

“Towards an Ecumenical Missiology”

In 2011 the World Council of Churches (WCC), the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) and the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) published the document “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World” in which they called on their member or affiliated churches and organisations to engage in a discussion on mission, witness, evangelisation and conversion and to apply the principles set out in the document to Christian witness in interreligious meetings.

Witnessing Christ: MissionRespekt

In Germany, the reception process for this document was organised by the International Catholic Mission Society missio Aachen and the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions (EMW). In 2014 they held an international conference entitled “MissionRespekt” under the auspices of the Council of Churches in Germany (ACK) and the Evangelical Alliance in Germany (EAD). For many people in the country, the reception process subsequently came to be associated with “MissionRespekt”, which also gave its name to the relevant website (www.missionsrespekt.org). In 2018 the working group appointed by the host organisations completed its work, and the 23 churches and societies involved were encouraged to incorporate the results of their joint deliberations in their work and proclamation. A documentation on the reception process to date was published in 2019.¹

Building on the encouraging experience gathered in the “MissionRespekt” reception process, missio Aachen, EMW and representatives of universities and schools run by the so called free churches in Germany (Baptist, Methodist, independent and other denominations), Protestant regional churches and Evangelicals resolved to continue their exploration of mission theology, which is ecumenical in the sense that it pursues the objective of joint proclamation of the Gospel as well as interreligious debate. In keeping with the spirit of the “Christian Witness” document, the witness given by participants from the different groups should neither impair nor devalue that of the other churches and mission societies and should be heeded with respect during encounters

¹ Michael Biehl and Klaus Vellguth, (eds.), *Christliches Zeugnis in einer multireligiösen Welt. Ein Rezeptionsprozess in ökumenischer Weite*, Hamburg/Aachen: missio/Evangeli-sches Missionswerk, 2019.

with people from other faiths. With this in mind, the further explorations on mission theology were to take due account of the specific nature of the respective theology and of ongoing differences in theological approaches which have an impact on mission theology.

As part of the reception process, a theological consultation was held at the Elstal Theological Seminary near Berlin in 2016. The participants considered the question of whether the agreement achieved in respect of the ethics of mission, of which the “Christian Witness” document takes due note and which was crucial to the reception process, can also be ascertained in the mission theologies of the Roman Catholic, Protestant regional church and other church traditions. The consultations in Elstal showed that differences between the traditions continue to exist, especially relating to Christology, eschatology and missionary strategies. However, it also transpired – contrary to expectations – that the differences established could not be unequivocally attributed to a particular denomination. The more important factor was whether the mission theology concepts were based or aligned more along ecclesiological, Christological, pneumatological or practical theological lines.²

Only theologians from Germany contributed to the Elstal consultations in connection with the reception process. One outcome of the conference, however, was a recommendation that comparable international ecumenical consultations should be held which, in addition to the immediate objective (a comparison of mission theology approaches), should give international support to the reception process of the document.

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Klaus Vellguth and Miriam Leidinger (missio), Michael Kisskalt (Baptists), Traugott Hopp, then Rector of the Korntal Academy (Evangelical), Claudia Jahnel (regional churches, university) and Michael Biehl (EMW) formed the team that resolved to put this recommendation into practice. They were joined later by Hanna Stahl, head of studies at the Mission Academy at the University of Hamburg. It was this team that organised the conference “Towards an Ecumenical Missiology: Witnessing Christ” which was held in Mainz from 15 to 18 July 2019. In response to the outcome of the consultations in Elstal, they decided that it should focus on Christology.

² Michael Biehl and Klaus Vellguth, (eds.), *Christliches Zeugnis in ökumenischer Weite. Konvergenzen und Divergenzen als Bereicherung des Missionsverständnisses*, Aachen, Hamburg: missio/Evangelisches Missionswerk, 2016. Cf. Christoph Anders, Michael Biehl (eds.) *Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious Word: Trajectories in the International Ecumenical Discussion*, in: *Transformation* 36(1), 2019, 3–11. DOI: 10.1177/0265378819831817.

