


Editorial

Intercultural, Ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue: An Introduction

Francis-Vincent Anthony 

Faculty of Theology, Salesian Pontifical University, 00139 Rome, Italy; vincent@unisal.it

Religious traditions with their universal intent on human salvation or well-being have de-territorialized themselves or migrated from the place of their origin along trade routes in the company of merchants, invaders, and colonizers. Moreover, in the contemporary world, every other aspect of society, namely, economic, socio-political, and cultural, has tended to de-territorialize. The intersection of complex features of diverse cultural and religious traditions in a globalized world thus poses daunting challenges and innovative opportunities.

While cultures differ in their core aspect of meaning–value systems and linguistic-expressive systems, giving rise to socio-political systems and ecological-economic systems (Anthony 1997), religions vary in their articulation of transcendence and immanence. Religions can uphold absolute transcendence (e.g., Islam, Judaism) or absolute immanence (e.g., Taoism, Confucianism), or they can take the mediating stance of immanent-transcendence (e.g., Christianity, Hinduism) or transcendent-immanence (e.g., Buddhism) (Panikkar 2008).

Although distinction can be made between religion and culture in the modern secular context, in its origin, the former is so bound to the latter, as soul to body (Panikkar 1991), that separating them would mean the decline and demise of both. The strong bond between religion and its culture of origin faces a challenge as the former enters new cultural territories. The challenge is to express and share the religious core, integrating with features of new cultures through the process of inculturation/acclimation. Given that the newly encountered cultures themselves are generally animated by a religious core, the migrant religion faces the dilemma of complete isolation to preserve its identity or full immersion, risking self-destructive syncretism. Hence, as a religion moves from one context into another, it necessitates a critical diachronic intercultural dialogue to maintain and develop its identity; when it spreads across diverse contexts simultaneously, it needs to engage in a critical synchronic intercultural dialogue to maintain unity in diversity (Anthony 2012). Since culture is a dynamic reality, religious traditions have to engage in intercultural theology both diachronically and synchronically to maintain and progress in their understanding of the transcendental reality and be relevant to the local context and the world at large.

The history of religions testifies to the inner divisions or sectarianism based on religious-cultural sensitivities. In Christianity, this may be exemplified by the emergence of churches, such as the Coptic Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Anglican Church, Lutheran Church, and the Roman Catholic Church. Besides historical socio-political factors, it cannot be denied that underlying the denominational differences, there are religious–cultural and linguistic factors in comprehending and expressing the Christian faith. Analogously, this is true in the case of other religious traditions: for example, sectarian divisions in Hinduism, like Shaivism and Vaishnavism, or inner divisions in Islam in terms of Sunni and Shi'ah communities. A dialogue for unity in diversity among denominations or sects of religious traditions would require an interdenominational or ecumenical dialogue, which could be rendered possible via the complex process of intercultural theologizing. Divisions, in a way, point to the monocultural assertion of religious truth as against the intercultural exploration of transcendental reality.



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The fact that culture is enlivened by a religious core implies that one cannot engage in intercultural theology without some dialogue with the religious core of an encountered culture or with its ideological core, as in the case of secular culture. Likewise, an interreligious dialogue can be facilitated and furthered through intercultural theology as the two represent intersecting features of a complex process. Such a process can forestall further divisions and even help overcome existing rifts both within and between religious traditions. Moreover, intercultural theology, when facilitating ecumenical and interreligious encounters, can provide a deeper scrutiny of the divine mystery, a progressive consolidation of unity-in-diversity, and a wholesome experience of *cosmotheandric* (Cosmic-Divine-Human) wellbeing (Panikkar 1993, 2008, 2010).

The focus of the present Special Issue is to carry forward intercultural theology as a process not only for enriching theological discourse within the context of one's own faith-community but also as an added stimulus for engaging in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The centrality of culture in ecumenical and interreligious engagements suggests that these, in turn, can give rise to a multifaceted intercultural theology.

