

The Cultural Origins of “Intercultural Theology”¹

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Abstract

Ecumenical amnesia is accompanying much of the current debate on replacing the terms missiology or mission studies by that of intercultural studies or intercultural theology. This paper tries to address the loss of memory. By remembering the time when the new terminology was established (the 1970s and 80s) we become aware of the particularities, the challenges, and the limitations of the original vision of “intercultural theology”. Among the particularities we will detect that of the professional missiologist working in the secular academy; challenges can be found in the reformulations of the missionary paradigm; and some may wish to see the limitations in the fact that intercultural theology began its life as part of a European conversation on culture and transcendence.

Keywords

intercultural, intercultural theology, missiology, interreligious dialogue, convivencia, hospitality, Friedli, Hollenweger, Margull

Decolonization exposed much of Northern orthodox theological thought as unhelpful to reflect the human realities in the South – an exposure that confirmed the inherited frustration of the Christian left with traditional theology and triggered a number of acts of theological repentance in the North, among them that of intercultural theology. From the start, *intercultural theology* received its thrust and energy not only from the discovery that all theologies

¹ Several friends and colleagues helped me collecting the information presented in this paper, among them Dr. Lynne Price, Birmingham, and a number of colleagues from my Department; Frau Ute Winkelkötter, Lang Publishers (Hamburg); Prof. Richard Friedli, Fribourg; Prof. Volker Küster, Kampen; Prof. Theo Sundermeier, Heidelberg; Prof. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Glasgow. I am grateful to all of them – for all errors, however, I am responsible. I have listed emails, correspondence and my own collection of Personal Papers in the *References Cited* section. The main text will cite any such materials as PP, followed by its author’s name, followed by the year.

are contextually conditioned, but also from much older Northern theological fault-lines that became active again under the pressure of the decolonization process. The term itself, though first turning up, it seems, in linguistics and international pedagogy (Kaplan 1966), was put to theological use in the seventies by missiologists working in three European (and secular) universities. It is primarily connected with the names of the Lutheran missiologist and ecumenist Hans Jochen Margull (Hamburg; for his theological CV see Ahrens 1992, Petter 2002)) and of his friend Walter Hollenweger (Birmingham; cp. Jongeneel 1992, Price 2002) who belonged to the Reformed tradition and, at the same time, to that of Pentecostalism. Both were in the sixties exponents of church reform in the *World Council of Churches* in Geneva and advocates of a new, namely a de-colonized theology that would include those traditions that were usually neglected by Western theology – non-Western and/or non-literary traditions (Margull 1962b, 1974a; Hollenweger 1967). In this ambition they were supported by a Catholic missiologist and historian of religions from Switzerland, Richard Friedli (Fribourg), who had published a pioneering theology of religions to which Margull had written the introduction (Friedli 1974). Friedli, a generation younger than his two colleagues (emeritus since 2006), tried to rethink the future of Christianity and the religions by including two new sets of data: one, the phenomenon of a global “cultural circulation” and, two, the problem of coping with irreducible “otherness” in terms of society, culture and religion. Both sets of data meant that believers, any believers, were aliens to the world they knew, using a transitory model of interpretation in order to put their trust into what is not transitory. In this period of transition, all traditions, including that of the Christian faith, had to re-orientate themselves.

From 1971 to 1981, Birmingham, Hamburg and Fribourg were in intense missiological communication (PP, Friedli 2008a). Their missiologists had little sympathies for the continuation of colonial or hegemonic mentalities under whatever guise, and they agreed as well on the bankruptcy of nationalist and ethnic ideologies. Hollenweger and Friedli were Swiss and thus coming from a multi-national and multi-lingual background. Margull was hypersensitive to anything that was reminiscent of fascist thought and was deeply transformed by his encounter with Buddhism in Tokyo and Kyoto (1965–1967) and by his involvement in setting up (1971) the sub-unit on interreligious dialogue of the World Council of Churches. One of the joint achievements of these years of co-operation was the tri-lingual book series they edited from 1975 on: *Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity*, which comprises currently 146 published volumes, mostly in English, but with a number of French and German texts as well (Studies 1975; Hollenweger 1987). Though Lynne Price has