Invitations to attend the conference in Mainz were extended to 35 theologians from Africa, Asia, North America, the Middle East, Oceania, Latin America and Europe. They all came from the church or theological backgrounds represented in the reception process and at the Elstal conference. The challenging task they faced was, first of all, to present selected Christological concepts from within their own church and theological circles as well as from their particular region. They were then required to outline their own position and, finally, to draw conclusions with respect to an ecumenical mission theology. The aim of the conference, which was organised as a process, was to establish the extent to which the confession of Christ and Christology can lay the ground for greater agreement in missionary theology. The participants were also asked to ascertain whether certain Christological concepts result in an emphasis being placed on differences or even dividing lines within mission and theology.

The nature of the task assigned to those in attendance produced an astonishing wealth of varying Christological concepts in the provinces of global Christendom: Jesus the Jew; Jesus as a Palestinian; Jesus as an invitation to dialogue with Muslims; the black, queer body of Christ; Christ as ancestor or avatar; feminist readings or approaches based on subjectivity theory in the context of European theology ... in other words, a wide-ranging panorama in which the countenance of Christ reflected the diversity of faces to be found in the great human family. In some of the concepts of Christology “from below”, Jesus gives people access to God, from whom they have become estranged due to the Christology of the majority or of dominant ecclesial traditions. Others claim that Jesus Christ comes from within their midst while they regard themselves as marginalised in the Christian faith and the churches. In many instances, the Christological concepts clearly had to do with social, cultural and political dividing lines. This meant that they tended to concentrate on aspects such as marginalisation, violence, suffering, injustice and poverty, with the resulting missiology being focused on salvation and redemption. The same was true of the religious environment wherever other religious communities formed the majority in society. Only in a few of the concepts presented did Jesus represent the difference between the religions; in some he was presented as a source of access to God for adherents of other faiths who, together with the Christians, suffer under the conditions they face in life.

These summary observations will now be followed by a brief look at the presentations given at the conference by way of an introduction to its proceedings contained in this volume. An outline of the discussion process during the conference will then be provided together with some remarks and insights.

Continental perspectives

At the start of the conference the African theologians Paul Béré (Abidjan/Côte d’Ivoire), Timothée Bouba Mbima (Yaoundé/Cameroon) and Faith Lugazia (Butare/Rwanda) examined a number of African approaches to Christology. In his presentation Paul Béré looked at “Christ the forebear”, “Christ the initiated”, “Christ the master of initiation”, “Christ the healer”, “Christ the chief” and “Christ the elder” as well as liberation theology perspectives on “black theology”. He was in favour of laying a path from the central point of the cross to a “kainos anthrôpos” or “homo novus”. Timothée Bouba Mbima mapped out the social frame of reference for an African theology and urged the churches to become involved in diaconal and transforming missionary work. Faith Lugazia, on the other hand, took a critical look at traditional metaphors of Christ and suggested that the metaphor of the king should be replaced by an understanding of Christ as a servant leader.

The second panel examined contextual Christology from a North American standpoint. Stephen Bevans (Chicago/USA) introduced three contemporary theological approaches: Terrence W. Tilley and his work *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice*; Elizabeth A. Johnson and her feminist-theological and eco-theological approach; and M. Shawn Copeland with his concept of a theology based on the marginalised. Bevans added to his presentation by introducing some Christological points of his own and explained how Christology can play a part in missiological reflection. J. Jayakaran Sebastian (Philadelphia/USA) described his own situation as a Christian with an immigrant background living in the USA and looked at the forms discipleship and witness can take in a changing world. Petros G. Malakyan (Pittsburgh/USA) explained his concept of leadership Christology and its theological and missiological foundations. It was conspicuous that the “North American panel” consisted mostly of theologians with an immigrant background, which represented an application of the post-modern, cross-cultural, inter-contextual and inter-cultural structural principle underlying the conference. The question arose as to whether it was more appropriate to have the modern-day church in North America represented by immigrants who entered the United States two hundred years ago or by more recent immigrants. With regard to the Catholic Church, it is particularly necessary to take note of the growing significance of the Hispanics, who are increasingly coming to dominate the face of the Church in the USA.

