

THE INTERCULTURAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS MAIN COMPONENTS OF A CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGY

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Abstract

Soteriology is the important Christian teaching. However, it is interesting to think the Christian soteriology in the context of intercultural and interreligious community. This article will analyses some aspects of Christian Soteriology in that context: that of the role of the traditional Western denomination, of that Scripture is a complex criterion, that the impact of the history of doctrine cannot be fixed, that the cultural setting is an ambivalent fact, that therefore the relation Gospel-culture is multifaceted, the contention that the transmission of the Gospel presupposes societal and religious solidarity, a two-sided transformation, a realistic idea of the impact of religion upon a culture, and an appeal to an on-going debate on the Gospel-Culture relation.

Keywords: intercultural, soteriology, interreligious, theology, Western theology, culture, Gospel.

Abstrak

Pemahaman atau ajaran keselamatan (soteriologi) Kristen pada saat ini bersinggungan erat dengan pluralitas budaya dan agama-agama. Ini bukan hal yang baru karena pemahaman keselamatan itu sendiri, seperti yang terdapat dalam Alkitab, merupakan hasil dari perjumpaan kekristenan dengan beragam ide saat itu. Terhadap fenomena ini paling tidak ada sepuluh hal yang penting untuk diperhatikan, yaitu: peran teologi Barat tradisional telah menurun, Alkitab dengan kompleksitasnya, kenyataan bahwa pengaruh dari doktrin masa lalu tidak bisa dibetulkan, budaya merupakan hal yang ambivalen, relasi Injil dengan budaya bersifat multifaset, transmisi

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Injil mengandaikan relasi sosial, transmisi Injil mengandaikan religiusitas, transmisi Injil mengandaikan solidaritas, adanya dua sisi transformasi, pemahaman realistik pengaruh agama dalam kebudayaan, keharusan terus-menerus mempercakapkan wacana relasi Injil dan kebudayaan.

Kata-kata kunci: interkultural, soteriologi, interreligius, teologi, teologi Barat, kebudayaan, Injil.

Introduction

That the intercultural and interreligious dialogue more and more can be considered as an intrinsic part of the Christian soteriology is a direct result of the inculturation of the Gospel in the non-Western world. The Gospel has here to find its own way among already existing ideas of salvation. In ten points I shall deal with this phenomenon. My ten points can be more or less divided—in contrast to the composition of the Ten Commandments—in five “negative” and five “positive” points. The first five points consist of the assertion: that in the process of inculturation, the role of the traditional Western denominations has been played down (1); that Scripture is a complex criterion (2); that the impact of the history of doctrine cannot be fixed (3); that the cultural setting is an ambivalent fact (4); and that therefore the relation Gospel-culture is multifaceted (5). The second five, more constructive points encompass: the contention that the transmission of the Gospel presupposes societal (1); and religious solidarity (2); a two-sided transformation (3); a realistic idea of the impact of religion upon a culture (4); and an appeal to an on-going debate on the Gospel-Culture relation (5).

In this contribution I intend only to give a sketch of the framework within which an intercultural soteriology might be able to function. I shall not in detail deal with the specific content of that soteriology, because it belongs to the core of my argument that that content needs, in different continents, different expressions.

The Catholicity of the Church as a Hermeneutical Community

The main presumption of my contribution is the idea of the catholicity of the church as a hermeneutical community. I am convinced

of the necessity to use the diachronical (throughout the centuries) and the synchronical (contemporary) experiences of the worldwide church to incorporate the fruits of the current inculturation process hermeneutically. No church can digest these developments on its own. Therefore, I am inclined to understand the church primarily as the *historical and current hermeneutical community* in which the interpretation and proclamation of the Bible plays an authoritative role (a), in which the essence of church history (the important decisions of the great councils) is respected (b), and in which the local communities invite their members to express their living faith in witness and service (c). In this interpretation of the concept of *catholicity*, the Bible, church history, and the local community form the soil and foundation for the meanings that can be attributed to the Gospel.

The three components mentioned above belong closely together. If there is no active reading of the Bible, the study of the history of the church degenerates into unbridled speculation and liturgy becomes routine. Without any basic knowledge of the faith decisions taken before our times in church history, the understanding of the Bible quickly becomes naive and the liturgy has no centre. And without the Sunday liturgy with its prayers and hymns, we forget that only that is of lasting value in the church what can be sung in praise (*gloria*) or lament (*kyrie*) in the liturgy.