The scope of this Special Issue, then, is to explore innovative aspects of intercultural theology in relation to an ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The efforts made by scholars in the thirteen contributions can help overcome the confessional or sectarian view of intercultural theology and find its full significance and rightful place in close association with ecumenism, interreligiousity, and interdisciplinarity. The contributions of the authors, in fact, bring into dialogue various religious traditions (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, African religion, Confucianism), various Christian denominations (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Pentecostal/Charismatic and Independent churches), and diverse socio-cultural linguistic contexts (Russian, Greek, South African, Asian, Indian, Chinese, post-colonial) and interdisciplinary perspectives (theological, philosophical, practical/pastoral, spiritual, catechetical and educational). We offer a synthetic panorama of the contributions based on the abstracts and evince how these add to the existing literature on intercultural theology and enhance *cosmotheandric* communion and wellbeing (see Special Issue: https://www.mdpi.com/journal/religions/special_issues/ITVEID, accessed on 29 August 2023).

Henning Wrogemann's article that introduces "Intercultural Theology as In-Between Theology" takes up the profile of intercultural theology against the background of world Christianity and the anthropology of Christianity and defines it as an in-between theology with respect to factors such as audience, media, power, methodology, plurality, and connectivity. According to the author, intercultural theology should be understood as both a descriptive and normative discipline, the driving force behind it being the universal-missionary truth claim of salvation and being committed to a comprehensive understanding of reality and theology.

Opening the discussion with reference to ecumenism, Johan Buitendag and Corneliu C. Simut focus on "Emerging Religious Consciousness: A *Cosmotheandric* Understanding of Reality in the Light of Sophiology of Some Russian Theologians towards an Eco-theology". It appears that the sophiology of Russian Silver Age theologians (e.g., Solovyov, Bulgakov, and Florensky) can open up a vista in the spirit of *aggiornamento* to a meta-religious approach recognizing the infinite capacity of humanity to transcend particularized religious identities and to belong in different ways to, with, and in God. Sophiology, then, is a form of progressive Christianity that brings together philosophy and faith in promoting an ecological public theology.

In his paper "Charismatic Pneumatology as Ecumenical Opportunity", Jason Wesley Alvis engages the work of three emerging Pentecostal/Charismatic thinkers whose pneumatologies provide novel opportunities to think more carefully about 'relationality' and ecumenical unity. Nimi Wariboko's pneumatology helps us acknowledge the very kind of relational ontology God has with Godself as a split subject, thereby disrupting not only our all-too-human meaning-making process but also the way God signifies the world for us. Amos Yong's pneumatology emphasizes human practice or an 'orthopraxy' that is polyphonous, historically rooted, and concerned with spiritual gifts not only for sanctifica-

tion but also for worldwide witness. Finally, Clark Pinnock emphasizes the connections between creativity and relationality, suggesting how at-one-ment is also the telic work of the Spirit.

Michael Nausner's contribution, "Culture-Specific and Cosmopolitan aspects of Christian Coexistence: A Postcolonial Perspective on Ecumenical Relations", suggests that the academic discourse on postcolonial theory and the ecclesial movement of ecumenism are siblings of sorts in as much as they both deal with the lingering consequences of past violence and the tensions between particularity and universality. Hence, a growing awareness of the problem of postcolonial conditions in the ecumenical movement and Simón Pedro Arnold's suggestion of an 'inter theology' that is sensitive to power dynamics and cultural intermingling in global Christianity have their relevance. In a similar vein, Claudia Jahnel argues for an intercultural theology that takes processes of hybridization seriously and calls for forms of 'vernacular ecumenism'. To understand and recognize the complexities in these postcolonial Christian identity formations, some kind of 'cosmopolitan ecumenism', as André Munzinger calls it, needs to be developed. In this way, hybrid cultural and theological formations can be recognized, and hegemonic universalisms resisted.