In the third session Wilbert van Saane and Martin Accad, both of whom are theologians from Beirut (Lebanon), provided insights into Christology in the Middle East. Wilbert van Saane, a Protestant missiologist who has taught at the Haigazian University in Beirut for the past ten years, presented “Phoenician Christology”, “Arab Christology” and “Palestinian Christology” as contextual

Christological approaches that have been developed in the Middle East. The background to his Christological remarks was the Levant with its long history of violent religious conflict, which provided the context for Christological reflections. In his remarks on the Phoenician Christ, van Saane referred to Karim El Kuossa and his work *Jesus the Phoenician*. The “Arab Christ” perspective has its roots, inter alia, in the works of Kamal S. Salibi and Mouchir Basile Aoun. In *Le Christ arabe - Pour une théologie chrétienne arabe de la convivialité* Aoun points out that Arab culture need not necessarily be regarded as identical with Islamic culture. He set out a Christological approach in which Christ is in the first instance the love of God, and Christians as disciples of God face the challenge of a kenosis in partnership with Muslims. According to van Saane, Islam provides inspiration for Christians especially with regard to its focus on the transcendence of God. Palestinian Christology has developed against the backdrop of the extended conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Mitri Raheb, a Protestant advocate of this approach, outlines in *Faith in the Face of Empire* a Christology which revolves around Christ’s solidarity with the landowners. Raheb points out that nowadays these landowners are the Palestinians. Based on these Christological concepts, van Saane said it is the task of ecumenical missiology to explore the Christological roots that exist in every culture. In the Middle East, in particular, ecumenical missiologists must develop their approaches in close cooperation with Islamic theologians and thus enhance their own capacity for interreligious communication. Finally, in van Saane’s words, missiologists must get to grips with situations and discourses which are bound up with the personal experience of vulnerability.

Martin Accad, Director of the Institute of Middle East Studies at the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary in Lebanon, discussed the Middle East as a cultural setting in which Islam and Christianity came into contact at an early stage. The Baptist theologian referred to the fundamental remarks made by the Jesuit Khalil Samir Khalil, who pinpointed various historical stages in the development of an Arab Christianity and the emergence of Arab Christologies. Looking at the fourteen centuries of Christian-Islamic dialogue in the Middle East, Accad highlighted the challenge facing ecumenical missiology of first overcoming approaches that are focused exclusively on Christianity and then developing a Christ-centred missiology which can be carefully introduced into an Islamic-Christian discourse. He distinguished between syncretistic, existential, kerygmatic, apologetic and polemical interactions and advocated a kerygmatic, prophetic and supra-religious approach together with the establishment of “multi-religious round tables”, so that religious issues can be discussed in society in an appropriate manner.

In a further panel, theologians from Europe debated the question of which contextual Christological perspectives from the region can point the way forward to an ecumenical missiology. Margit Eckholt (Osnabrück/Germany) referred first of all to the Christological approaches of Joseph Ratzinger, Walter

Kasper, Karl Lehmann, Peter Hünemann and Johann Baptist Metz and then went on to illustrate the extent to which – especially from the point of view of feminist theology – the approaches of Hildegard Keul and Miriam Leidinger to a theology of vulnerability constitute a valuable source of input for an understanding of the kenotic mystery of incarnation. Lisanne Teuchert (Bochum/Germany) reflected from a Protestant standpoint on the Christological approaches of the 19th and 20th centuries which were formulated “in the spirit of the Enlightenment” in a society characterised by individualism and self-determination. Subjecting these approaches to a post-structuralist critique, Teuchert contrasted them with more recent approaches that are influenced by specific hermeneutical interpretations: the symbolic-figurative approach and the multi-contextual, polyphonic Christology approach formulated by Michael Welker. Johannes Reimer (Ewersbach/Germany) broadened the horizon by introducing an Eastern European Evangelical perspective in the form of the approach developed by Ivan S. Prochanov. Reimer was able to show that Christological and missiological thinking is expanding, thanks to the overcoming of an individualistic and spiritual fixation, the contribution to society of independent Churches and the assumption of the task of reformation and renovation, above all in Russia.