I am fully aware of the fact that the above-mentioned criteria of *catholicity* (Bible, church history, and vibrant communities) cannot easily and quickly be applied. Their concrete application requires a continuous hermeneutical debate at all church levels.

The European Denominational Background

A certain abstraction of the European, confessional (denominational) background is inevitable in non-Western theology. The classical, denominational controversies stem from the European history of the sixteenth century. Western missionaries exported these controversies to the non-Western world and imposed them upon the churches of Asia and Africa (see Vischer, 1993: 3-13, esp. 6-7). Nowadays non-Western theology is characterized increasingly less by its denominational background. That obtains most for the Protestant Churches. The Roman Catholic Church still manages to maintain a universal, confessional standard through its central authority. The worldwide distribution of a *Catechism of the Catholic*

Church in 1992 fitted into that strategy. Moreover, it is apparent that Roman Catholic theologians have more common points of reference (Aquinas and Vatican II) than Protestant theologians.

The Calvinist tradition has no confession that enjoys unchallenged universal recognition. It does have confessions that have found acceptance far outside their historical context—the *Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563 and the *Westminster Confession* of 1646 are the most widespread—but their worldwide distribution is rather limited. The Lutherans do have a fixed reference point in the so-called *Book of Concord* (1578) in which their most important confessions are collected, but only a few works in it—particularly Luther’s *Large* and *Small Catechisms* and the *Augsburg Confession*—actually function as reference points, and do so only in the Western world. Therefore, many non-Western Protestant churches wrote the last decades their own confessions. It is, however, from a Protestant point of view rather complex to find common criteria to assess them.

The Sola Scriptura Principle

For Protestants, from the beginning, it was always the appeal to Scripture, the *sola scriptura*, that obtained as the highest norm. Previously and now not at all, given the current appeal to a contextual reading of the Bible, that appeal could not be reduced to one common denominator (see “Contemporary...”, 1986: 453-473). In the past several of common denominators were proposed as internal hermeneutical principles. The Lutherans suggested *justification*, the Anglicans *incarnation*, the Reformed *God’s sovereignty*, the liberation theologians *liberation*, etc. None of them are, however, able to cover the whole content of Scripture in a convincing way. Unlike the Roman Catholics, the Protestants do not have an adequate, external hermeneutical principle like a universal teaching authority (cf. Brinkman, 1995: 51-53). This confronts Protestant theology with a towering hermeneutical (exegetical) problem. It might be that the concept of the church as a *hermeneutical community*, developed in the nineties of the former century within the World Council of Churches, could be helpful here. It sees biblical hermeneutics as one of the main aspects of the *catholicity of the church* (cf. WCC, 1998).

In Asia, where the Christian mission has been confronted with the written sources of other religions, the hermeneutical question is still more

complicated. The current inculturation debate brings there the Protestant *sola scriptura* principle immediately in touch with a vibrant discussion on the place of the Bible in the midst of an extended, millennia-old Asian library of holy books of Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Buddhism (cf. Samartha, 1987: 30-32; and also Manickam, 2004: 352-360).

The Impact of History

It is often said that, just as there is no European or North American theology, so there is no African or Asian theology. After all, there is such a great religious and, consequently, theological variety per country, linguistic area and region that such general labels are far too crude. The questions, however, with which contemporary inculturation confronts Christianity, have a lot in common worldwide. They concern the position of the Bible, the contested impact of early Christian doctrine and the position of Christianity in its relation to the other world religions.

We touched already briefly the question of the position of the Bible. That question is closely related to that of the authority of early Christian doctrine. Was the Graeco-Roman culture of that time just an adequate instrument of transmission or also a procrustean bed for the Gospel? We cannot determine definitively the meaning of past events on the basis of our existing, always limited knowledge. In essence, we should then—stated paradoxically—attempt to predict the future from the past. If the past is to have a future, however, then it must also be given the chance for that. Wanting to set the course of history deterministically can be considered to be one of the greatest mistakes of communism.

From the wealth of the history of doctrine, we uncover again and again experiences and insights that have been covered by later layers. Thus, we are always discovering forgotten truths behind and beneath doctrines. They do often not lead to completely new interpretations, but place well-known interpretations in a new perspective. For, indeed, the future of the dogmatic past of the church cannot be predicted. Already the change of the meaning of words and concepts through out the centuries within one language prevents that.