argued in her theological biography of Hollenweger that he was already doing intercultural theology in Birmingham *before* the tag appeared (Price 2002; also PP Price 2008), it is to my knowledge still true to say that 1975 is the first location where the term “intercultural” is used explicitly and with a theological programme in mind. Later, from the eighties on, Heidelberg continued the exploration of this theological approach. Related but conceptually distinct attempts were made in other places. Nowadays, the term intercultural theology is often used without any reference to its history in the 70s and 80s (for example Newlands 2004). I will organise this paper in four sections: a terminological observation, a closer look at the European discussion in the 70s, a review of the attempts at conceptualising the approach in the 80s, and a final section I have called “conclusions and prospects”. As the title already indicates, my hypothesis is that intercultural theology has culturally particular and rather context-specific origins, and these I will try to describe. I hope to show as well that the north-Atlantic origin of this vision does not prevent it from being a rather interesting voice in the global theological discussion.

1. Terminological Observation

Though launched publicly in 1975, the term was not immediately adopted in the English-speaking world. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1993: 863 [1095]) does have an entry “inter-cultural”, but simply as an example of combining the prefix “inter” with an almost unlimited number of adjectives or nouns – even, and this is the message *ex silentio*, if there is no defined meaning attached to it. The term “intercultural” had not yet entered the English language in any specific sense it seems and even less so the combined term “intercultural theology”. Even the most well-known theological dictionaries and handbooks of the time are silent on this issue. The *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Barrett 1982: VII) contains a “contemporary dictionary... defining and explaining the majority of terms used in the Christian world”, but the term “intercultural” is not among them – and neither do the glossary and the dictionary in the second edition have it (Barrett 2001). The same is true for the *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Lossky 1991), the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Cross 1997) and even for Jan Jongeneel’s encyclopaedic two-volume bibliography on *Mission in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Jongeneel 1994/97). I could expand this list.

From 1975 to the mid-1990s the word “intercultural” was mainly to be found in the theological discussions of Europe and in the international educational

discourse (for example Roswith Gerloff's pedagogical experiments with black and white Christians in Birmingham – PP Margull 1971a). The publication history of the term tells us that the two Swiss editors of the book series *Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity* were also involved in actively promoting the new term. Hollenweger produced a three-volume study *Interkulturelle Theologie* (Hollenweger 1979, 1982, 1988; see also Hollenweger 1978) and Friedli used the term in his book *Mission oder Demission* (Friedli 1982) and contributed the entry *intercultural theology* for a German (later translated) missiological dictionary (Friedli 1987 and 1997). About the same time, in 1985, the Catholic Theological Faculty of Frankfurt University established an academic association called *Theologie Interkulturell*, which a year later started a book series under this very title (Theologie 1986; see also Websites). And in October 1986, Theo Sundermeier, the missiologist of Heidelberg University, together with the author of this paper, dared even to think of the establishment of a *Department of Intercultural Theology* within the theological faculty there (PP Ustorf 1986a and b). A preliminary report was published (Ustorf 1989), but the institutional plans never materialized. Yet, in the 90s, the Heidelberg project (see Sundermeier 1991 and 1999) had developed sufficient academic gravity to influence the conceptual design of a major theological dictionary (Küster 2001a) and, in 2005, convince the leading academic association for theology on the European continent, the *Wissenschaftliche Gesellschaft für Theologie*, to adopt a declaration on *mission studies as intercultural theology* (Mission 2008). I will come back to the Heidelberg tradition and this declaration further down.

Up to then, most of these publications were in languages other than English. The turning point came perhaps in the mid-90s. About this time Robert Schreiter addressed the issue (Schreiter 1996) and the American edition of the German *Dictionary of Mission* was published (Müller 1997). This does of course not mean that the issues the tag *intercultural theology* tried to address had been unknown outside Europe. On the contrary, there was a vivid discussion and I think David Bosch is a prominent example of this. He tried to give terminological expression to the mutual process of theological giving and receiving that characterizes the history of Christianity in its post-colonial and polycentric period. The term he chose in order to describe the step from the local incarnation (inculturation) of the faith to that of its participation in the ecumenical conversation with the other local incarnations, was already around, namely “interculturalization” (Bosch 1991). These insights rested on American research into processes of local contextualisation and communication processes; Fuller Theological Seminary and other places played a role and,