In a subsequent session, three theologians, two female and one male, presented Christological concepts from Asia. Samuel George (Allahabad/India) talked about his Pentecostally-influenced Christological approach, at the heart of which are a Christ-centred orthodoxy, orthopraxy and orthopathos. He referred to the inspiration he had found in Dalit and Adivasi theology and stressed that, from a Pentecostal perspective, philosophical observations about Jesus were not as important as believers’ personal experiences of Christ, which form the essence of Pentecostal Christological reflection. Ambrose Mong (Hong Kong) prepared a presentation for the conference which was given by his student, Wai Han Kung. Drawing on his research into the work of the Indian theologian, Michael Amaladoss, Mong set out various Christological approaches from Asia before inviting discussion of Jesus as an avatar. In doing so he gave examples of agreement with, and disassociation from, the traditional understanding of an avatar. He pointed out that the avatar metaphor was helpful in conceiving the human/divine nature of Christ, in which God engages with human beings as a friend, brother and servant. Septemmy Lakawa (Jakarta/Indonesia) began by introducing some classical Asian approaches to Christology before going on to deal with feminist theology concepts from the continent. She then presented her own concept in which, beginning with the cross, she outlined a theopoetic Christological approach which takes account of the traumatic experience of violence, war and terror. In a concluding sacred dance, Lakawa gave an impressive demonstration that a theological exchange limited to semantic discussion rooted in the Western comprehension of science imposes restrictions on itself (particularly as regards

injuries, suffering and traumata) as long as it renounces crucial poetic and physical forms of expression.

In the continental panel that followed this session, Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro (Bogotá/Colombia) and Ruth Padilla DeBorst (San José/Costa Rica) gave papers on Latin American Christological perspectives. Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro dealt from a Catholic standpoint with the liberation theology approach involved in “Christ as liberator”, incorporating both feminist theology and eco-theology aspects in her Latin American perspective. Concerning the latter she referred, in particular, to the work of Leonardo Boff who, drawing on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, described Christ as the principle inherent in creation which entered history in the incarnation event and has provided people down the ages with a cosmic spiritual experience. Vélez Caro pointed out that the mission work of the churches along with missiological reflections can bring together Christians from the various Christian families, traditions and churches. Ruth Padilla de Borst drew attention to the semantic and ideological differences between the terms Latin America and Abya Yala and added the metaphor of “Jesus the worker” to the Christological approaches from below. She presented theological approaches developed by Samuel Escobar and Jules Martin, contrasted different narratives and demonstrated that the “official Christologies from above” in Abya Yala do not correlate with the life and witness of Christians, since they are narratives that are designed to establish or demonstrate power structures.

In the closing session Upolu Lamia Vaai from Samoa, the Principal of Pacific Theological College in Suva/Fiji, went through perspectives of an Oceanian Christology in which he highlighted the relations between water, earth, human beings and other creatures. Unfortunately his paper is not part of this volume. Arthur Leger (Suva/Fiji), who was not able to attend the conference in person, subsequently made available his paper on “The *Talanoa* about Oceanian Christology”. The term *talanoa* describes a style of discussion in which participants get together in small groups or pairs to deliberate on such fundamental questions as: who are we, where to do want to go, and how are we going to get there? Leger notes with regard to the formulation of an Oceanian Christology: “The *talanoa* about the Black Christ, Pacific Christ and Oceanian Christ begins with our personal experience of Jesus Christ.”

The conference as a process

The conference, in which – with a few exceptions – all the participants were both presenters and members of the audience, was designed as a process. Presentations were given in sessions organised by continent or region. In between there were meetings of working groups, which enabled the participants to examine in depth the proposals and questions raised by the

presenters. The composition of these groups varied in accordance with different criteria – regional, denominational, men/women, etc. – and the results of their deliberations were fed back to the plenary meetings. An additional conference observation group was called on to critically monitor the process and discussions. Its report opened the concluding debate, which focused for the most part on the consequences for an ecumenical missionary theology.

Some of the participants were critical of the division of the conference into continental sessions. Question marks were raised from a South American perspective, for example, as regards the use of the category “Latin America”, the feeling being that it indicated an insufficiently critical reflection of the colonial period and (unwittingly?) failed to appreciate that the term used by the inhabitants to describe their continent is “Abya Yala”. The breakdown into denominations, for example in the discussion groups and sessions in which the categories Evangelical, Catholic and the churches designated in Germany as “Free” were used to indicate the speakers’ background and perspective, were not considered appropriate for all the contexts. Issues of gender, equality, power of definition, post-colonial heritage in combination with the desire and willingness of the participants to learn with and from each other ensured a very candid yet appreciative atmosphere, which enabled the participants to engage in critical back-and-forth discussions.