A case in point is here the affinity of the churches in India with the Gospel of John. Can the gospel of John be said to come fully into its own only in India with its emphasis on the cosmic Christ (Parapally, 1995; Honig,

1982: 1-67)? And can be said that the meaning of Jesus' "descent into hell" can only be grasped in those cultures where they still hold that future generations can hope for a final liberation of their ancestors out of the waiting room of the dead (Mogoba, 1985: 5-16, esp. 11; Gounelle (ed.), 2004)?

Must God Remain Greek?

All the above-mentioned questions can be summarized in the question: Must God remain Greek (cf. Hood, 1990)? Provided that we are not anymore prepared to give an affirmative answer to this question, what would then be the corollary? Are we nowadays searching for an alternative for a Greek God? If God can no longer be Greek, what must he be then? What cap would fit him best? The Chinese have an apropos expression for offering someone something that does not really fit him: "placing Mr. Chang's hat on Mr. Li's head". That it will not fit, is obvious (see for this expression; Song, 1996: 21). But what is the alternative? Must Li just go around the whole time with his own hat? Are faith truths transmittable from one culture to another without losing their main content? If so, will they then be taken totally in possession by that new culture? Does that mean that God, instead of remaining Greek, must now become totally Korean, Chinese, Indian, or Indonesian?

It will be obvious that we cannot make from Christ a local or tribal hero. Any kind of inculturation has to express, therefore, something of the tension between indigenization and alienation. It is the tension between particularism and universalism. Authentic universalism—to quote the Cameroon Roman Catholic theologian Fabien Eboussi-Boulaga—concerns always a particularism that transcends its own limits (see Eboussi-Boulaga, 1984: 115; also Brinkman, 2001: 171-185). Hence, I would be inclined to state that Christians feel both at home and not at home in their own culture. Or, to use the famous words of the *Epistle to Diognete* (5,1) from the second century: "For them, any foreign country is a motherland, and any motherland is a foreign country" ("Epistle...", 1987: 145). Therefore, a Christian will feel at home everywhere and nowhere. This ambivalent position is formulated, briefly and to the point, in the New Testament in the classic Christian saying of being "in but not of the world" (John 18:36 and Rom. 12:2). This saying implies that for a Christian the relation between Gospel and culture is never an one-to-one relationship. There is always some distance between them.

Who Inculturates What?

Inculturation refers to the *transmission of a religious set of ideas and acts out of a specific culture to another culture with its own religious set of ideas and acts*. In this description abroad concept of culture is presupposed. Culture points not only to the world of the high arts. Defined as a *comprehensive system of meanings, norms, and values by which people give form (meaning) to their life in a certain time and place*, it embraces the material conditions of life as well (see for these two definitions; Brinkman, 2007: 6, 4). In an inculturation process elements from one culture are transferred to another.

That implies always a *two-sided transformation* (Brinkman, 2007: 1, 16-17). This expression refers to the phenomenon that when a concept is transferred from one context to another, both the giver and the receiver are transformed. In another context, the concept in question (the giver) receives a somewhat different meaning, whereas that concept also gives something new to, or changes, the new context (the receiver). The dynamics of such a two-sided process appears to elude constantly any pattern to which researchers call our attention. Theologically, with respect to the subject, here the work of the Holy Spirit will always be indicated as the driving force behind each inculturation. Always reciprocity will be implied. A major complication in the inculturation debate constitutes the simple but often overlooked fact that we never have a clear image of the subject and object of the inculturation event. Who inculturates what? Penetrates the Gospel a culture or penetrates a culture the Gospel?

With respect to the “what”, the object, we keep searching and groping for the most adequate words and concepts to imagine the mystery of divine presence. We never grasp divine revelation completely in language and in concepts. Hence, Paul writes: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror.... Now I know in part” (1 Cor. 13:12). And in Romans 11:33-34, he sighs: “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?” The inability to come to complete understanding affects not only Paul but everyone who attempts to articulate the meaning of the Gospel in his own language and culture. There is no cut and dried recipe for expressing the meaning of divine presence in one’s own situation.

Also with respect to the “who”, the subject, the culture in which meaning is attributed to the Gospel, we are still unable to trace what happens

precisely in the interplay between faith as a “belief system” and a culture as a “value system”. How does a culture leave traces as a pattern of norms and values in someone’s belief? And how precisely do the concepts of our faith influence our norms and values? Even if there is usually no one-to-one relationship—a complete identification—between faith and culture, they do influence each other. No one can, however, say how that interchange occurs precisely. Influences are often indirectly or might cause effects opposed to the original intention. That explains, for example, that a deliberately secular government does not make always a country more secular and that an explicitly Christian government does not make per definition a country more Christian.