again, the name of Robert Schreiter may stand here vicariously for quite a number of scholars (Schreiter 1985 and 1997; on Schreiter see Hintersteiner 2001 and 2007, Küster 2003). Bosch does acknowledge that there is a difference of theological perspective when we think *interculturally*, cross-culturally, or contextually. This process of searching for terms and terminological differentiation on both sides of the Atlantic was not just triggered by the insights ecumenical research and missiology had produced over the last thirty years or so, but also by the rude facts on the ground, that is the visible and sometimes painful demographic changes in world Christianity. Reflections on these processes invaded *main-stream* theology only from the turn of the century on and were quickly and successfully picked up by other disciplines, for example history, as demonstrated by the notoriety the publications of Philip Jenkins have achieved (Jenkins 2002, 2006 and 2007).

Nevertheless, let us state the fact that it took some 20 or more years until the discussions in Europe on intercultural theology and the Anglo-American debate on culture, context and theological communication grew together. Today, the term has not only been widely accepted in Western theology, but in many instances, it completely replaced the terms mission or missiology. A prominent example of this is the name change at the end of 2003 at *Fuller Theological Seminary* from School of Mission to that of *Intercultural Theology*. The reader may wish to check the description of Fuller's MA in Intercultural Studies and may concur with me that this is a degree in mission studies in every detail – apart from the title (see Websites). Another such example is the before mentioned declaration on *mission studies as intercultural theology* of 2005. The declaration quite rightly defines intercultural theology as having grown out of missiology, religious studies, and ecumenical theology, but then retreats immediately into theological orthodoxy by stating that intercultural theology is an “explanatory term” to better describe missiology and protect this discipline from “stereotyping”, “confusion” and “misunderstandings”. This is, indeed, important, but just like Fuller's switch from mission to intercultural theology, the declaration seems to suggest a tactical update of the toolbox of missionary theology without changing its basic parameters (Oborji 2008). We will see that this usage of the term intercultural theology falls short of the momentum that was achieved in the 70s, when a “paradigm change” was envisaged, and may even constitute what Richard Friedli called “false labeling” (Friedli 2000: 190). In the meantime, the social sciences, medicine, business studies, and education have adopted the adjective *intercultural*. It is often included nowadays in the politically correct lingo of many city councils in Britain. In other words, the backside of the term's increasing popularity is its

entropy or even disintegration. It is time, then, to find out what the term actually meant when it was first used as an explicit theological programme.

2. The Beginning of the Debate

The book series of 1975 is primarily the result of the work done in Margull's research project at Hamburg University on the *social impact and self-awareness of the overseas variants of Christianity* (1969 ff.) which was to be carried out by an international team of up to twenty scholars, myself included (PP Margull 1969 and 1971a). In more than one way was this initiative related to the 15 or so studies previously sponsored by the *Division of World Mission and Evangelism* of the WCC, namely the project *World Studies of Churches in Mission* (1958–1970) the analysis of which – in a time when the term *pluralism* had not yet acquired theological currency – had ended in “a very humble agnosticism” (Mackie 1970: 101). Margull led the evangelism section of DWME from 1961 to 1964 and was well aware of the WCC study. One of the authors of the WCC series was also a member of Margull's research team in Hamburg (PP Margull 1971a). Yet, there were also clear differences to the approach taken by Geneva.

The Hamburg project tried to hook itself into the then trendy research on *development and social change* in those parts of the world that were once colonised, but now regarded as being in need of “development”. Such research used to be dominated by a secular social science approach and tended to neglect matters of religion and culture. Margull begged to differ and declared the traditional social sciences to be “a product of the history of western-European and north-American scholarship” and, therefore, not to be universal, but in its theories and perspectives rather a “Kulturgestalt” of the West (PP Margull 1969). Consequently, Western social theories were not to be imported lock, stock and barrel to contexts of deep change, they had rather to be formulated *in situ*, namely in response to the individual “cultural context” there. This meant not just to use an interdisciplinary approach, but also to challenge the secularization hypothesis and start from what the project called the surprising vitality and, indeed, the “revitalization” of religion in the South. In fact, the explicit prognosis was that religion would “remain or become the means of identity formation for the masses of the people” in the “Third World” (PP Margull 1969). The project would therefore analyse in detailed field studies how religious-cultural traditions in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, but also within the black immigrant churches of Birmingham and Watford, were

influencing the process of development and social change. This critical approach, which identified the *Third World* as a political-historical, cultural and religious rather than a geographical term, did not go down well with the research establishment in the Federal Republic. After a frustrating three-year-long process of repeated negotiations, the funding bodies finally rejected the project. They believed they had diagnosed a lack of coherence and classified the project as a sort of over-ambitious church history that had illegitimately invaded the territory of the social sciences.