Extending the discussion to religious pluralism, Vojko Strahovnik, in his contribution "Holism of Religious Beliefs as a Facet of Intercultural Theology and a Challenge for Interreligious Dialogue", argues for a holistic understanding of religious beliefs and suggests that the formation and maintenance of religious beliefs are holistically sensitive to background information, which includes the culture's meaning-value system. Beliefs embed their appreciation of this background without the believer being explicitly conscious of how it has shaped them. Any model of intercultural theology must then understand religious belief holistically if it purports to facilitate interreligious dialogue. Holism is a vital epistemic and pragmatic facet of intercultural theology. The article concludes by outlining the significance of epistemic humility for interreligious and intercultural understanding.

Shruti Dixit's contribution "The Apocalypse as a *Cosmotheandric* Communion: A Hindu-Christian Dialogue" focuses on apocalyptic theologies in the context of Hindu and Christian settings in India and how they interact, creating the possibility for an interfaith dialogue. Based on Raimon Panikkar's neologism '*cosmotheandric* vision,' the paper establishes a relation between intercultural theologies and interfaith dialogue. The apocalypse can be viewed as being a constant reminder of the *cosmotheandric* nature of the universe for Hindus and Christians alike, fostering a dialogue between the two religions and allowing for their hermeneutical differences. The Apocalypse can then be viewed as an instance of *cosmotheandric* union and absolute togetherness, wherein cultural and religious differences disappear with the consciousness of the whole: the One.

In their contribution "Invigorating Interfaith Consciousness for the Common Good: Reimagining the Role of African Religion and Pentecostalism in Contemporary South Africa", Galous Atabongwoung, Johannes M. Lütz, and Denise A. Austin investigate some of the factors that could limit harmony between African religion and Pentecostalism. After making reference to some definitions and historical context, they discuss the power and legacy of anti-apartheid interfaith solidarity. They then explore the ongoing factors hindering interfaith engagements between the African religion and Pentecostalism in South Africa. Utilizing Walter Hollenweger's Pentecostal intercultural theology, they argue that expressive liturgy for biodiversity and sustainability, communal participation for reconciliation, and experiential spirituality focused on land care could provide a potential 'fourth' approach to the interfaith dialogue for African religion and Pentecostalism.

Widening the perspective to include the Islamic tradition, Nur Serikovich Kirabaev, and Olga Vasilievna Chistyakova compare "The Human Being in Eastern Church Father's and Al-Ghazali's Philosophical Theology". They analyze two historical types of philosophical culture: the classical Eastern Patristics and Arab-Muslim medieval thought. The focus on the religious doctrine of man allows the intercultural and inter-theological nature of these traditions to be elucidated. In more specific terms, the authors examine the understanding of the human being as emerging in the Nicaea and post-Nicaea periods

of Eastern patristics—Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor—with Abu Hamid al-Ghazali as the most insightful representative of the Sufi philosophical-theological system in the Middle Ages. After presenting the Christological views of Athanasius of Alexandria and Maximus the Confessor, the authors take up Al-Ghazali’s holistic and systematized doctrine of humanity. Conclusions are drawn about the comparability and the presence of intersections between Eastern Christian, Byzantine, and Muslim forms of thought.

Roberto Catalano elucidates “Pope Francis’ Culture of Dialogue as Pathway to Interfaith Encounter: A Special Focus on Islam”. Since 2013, the pope appeared to be unambiguously committed to finding an alternative pathway to the much-publicized category of the ‘clash of civilizations’, which, over the last few decades, has been the reference paradigm in Christian–Muslim relationships. Papal initiatives, gestures, and journeys have consistently aimed at a ‘culture of dialogue and encounter’. The author seeks to show how Bergoglio’s engagement to establish constructive dialogical rapports with Muslims is an effective way toward the implementation of the Second Vatican Council while opening avenues for what could be defined as ‘interreligious synodality’.