No single study seems to have been able to capture this difficult phenomenon of the interaction between faith and culture in such broad terms that they can be used straight forwardly. The differences vary too much from situation to situation and such an interaction has to go through too many channels. And if a plausible explanation is offered in a creative study, that explanation is usually valid for only a short time. Within a few years the religion-culture relationship can change worldwide, as appeared from the attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September 2001.¹

No Transmission without Societal Solidarity

Crucial in each form of transmission of the Gospel is always the feeling of urgency and solidarity. The reproach of a lack of true solidarity with the needs of the continent is heard repeatedly from Asia especially, the continent where the transmission of the Gospel failed for the most part. In Asia, Christianity remained a “strange” religion for too long, intended only for those who wanted to become alienated from their own situation. This situation has changed drastically nowadays. Christianity in Asia has received an unmistakable Asian face (cf. Sugirtharajah [ed.], 1993). Solidarity can, of course, take many forms, in the case of the *dalits*, the casteless untouchables in India, many of whom are Christians, the solidarity can assume the form of resistance to the caste system. One can thus speak of *cultural resistance* in connection with the inculturation of the Gospel. We see that in South Korea as well in the circles of the so-called Minjung theology (cf. Nirmal [ed.], 1990; Suh, 2002). In a situation of social reconstruction, as in South Africa after apartheid, there was a strong appropriation of old (African)

values in order to help restore dignity to tens of millions of former “second-class citizens” (Maluleke, 1997: 17-30). Here, we could speak of *cultural acceptance*.

Solidarity can sometimes even consist to a large degree of *agreeing on what* is considered suitable *in the dominant culture*. The position of Christians as a religious minority can be so weak and threatened that a large degree of agreement regarding the dominant (religious) culture is essential for their survival. Stronger or weaker examples of this form of solidarity have appeared in recent decades and sometimes still do in China, India and Indonesia (Ming Ng., 2011: 57-70; Jingyi, 2007; Carman, 2006: 241-263; Heredia, 2003: 401-426; Aritonang, 2002: 124-137; Titaley, 2002: 37-102). It has to do with situations in which millions of Asian Christians live, thus not a marginal occurrence! Outside the context in question, this form of solidarity especially quite often meets with scepticism by Christians who live in a comfortable majority situation. In some situations, it can, however, also be a command by the Gospel to walk two miles with someone when forced to walk one (Matt. 5:41).

Solidarity with Other Religions?

Does this solidarity concern other religions as well? The current Indian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Indonesian theology—to mention just a few examples—cannot be studied without some basic knowledge of the content of the sacred books of Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Islam. Similarly, non-Western theologians will say that the history of the early Christian development of doctrine cannot be understood without knowledge of Plato, Aristotle, and Greek mythology, and that contemporary Western theology cannot be understood without knowledge of nineteenth-century Western European Enlightenment philosophy.

When I myself worked on my book *The Non-Western Jesus* in 2005/2006, I was already during the first weeks of the real writing process convinced of the fact that I couldn't work on Asian theology without the holy books of the great Asian religions. It is impossible to understand Asian theology without any knowledge of the *Analects* of Confucianism, of the *Tao Te Ching* of Taoism, of the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanisads* of Hinduism and of the texts of the main sutras of Buddhism. And the same holds *mutatis mutandis* also true for Africa and Latin America: it is also impossible to

understand African and Latin-American theology without any knowledge of African and Latin-American ancient religions.

Seldom I came across traces of the Western denominational background of African and Asian authors, but repeatedly I was confronted with their own religious context. That implied that in my search to find criteria to assess whether or not we could call Jesus an ancestor, a guru, an orisha, an avatar, a healer, or a bodhisattva, I couldn't find a lot in denominational literature, on ancestors exempted. Especially Roman Catholic authors discussed extensively the veneration of ancestors, often in comparison to the adoration of saints (cf. Jebadu, 2007: 246-280). Generally spoken, however, the interreligious dialogue as intrinsic part of the inner Christian dialogue is a relatively new phenomenon.