However, eight of the individual research projects were already underway or almost finished, often precariously financed, but showing results that called for quick publication. This dynamic in combination with the lost battle for the acknowledgment of a new research paradigm (PP Margull 1971b) were two of the factors convincing Margull that he had to circumvent the establishment. He liaised with his colleagues in Birmingham and Fribourg and all pegged their theological colours to the mast by publishing the research under the programmatic focus of an *intercultural history of Christianity* (PP Margull 1974; PP Friedli 2008a), though none of them was a trained historian. The archival records of 1971/72 show that a very specific confluence of missiological, ecumenical and religious ideas generated the critical mass out of which the term *intercultural theology* was born:

1. The globalisation of Christianity had demonstrated that the non-Western variants of Christianity could no longer be described in theological or ecclesiological categories developed in the West. In fact, the diagnosis was that there is a profound “discontinuity with the European origin”.
2. The root cause of this discontinuity is the formative and continuing influence on the non-Western variants of Christianity of the factual cultural, religious and contextual diversity that is to be found on the ground.
3. Non-Western forms of Christianity would develop their individual theological identities in response to the pressing issues of their social, political, religious and cultural contexts and are part of the general “surge of the Third World” in world politics.
4. This fundamental change in the power structures of the world, including world Christianity, is accompanied by what Margull called “a general change of the way Christianity relates to the ‘world’”. This is a product of Margull’s ecumenical experience and reflects the WCC’s promotion of social engagement as a fundamental mode of being Christian.

5. These insights, in general, expressed a new perception of worldwide Christian experience and required now a deliberate “transgression of traditional theological approaches and methods” – though the tag *intercultural* does not yet emerge on this occasion (all quotes from PP Margull 1971c).

Several basic assumptions were implicit in these ideas. To mention the most important: Christianity was now globalized, but neither doctrine nor denominational tradition was the driving force, but the “world” or the historical particularities of the social, religious and cultural context had been identified as the catalyser that made local Christian faith what it was. Margull understood the diversities of faith, ecclesiology, theology, tradition, Christian engagement and the mutations of Christology as a response to – shaped by and shaping – the diversities of the contexts out of which they had grown. No theology and, as we have seen, no secular academic tradition, could ever claim to be universal. The Hamburg project, however, was completely unaware that they had just re-discovered what the philosopher-theologian Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) had already stated in the 18th century (Ustorf 2004). The degree to which the project was part of a much longer European conversation on transcendence, culture, and pluralism was seriously underrated.

3. Conceptualising the Approach

In retrospect it appears to be a surprising flaw in the creation of the 1975 book series that though the notion of *interculturality* was apparently discussed among the editors (PP Friedli 2008a), they pursued this “new research interest” only “rather spontaneously and un-programmatically” (PP Margull 1974) and never made it explicit in the editorial presentation of the series. There was no conceptual editorial statement to accompany the individual volumes, though it is true that Friedli wrote a short paragraph in 1976 for the publisher’s promotional use.² The first descriptive definition was published years later

² Friedli’s text reads: “Either the church is universal and catholic – and at the same time indigenous and culturally and politically involved in its environment – or it is not church at all. This dialectical statement sums up the fundamental tension running through the scholarly publications in the series ‘Studies in the Intercultural History of Christianity’. Starting with the cultural, social and political context – instead of the theological and political ideas of traditional denominational (catholic and protestant) church histories – the pluriformity of the Christian church and the search for its new catholicity are revealed.” PP Friedli 1976.

as an integral part of Hollenweger's research in this area (Hollenweger 1978) and further systematised in his *opus magnum* on intercultural theology. In his "five guiding principles", he states that intercultural theology

1. is "that scholarly theological discipline that operates within a particular cultural framework without absolutizing it."
2. will select its methods appropriately. Western academic theology is not automatically privileged over others.
3. has a duty to look for alternative forms of doing theology (such as non-Western and narrative forms).
4. must be tested in social practice and measured by its capacity for bridge building between diverse groups.
5. must not be confused with "pop-theology" that escapes from self-critical reflection (summarised from Hollenweger 1979: 50 f. See also Hollenweger 1982: 145).