In a similar vein, Francis-Vincent Anthony takes up the question of “Intercultural Lived Ecclesiology: The Asian Synodal Praxis of *Communio, Participatio et Missio Inter Gentes*”. The author examines the crucial issue—to a great extent ignored—of the intercultural lived ecclesiology associated with the *inter gentes* synodal praxis of the Catholic church. Although the synodal journey appears to be promising, the endogenous and exogenous ecclesial and societal differences implied in the *inter gentes* discernment can render it a complex transformative endeavor, entailing reciprocal enrichment and mutual critique. Making a synthesis of the views associated with inculturation, interreligious dialogue, and human flourishing that emerged in various episcopal conferences in Asia in dialogue with some key themes of the German Episcopal Conference, the author traces the intercultural challenges and prospects of *communio, participatio et missio inter gentes* with a view to transforming the Church’s way of being and functioning.

Moving on to the practical theological area of education, Antony Christy Lourdanathan elaborates on “Intercultural Theology Competence for an Intercultural Faith Education”. Taking for granted Intercultural theology as the bedrock of faith education in an multicultural context, the author seeks to enumerate the specific competencies that can render the process of intercultural faith education possible, significant, and feasible. From a catechetical or faith education point of view, this article analyses the three perspectives of faith that intercultural theology should promote, namely, the dialogic personalization of faith, the prophetic challenging of faith, and the cohesive exchange of faith—corresponding, respectively, to personal and interpersonal dimensions, communitarian and social dimensions and expressive and missionary dimensions of faith. Each of these three perspectives declinate itself into at least three specific competencies, amounting to nine in all. Interpreting each of these competencies and their distinctive contributions, the article configures the foundational framework of intercultural theology for intercultural faith education.

In a similar vein, Thor-André Skrefsrud focuses on “Rethinking the Intercultural Potential of Religious Education in Public Schools: Contributions from Intercultural Theology”. The author studies the question of how intercultural theology can inspire a critical and constructive reflection on the intercultural potential of non-confessional religious education (RE). Taking the Norwegian non-confessional RE subject as a starting point, the author draws attention to the tendency to present religions, worldviews, and denominations as single entities with distinct characteristics. As emphasized by Jackson, Jones, Meyer, and others, a systemic approach can largely capture the institutionalized sides of religion. It means that in schools, the intercultural dimension of RE could easily be reduced to emphasize the students’ need for encyclopedic knowledge regarding different traditions, overlooking how religion is embedded in social life and transforms, develops, and interconnects through everyday practices outside of institutionalized religious stand. It is then crucial to examine how intercultural theology can create critical awareness of the inner

diversity and interconnectedness of denominations and religious traditions. The study posits that the descriptive and normative framework of intercultural theology can inspire educators to reflect critically on the intercultural dimension of a non-confessional RE.

Focusing on the pastoral–spiritual domain, Caroline Yih examines “The Impact of Cultural Diversity on End-of-Life Care”, that is, how end-of-life care needs and expectations are unique and are influenced by the individual’s cultural conditioning, values, and beliefs. In the pursuit of quality end-of-life care provision within the increasingly complex and diverse contemporary medical context, it is vital for cultural idiosyncrasies to be taken into consideration in order to attend to the individual patient’s needs and end-of-life goals. Palliative chaplains, as spiritual care specialists within the multidisciplinary healthcare team, play a crucial role in the support and facilitation of the holistic vision of end-of-life care delivery. Using Hong Kong as a case study, this author examines the impact of cultural diversity on the effectiveness of the chaplains’ delivery of end-of-life spiritual care. Specifically, special attention is paid to two challenges arising in the Confucian cultural context: the cultural taboo of death and the cultural idiosyncrasies in end-of-life communication. The article seeks to highlight the cultural incongruencies within the current chaplaincy professional formation and to sustain chaplains in becoming culturally competent practitioners in the pluralistic healthcare landscape.

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