

Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology and its Relationship to Religious Studies

The intention of the following paper is to define the function and position of the subject Mission Studies within the area of Theology as well as in its interaction with Religious Studies. In German-speaking universities, Religious Studies and Mission Studies are incorporated in different ways. Whereas Religious Studies can be located both within and without Theological Faculties, Mission Studies is a genuine part of Theology. The subject, which is taught at nearly all Protestant Theological Faculties, can be found under various categories, for example: Mission and Religious Studies; History of Religion and Mission Studies; Mission Theology; Religion, Mission and Ecumenical Studies. The reason for this lies in the complex historical development of the subject. In both contemporary public and theological discourse, the term “mission” often leads to confusion and stereotyping, which is why the traditional subject title “Mission Studies” is frequently the cause of misunderstandings.

The section “Religious Studies and Mission Studies” of the Academic Association for Theology (WGTh) and the Administrative Board of the German Association for Mission Studies (DGMW) have drawn up this document together. This paper represents the view that in the course of its history, Mission Studies has been assigned manifold tasks relevant for all of Theology and these give this area the character of an “Intercultural Theology”. For this reason it is suggested that the explanatory term “Intercultural Theology” be added to the traditional term “Mission Studies” without replacing the name Mission Studies. The association between Mission Studies or Intercultural Theology and Religious Studies as is customary in theological faculties, has proven to be fruitful and therefore should certainly be continued. The following paper will also comment in more detail on this association.

It is not the intention of this paper to formulate programmatic content because this has to be left to each individual faculty chair. The aim is rather to clearly distinguish the subject matter of Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies within Protestant Theology.

Global Context and Religious Pluralism – Theological Challenges in the 21st Century

The *global context* necessitates a repositioning of theological thought. Developments in non-western religious and cultural contexts directly affect contemporary Europe (for example: trade, tourism, military assignments, terrorism). The public call upon Theology to give qualified statements on these new issues. Increasing globalisation raises the ecumenical problem in a new way because locally, Christianity has to interact with regional cultures, milieus and religions (for instance the Pentecostal Charismatic Movement, liberation theology, independent churches).

Religious pluralism in Europe requires from Theology a special competence in intercultural matters and in theological reflections on the encounters between Christianity and non-Christian religions, worldviews and traditions. Many churches today find themselves in an environment under strong Muslim influence. Religious Education partly takes place in schools where children with a Christian upbringing are in the minority. Christian migrant congregations trying to transfer the spirituality and devoutness from their home country to the

local context are also a big challenge for churches. Additionally, some of the local population are turning to rival non-Christian practices and religions. (e.g. esotericism, Buddhism).

Academic Theology has to react to these new parameters and inner changes. Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies and Religious Studies deliver competences that are indispensable for all the working areas of the church, especially for the role of the rectory and for Religious Education. That in practice this has already happened, can be seen in the increasing student demand for Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies and Religious Studies and for the themes covered in these areas, and their gradual inclusion in the relevant theological examination regulations and training measures.

The content of the *Christian message* is such that it appeals to all peoples irrespective of their cultural, ethnical or political borders. Inseparable from this content - relevant for all mankind - is the form of the communication, which in the context of Christianity is referred to as "mission". When cultural as well as religious borders are crossed during this communication, it is necessary for Academic Theology to reflect on the specific questions of inter-religious encounters as well as on the cultural diversity of the Christian faith.

The significant changes mentioned above, which Theology as a whole has to consider, necessitate a strengthening of the subject Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies as an *independent theological discipline* dealing with the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions and with its intercultural differentiation. Consistent with international development trends in Theology, most Protestant Theological Faculties in German-speaking countries have the respective professorships. Likewise the theological examination regulations (e.g. EKD-regulations and teaching qualification regulations) cover this area to an increasing degree. However, the status and importance of this subject within Theology as well as in the dialogue with Cultural Studies has not been sufficiently clarified.