This description clarifies and extends some of the assumptions underlying the Hamburg project and defines *intercultural theology* primarily as an inner-Christian project. It is not quite clear whether the character of this project is that of a "meta-theology". Should we detect here an inbuilt temptation to reach for finality and closure, the starting point of intercultural theology itself, namely to regard any theology as part of the weft and warp of human culture, would have to be abandoned. It is surprising that Hollenweger's *guiding principles* dropped the issue or rather the urgency of interreligious dialogue that was so close to Margull's theological agenda (Margull 1974b), though Hollenweger later did in fact address the matter (Hollenweger 1988; see also Ustorf 1990). It is significant indeed that Friedli's entry for the *Dictionary of Mission* (Müller 1987/97) reintroduced this point by insisting that intercultural theology had to open up to "interreligious theology" and thus face the experience of dialogue that Christianity's truth claims were vulnerable and that the history of Christian understanding was unfinished and open to the future (Friedli 1997: 220. See also Brück 1992). This correction is justified and backed by the sources. While still working on his ecumenical project of understanding the new variants of Christianity in the South, Margull had already begun to shift his attention from missiology to interreligious dialogue. As Chair of the WCC's Commission on Evangelism, he had participated in the WCC's first-ever worldwide dialogue not "about" but this time "with" Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims in Ajaltoun/Beirut (Margull 1972). Subsequently, he was appointed chair of the Commission's newly established

sub-unit on interreligious dialogue (1971) and, in this capacity, he organised the Muslim-Christian dialogue of Broumana, also in the Lebanon (1972), and other activities (Margull 1973).

This shift is quite important for the matter under discussion here because Margull had identified the comparability of intercultural and interreligious communication. This comparability was because both processes (and the “spiritual ethos” within them) were related and responding to the social context. This transfer of a primarily inner-Christian question to the area of interreligious dialogue became immediately controversial. The fifth Assembly of the WCC in 1975 is an example of symbolic quality in this regard: due to the vociferous protests by increasingly radicalised and anti-Western Muslim groups in Indonesia, the venue of the assembly had to be moved from Djakarta to Nairobi. In Nairobi, however, an equally single-minded majority of church leaders quickly exorcised the new agenda of interreligious dialogue by regressing, as Margull put it, “to the easiest of options”, namely the position of the absoluteness of the Christian truth (quoted by Friedli 1982b: 293). Margull detected in the appeal to the absoluteness of truth (usually a truth that is put in words, written up, and thus “known”) the presence of a deeply ingrained structure of denial that refused to open up to the call of the living God (Ustorf 1992: 14).

Heidelberg continued this awareness, and its leading missiologist, Theo Sundermeier, had early on opened up to the often surprising non-verbal forms of understanding, such as Christian art, not only as legitimate theological languages but as inter-cultural or bridging languages. The results of these attempts were usually published later or are still ongoing and therefore are outside my scope (Sundermeier 1985 and 1996 – and it should be noted that regarding the latter volume the publisher rejected the originally intended subtitle of “an intercultural hermeneutic”; PP Sundermeier 2008 – Sundermeier and Küster 1991b; Küster 2001b). The group around Sundermeier took also steps to apply the philosophical critique of modernity (Adorno and Horkheimer 1944, Ricoeur 1992) to the missiological discussion of culture and construct a practical theological hermeneutic of the intercultural encounter. They were convinced that theology on its own was no longer in a position to explore fully the human condition. This was reminiscent of the approach Joe Oldham (Clements 1999) had taken in the 1930s towards the question of rethinking the Christian message. In fact, some of the practicalities of the Heidelberg programme remind us of steps taken in the ecumenical past. There was for example the idea of establishing the hermeneutics for a global society by bringing together leading experts from a great number of academic disciplines and dis-

cuss (non-publicly) the epistemological presuppositions that are operative in the perception of the “other” (PP Ustorf 1988). The most influential text behind these attempts was Sundermeier’s remarkable study on *Konvivenz* or *convivencia* (Sundermeier 1986). This term, borrowed from liberation theology, stands for a new Christian life style in the global world. This style is characterized by a redefinition of mission as invitation to a divine banquet where Christians are enabled to recognise God in the face and the religion of the other and where there is priority of the shared experience of life over theological systematisation. Priority does not mean that theological reflection is redundant – the opposite is the case, but theology must acknowledge that