Evaluation and continuation

It is hard to formulate the outcome of such a rich, complex and inter-cultural process of consultation. Different ways of engaging with theology emerged in the course of the conference, not just among the Catholic, mainline Protestant, Evangelical, Free Church and Pentecostal theologians present, but also among the regions from which they came. Regional and personal styles were at odds with each other but they could rarely be imputed to denominations. These styles occasionally made discussions difficult, since they required participants to listen very closely and placed considerable demands on the steering of the process. However, they also ensured that the debates were lively and controversial and provided moments of spirituality during the consultations.

It was readily apparent that convergences and divergences in the Christologies and their missiological implications are influenced not so much by the denominational backgrounds of the theologians as by the social, religious and cultural contexts to which their missiological concepts are related.

Although the term contextual theologies is often associated with the local churches of the Global South, the conference in Mainz showed once again that the churches and theologies in Europe and North America, in particular, are

being left behind in epistemological respects. Whereas the churches of the South realised early on that the theologies they formulated were always influenced by their respective contexts, numerous theologians from Europe and North America still cling at the outset of the 21st century to the illusion that the theologies formulated in their own context have a universal claim to the truth. In epistemological terms, such theologians in Europe need to make up lost ground to avoid future generations categorising this theological and ecclesiastical Eurocentrism as theological provincialism.

In a world characterised by migration and trans-cultural biographies “North America”, for example, was represented by renowned speakers such as Stephen Bevans, Jayakiran Sebastian and Petros G. Malakyan, who not only drew attention to denominational differences, but also used their personal experiences to illustrate the fact that North America is a (theologically) diverse continent. This was just one instance of the evaporation of a supposedly close connection between context, denomination, culture and ethnic authenticity that is to be found in an understanding of ecumenical missionary theology as the reflection of inter-cultural translation processes.

Pronounced modal and methodical differences emerged between Catholic and Protestant as well as Evangelical, Free Church and Pentecostal theology and missiology. For all the different styles in the theological traditions, specific differences in substance only emerged at second glance. The conference showed at least that the convergences and divergences in the Christologies and their missiological implications do not run along strictly denominational lines. Continental and cultural affiliations appear to be far more crucial in the formation of identity, so that they exert a greater influence on theological perspectives than any denominational background. One observer at the conference was bold enough to assert that structuring the series of conferences “Towards an Ecumenical Missiology” in accordance with the principle that theological approaches should be considered on the basis of denominational differences reflected a “specifically German perspective”. This claim, which needs to be formulated with a degree of caution, will require examination in the intercontinental ecumenical conferences ahead that will focus on issues other than Christology.

A number of wishes were expressed at the end of the conference. It was felt to be important that theologians from Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism and diaspora should be taken into account when designing the forthcoming ecumenical conferences. The conference monitoring group, whose composition was also inter-denominational and inter-cultural, was given an opportunity to express its views. Its members commended the potential inherent in such an intensive ecumenical debate while also underlining its limitations. They called for other topics to be considered, to which insufficient attention had been paid at the Christology conference in Mainz: digitisation and mission; mission in relation to power and structures; mission and abuse within the churches; mission in the

age of inter-culturalism; mission and migration; mission in the age of secularisation; mission and dialogue; mission and development; cross-cultural mission, etc.

Towards the end of the conference there was a wide-ranging discussion of how the significant findings and standpoints could be transferred from the academic discourse of a conference to churches and congregations and be of benefit to university students. The final vote of the students gave rise to the question of how the new findings can be introduced into the real world outside and sensitive dialogue practised. As regards the title of the conference “Towards an Ecumenical Missiology”, there was also agreement that its objective cannot be to formulate a *single* missiology, *no matter how ecumenical it might be*. It transpired that, just as there is a diversity of Christologies, so there can and must be several mission theologies and varying approaches. It is the task of ecumenical mission theologies to contribute to the common witness to Christ – as a person of the Trinity – in this diversity of contexts and to sharpen its profile. In this sense the process was inspired by the spirit of the “Christian Witness” document, and the outcomes will enrich the ecumenical discussion of MissionRespekt.

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