Mission Studies as Intercultural Theology

Mission studies came into being as an academic discipline together with the mission movement of the 19th century and was initially called "The Study of Mission". Hereby it was necessary to keep in mind the complex problems of the transculturality of Christianity arising from Christian mission. From the very beginning this took place in close partnership with the studies of Ethnology, Anthropology and non-European Philology. In the second half of the 20th century, transculturality became a central theme of Mission Studies. Addressing this issue theologically has become known as "*Intercultural Theology*". In its current approach, the subject – from a wide theological perspective - focuses on the encounters and disputes between Christianity and non-Christian religions, as well as on theological reflections about the non-western cultural dialects of Christianity in close connection with the general question of ecumenism. Additionally, there is the explicit and conscious acceptance of Religious Studies as a definite point of reference for mission research. The result is that Mission Studies has developed into a diversified, empirically substantiated Christian theology of cultures and religions. Against this background, Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies has to be seen as a theological discipline that reflects on: 1.) the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions and worldviews and 2.) the relationship between western Christianity and its non-western cultural variations.

Relationship to Religious Studies

The trend towards Religious Studies does not mean that Religious Studies should be absorbed into Theology. Intercultural Theology/ Mission Studies is interested in a clear definition of the relationship with Religious Studies with regard to content and therefore holds the following position:

- 1.) Religious Studies is understood as belonging to Cultural Studies and Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies relies on this expertise in many working areas. In this respect there is an interest in Religious Studies being a strong, independent discipline of Cultural Studies. However, Mission Study Research itself always needs a high degree of competence in religious studies.
- 2.) The relationship between Theology and Religious Studies is defined within the framework of the general relationship between Theology and Cultural Studies and the Humanities. If the chairs of Religious Studies are located in the Theological Faculties, then they contribute to the interdisciplinary networking of Theology. Hereby the research and teaching of Religious Studies provide specific competences, which are not just communicated via Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies but also in the co-operation of Religious Studies with other theological subdisciplines.
- 3.) Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies as an explicit theological discipline in association with Religious Studies within a Theological Faculty provides both mediation as well as differentiation between Cultural Studies and Theology.

Relationship to Ecumenical Theology

One of the responsibilities of many chairs of Mission Studies is to simultaneously represent Ecumenism, or Ecumenical Theology. On the other hand, in some theological faculties Ecumenical Theology is considered part of Dogmatic Theology. This differing classification highlights the difference in emphasis placed on the understanding of ecumenism. Where the focus lies more on theological education via intercommunication with other confessions, there is a special proximity to the dogmatic. Where the focus is more on the worldwide alliance between Christians, or Churches within various cultural and religious contexts, there is a close connection to the central questions of Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies. A clear demarcation and differentiation from ecumenism is not possible. On the contrary, the overlapping points to the special interdisciplinary range of Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies.

Tasks, Content and Competences

It is the task of Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies to theologically reflect on the interaction between Christianity and non-Christian religions and worldviews and also on the resulting transformation processes activated in various cultural contexts. Three working areas can be identified within the framework of German-speaking protestant theology:

1. The History of Theology and Christianity in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania.

2. Intercultural Theology in a narrow sense (e.g. contextual theology, North-South interaction and conflicts in World Christianity, migration, development problems).

3. The theology and hermeneutics of inter-religious relationships (e.g. inter-religious dialogue, Mission Theology, Theology of Religions)

The description of these tasks shows that in many working areas Intercultural Theology/ Mission Studies can only function meaningfully in association with Religious Studies This is because it relies directly on the latter's latest research, especially on the modern non-European history of religion. For this reason, the representatives of this subject usually work in Religious Studies themselves and have been doing this for some time.

In the interaction of the theological disciplines, Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies provides special competences. It is therefore expected of those who represent this subject that they have done recognised research in Religious Studies in the area of contemporary non-Christian religions and that they are familiar with current theoretical debates on Cultural Studies. Usually they should have had a long period of international experience. Their exemplary regional areas of research, in which they possess the necessary empirical and philological knowledge, traditionally lie in Africa, Asia, Latin America or Oceania. However, due to global migration they can no longer limit themselves to certain regions. Thus research into the migrant groups in Europe, focusing on the interaction between home country culture and European culture, belongs to contemporary Mission Studies, or respectively Intercultural Theology. The empirical and philological skills are themselves the basis for the necessary interdisciplinary co-operation with representatives of the corresponding disciplines of Cultural Studies (e.g. Ethnology, African Studies, Sinology, Indology, Islamic studies). Sound intercultural competence provides the particular and necessary precondition for theological work in this subject, through which the quality of research and teaching is guaranteed.

Intercultural Theology/Mission Studies in association with Religious Studies is of primary relevance for the whole of Protestant Theology with the global challenge on the horizon. Therefore, in future, the status of the subject within Theological Faculties must also be institutionally clearly strengthened.

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