supported by the political instrumentalization of Christian evangelization, the mission work of the church in the 19th century cannot – because of its temporal proximity and its ambivalent relation to the colonial undertakings – be seen as detached from colonial discourse. Its initial ambivalent relation to the colonialism of its foundational period and the way this relation shaped its hermeneutics of non-European cultures and churches placed missiology under strong pressure for legitimation both within theology and in the broader field of academia. On the one hand, missiology's role in the canon of theology remains unclear. While the call for an explicit missiology with an independent status in both Roman Catholic and Protestant theology was asserted around the turn of the century, there are still those who argue that all theological disciplines need to have an implicit missionary orientation. Karl Rahner is one of many who called for a missionary reorientation of theology: "The theology of the West today also has some incalculable catching up to do. It must … be missionary."[48] After 1945, with the start of political decolonialization and the struggle of non-European peoples and churches for independence, the pressure to justify missiology increased. This period was marked by discussions about its elimination and the search for new orientations that focused on the de-Europeanization of theology and a positive hermeneutics of religious and cultural alterity. Thus, for example, Adolf Exeler's 'comparative theology' attempted to bring the differences of various culturally influenced theologies into dialogue with each other in a productive and creative way. His goal was to make them "fruitful for the large Catholic unity of theological thought."[49] Theo Sundermeier reconceptualizes missiology as xenology, i. e., "the study of the encounter of the church with those who are strangers to it."[50] The inescapable interculturality of

---

47 Schmidlin, *Deutsche Kolonialpolitik und katholische Heidenmission*, p. 39: "The state can indeed annex and incorporate those protectorates externally; the deeper goal of colonial policy, i. e., internal colonization, should help it complete the mission. While the state can enforce physical obedience through punishment and laws, it is the spiritual submissiveness and dependence of the natives that achieves this."

48 Karl Rahner, "Die bleibende Bedeutung des II. Vatikanischen Konzils," in: Karl Rahner (ed.), *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. XIV, Zürich, Einsiedeln, Cologne: Benziger, 1980, pp. 303–18, here p. 310.

49 Adolf Exeler, "Vergleichende Theologie statt Missionswissenschaft," in: Hans Waldenfels (ed.), *"… denn ich bin bei Euch" (Mt 28, 20): Perspektiven im christlichen Missionsbewußtsein heute. Festgabe für Josef Glazik und Bernward Willeke zum 65. Geburtstag*, Zürich: Benziger, 1978, pp. 199–211.

50 Theo Sundermeier, "Begegnung mit dem Fremden: Plädoyer für eine verstehende Missionswissenschaft," in: *Evangelische Theologie* 50 (1990), pp. 390–400, here p. 397; Theo Sundermeier, *Den Fremden verstehen: Eine praktische Hermeneutik*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und

Christianity became the focus of all attempts at reconfiguring missiology. Instead of outlining a theory of praxis of missions, missiology came to be seen as a "fringe science,"[51] engaged in "foundational research that … focuses on the analysis of the transformation of Christian discourse in the processes of crossing borders."[52]

## 2.2 Contextual Theologies

By the 1960s and 1970s, the missiological project had thus come under massive attack. The theological paradigm shifts of that time began to dismantle the neo-scholastic presuppositions of its theological framework; the paternalistic approach it took to the so-called 'objects of mission' and its monolithic ideal for the world church began to sit uneasily with a world shifting towards decolonization. It was in that climate that ideas for an Intercultural Theology first began to emerge. Werner Ustorf has convincingly shown that first steps towards Intercultural Theology in Europe – taken by Walter Hollenweger, Richard Friedli, and Hans Jochen Margull[53] – were actually steps *away* from the original paradigm of missiology, nudged along by a growing discomfort with the original framework of studying mission. The project of Intercultural Theology was hedged by former missiologists who were exposed to the suspicion that missiology now had to face.[54]

This growing unease had to do with extensive demographic, political, and theological shifts in the world church, which, in turn, were part and parcel of a profound rearrangement of the global order in the mid-20th century, when a host of former colonies of European empires gained independence. In the

Ruprecht, 1996; Theo Sundermeier and Werner Ustorf, *Die Begegnung mit dem Anderen: Plädoyers für eine interkulturelle Hermeneutik* (= Studien zum Verstehen fremder Religionen, vol. 2), Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verl. Haus Mohn, 1991.

51  Dieter Becker, "Junger Wein und neue Schläuche: Theologische Wissenschaft heute und der Fachbereich. Religionen, Mission, Ökumene," in: Dieter Becker (ed.), *Es begann in Halle … Missionswissenschaft von Gustav Warneck bis heute*, Erlangen: Verl. der Ev.-Luth. Mission, 1997, pp. 190–208, here p. 196.

52  K. Hock, *Grenzziehung und Grenzüberschreitung: The Making of "Mission" als Thema der Missionswissenschaft*, p. 254.

53  Walter J. Hollenweger, *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit* (Interkulturelle Theologie 1) 1979; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Umgang mit Mythen* (Interkulturelle Theologie / Walter J. Hollenweger; 2) 1982; Walter J. Hollenweger, *Geist und Materie* (Interkulturelle Theologie / Walter J. Hollenweger; 3) 1988; H. J. Margull, "Überseeische Christenheit: Markierungen eines Forschungsbereiches anhand der letztjährigen Literatur," in: *VF* 16 (2) (1971) 2–54; H. J. Margull, "Überseeische Christenheit II: Vermutungen zu einer Tertiaterranität des Christentums," in: *VF* 19 (1) (1974) 56–103.

54  Cf. Werner Ustorf, "The Cultural Origins of 'Intercultural Theology'," in: *Mission Studies* 25 (2008) 229–251.