Inculturation: Between Affirmation and Criticism

Theologically inculturation always takes place between two poles; the incarnation on the one hand and the cross and resurrection on the other. The incarnation of the Word (John 1:14) implies that God wants to dwell among people. That means that the divine wants to take on cultural garb. While the incarnation represents *fact* of the assumption, the cross and resurrection represent the *nature* of the assumption and, in fact, its *critical* character. Cross and resurrection point to dying and rising with Christ, an event that is symbolized in baptism.

That is a critical event. We die to our old Adam and rise up as people reborn with Christ, our second Adam. Only those who are prepared to lose themselves will find themselves (Mark 8:35; John 12:24). Believers are expected to make this experience their own not only at the moment of their baptism but throughout their whole lives. Baptism thus always refers to a critical *process of purification*, a catharsis. Whereas incarnation stands for affirmation, cross and resurrection stand for criticism, for the preparedness to empty oneself (*kenosis*), for finding oneself through losing oneself.

If we consider incarnation and cross and resurrection to be characteristic for a theologically adequate approach to the inculturation process, we refer to what we described above as the phenomenon of a *two-sided transformation*. That is why incarnation can never be described without the experience of cross and resurrection. *Indwelling* never occurs without change on the entering and receiving side, and *change* never occurs

without solidarity (identification). No single culture can reveal anything (new) about Jesus apart from this interaction.

The Impact of Religion

What could we expect from new inculturations of the Gospel in non-Western cultures? Are they a kind of panacea for church growth? Sometimes, it seems that that is the undertone in many expositions by both Western and non-Western theologians in the inculturation debate. The tenor of many arguments seems to be that, had Christianity simply adapted to Asian culture, for example, it would have become more rooted in Asia and there would have been more church growth.

The correctness of this expectation can, however, not always be demonstrated. A unique Japanese theology developed comparatively early in the twentieth century (immediately after the Second World War) in Japan, but this theology does not hold any special attraction to the Japanese. Only one percent of the Japanese population is Christian. In South Korea, Christian theology—despite the assumption of the Korean name of the supreme being, *Hananim*, for the Goci of Jesus—has taken on a strongly Western character, primarily in the large churches. Nevertheless, after the Second World War, more than 25 percent of the population became Christian. Thus, other factors played a role as well (cf. Mullins, 1995: 61-77).

If church growth is not the direct result of a successful inculturation, and therefore cannot be the immediate goal either, what then is? A better form of Christianity? A different Asia, Africa, and Latin America? The Congolese Roman Catholic theologian Metena M'nteba raises this question in an article aptly titled "Inculturation in the 'Third Church': God's Pentecost or Cultural Revenge?" (M'nteba, 1992: 129-46). By the "Third Church" he means the African Church that is emerging from the original Oriental Church (the "First Church") and largely formed by the Western Church as the "Second Church". Is the forming of a truly African church, the "Third Church" to be seen as a late fruit of Pentecost or are the old African cultures now grabbing their chance to bend the strange intruder to their will as the "revenge of the cultures"? Has—he asks critically—the Western inculturation of Jesus' meaning in the last 2.000 years made the West more Christian in the sense of more social, peace-loving? Has it drastically changed Western society?

Gospel and Culture

These challenging questions urge us to the conclusion that in every society a detailed analysis of the public role of the Christian religion is required. An overall approach will not work. Its role in Africa is another than in Asia as its role in Europe is another than in North-America.

These different roles have everything to do with different histories, political systems and majority-minority relations. There is no standard recipe for the Gospel-Culture relation. The Gospel-Culture debate has to be an on-going discussion in every time and in every place. This discussion belongs to the catholicity of the church and that means that it belongs to the church of all places and all times. No kind of Christianity can avoid the question about its societal role. Dutch Christianity can't afford that and Indonesian Christianity can't afford that. But, this indispensable and necessary question has to be put to each of us in a fair, patient, and humble way, because he who in his role in society is without sin, is ironically invited by Jesus Christ himself to throw the first stone (John 8:7). As Christians we believe in the coming kingdom of God. That means that we believe in change. The existing world will not be the definite world. Hence, we are time and again looking for adequate words and ideas to articulate our hope, our expectation of a new world. And the more that will be really our own hope, our own expectation, the more we will formulate it in words and ideas that are familiar to us. I would say: That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Hence, I conclude with the prayer: *Veni creator spiritus sanctus*, come holy spirit, descend into our minds and hearts.

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Endnotes

¹ The most well-known Gospel-Culture studies of the last six decades are H. Richard Niebuhr (1951) and Jaroslav Pelikan (1999).