Truth is contained in diversity. What matters is to learn, to confess, to sing and to celebrate it together to the glory of God. Truth itself calls the churches into *convivencia*. In it, truth wants to be discovered. (Sundermeier 1986: 99; see also, briefer and in English, Sundermeier 1992)

This went far beyond Oldham’s incomplete project, and it may be fair to assume that also the WCC would still today hesitate to make such a statement the basis for its thinking about interreligious dialogue. However, it is also true that the next (tenth) WCC Assembly, which is scheduled for 2013, will have the subjects of migration and *hospitality* as its central agenda (see Websites). I am not claiming that there is a direct historical line running from Oldham via Sundermeier’s vision of *convivencia* to the thoughts of the WCC about *hospitality*. However, it is no coincidence either that the repeatedly asked and rarely fully answered question of how to share life with “others” (people who think determinedly differently) keeps popping up in the age of globalization.

Another idea thought about in Heidelberg was that intercultural theology was not designed to “parade the liveliness of non-Western Christianity as a model in front of Europe’s ‘dead’ Christianity”, but rather to be an agent of change and liberation in Western Christianity by challenging the pseudo-certainty of ossified church traditions in the West. Yet, the Heidelberg team began to ask themselves whether “intercultural theology”, in the end, was perhaps a rather European agenda for liberation (PP Ustorf 1986a). There were too many signs that the approach of intercultural theology was sitting squarely on top of some major and well-known fault-lines that were running through western culture, from cultural plurality and cognitive diversity to the entanglement of the religious with the secular and the old conflicts between the academy and the church and between capital and labour. Was the expectation really that all these profound issues, made more difficult now by their

internationalization, could be handled on one single platform of thought? Was the liminal world of the professorial imagination not a universe of idiosyncratic particularity? Was it feasible that in this universe all conflicts could be ‘received’ and ‘resolved’ because the opponents would pause in their fight and join the ‘third space’ (Bhabba 1994) the professors themselves were inhabiting? Did intercultural theology really have an actual practice out there in social life?

Retrospectively, I would think that the immense distance existing between the intercultural vision and the actual cultural and religious conflicts on the ground was already noticeable in the original concept of intercultural theology. Margull, Hollenweger and Friedli were/are all in their individual ways ‘third space’ personalities. At some stage of their lives they had all been culturally dislocated and became theologically involved in a rather contextual battle on three fronts: they struggled with

- (1) what Hoekendijk had called “morphological fundamentalism”, i.e. the slowness and selfishness of their churches as *institutions*,
- (2) differentiating Christian hope and transformation from the unpleasant *historical shape* mission had often acquired, and
- (3) *academic theology* that kept essentialising, reifying or privileging certain modes of thought over against others.

Margull, for example, was convinced that a theological faculty in Western Europe would be incomplete without a chair in atheism. By not giving this radical challenge to theological coherence (the atheist temptation) a home, theologians would express their refusal to accept that theology was part of the human journey through history – a set of ideas that was already around (Sölle 1968), but never got much support from his colleagues in the Hamburg faculty. Hollenweger’s inaugural lecture in Birmingham discussed the bridging of the post-Christian or secular version that the hope for transformation had acquired in Europe, namely Marxism, with the missionary eschatology that was present in the new forms of Christianity that had grown in the South, in this case Kimbanguism in central Africa (Hollenweger 1973). Both examples demonstrate that the new paradigm of intercultural theology was directly responding to Europe’s old, but specific cultural and secular-religious context or, put in another way, the epistemological battles in Western Europe and, *nota bene*, the situation of academic marginality the professors of mission at the university wished to escape from.

Margull, whose 1959 PhD had been on mission theology (Margull 1962a),³ published his last essay on this subject exactly at the time of his search for a new theology (Margull 1970). Mission for him made no longer theological sense and he stopped using the term in that year. For him, the attempt at verifying the Christian claim of absolute truth had not only failed historically, the religions were as a matter of principle not at the disposal of the Christians and could not be made subservient to Christian truth (Margull 1980). Hollenweger was more ambivalent as to whether or not traditional missiology was still useful. Initially, he described intercultural theology as the historically appropriate successor of missiology, later – and very likely, under the influence of his large clientele of international doctoral students – he still saw some mileage in using the term mission (Hollenweger 1989). Nevertheless, he certainly got frustrated with the Reformed church at home and eventually resigned from it (PP Hollenweger 2007). Friedli had worked in Fribourg's faculty of Catholic theology for over twenty years as missiologist before he dropped his theological apron strings in 1992 and continued the search for truth, as he said, in a non-partisan way, namely as professor of the history of religions in the philosophical faculty. He is convinced that most people (in Europe at least) do no longer trust the different worlds of meaning, in particular the ethical and religious answers which the churches and religions are offering. Worldwide there are “new compositions of the sacred” underway – perhaps “spirituality without religion” – and therefore a much broader and non-partisan search for truth is required and it is clear to him as to where this kind of research has to take place: outside the theological departments (Friedli 2000).

³ “Hope in Action” was later the title of an initiative launched around 1980 by Richard Friedli and others (among them John V. Taylor, previously the General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society) inside the *World Conference of Religions for Peace* (WCRP, * 1970). This initiative worked along the lines of *Amnesty International*, namely as a lay movement engaged in international justice, but with a radically different methodology consisting not of accusing governments of violating human rights, but of publicly affirming *prophetic action*, that is those events and people that are active in the direction of greater freedom and *shalom* (Friedli 1982, 119–131). The initiative failed – not just because the organisational, logistical, and financial basis was missing, but also because one of the biggest lay movements engaged in the WCRP, the Buddhist *Rissho Kosei Kai*, could not be convinced to join (PP Friedli 2008b). Quite a number of allegedly secular agencies that are globally active have an implicit missionary dimension. In fact, one might even argue that many non-governmental organisations, and the zeal with which they campaign for human rights, peace, religious freedom, or ecological matters, represent a quasi-secular successor incarnation of a fairly traditional missionary motivation. This “secular” version of the idea of mission reflects precisely the synergy that is created when a missionary motivation is based on a post- or non-Christian and often a pluralist foundation.

All of them mirrored in their individual theological biographies in one or the other way the results of a profound conversation between liberal culture and Christian tradition. On the one hand, we can identify the primary vision of what David Martin calls the *Christian transcendent* (PP Martin 2007). This vision of peace is opposed to the imperatives of power and violence and generates a kenosis-driven mode of *knowing*. It discovers the Passion and the Resurrection *in* the world, in its histories, religions, cultures, literatures, philosophies, art and, of course, theologies – all being stations on the journey towards truth. On the other hand, we do very much have *Dover Beach*, Matthew Arnold's dark counter-vision, composed around 1852 and, impact-wise, frequently compared to Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859): the tide of faith receding and leaving the barren sand of a profoundly *iconoclastic scepticism* (Arnold 1867). Balancing the Christian transcendent and post-Christian iconoclasm meant to let go the presumption of certainty as to the permanence of any attempt at constructing theological meaning. It made it impossible to feel too cosy (an alternative expression for original sin) in the *second homes* we call culture, faith, identity, marriage or church. Moreover, this negation of certainty was to both the secular academy and main line Christianity perhaps far more unforgivable than the transcendent vision that drove Margull, Hollenweger and Friedli at the time. The location between all camps, or the refusal to join any of the "safe havens" the systematisers of the religious or the non-religious kind have constructed for us, introduced from the very start a strong dosage of capriciousness, modern occidental agnosticism and relativism into the mix of intercultural theology.

The driving forces in the construction of intercultural theology in the seventies were not only the post-colonial demographic changes in world Christianity with its subsequent diversification of theologies, not just the profound encounter with the religious other, and not simply the ethical desire to let those speak who so far were prevented from being heard in theology. There were also two cultural ingredients that are clearly of North-Atlantic origin, namely (1) the shape of iconoclastic transcendence which the Christian vision had acquired in reaction to the epistemological dilemmas of Western thought and (2) the curious and frustrating location of the professorial missiologist, on the one hand, in the secular academic pantheon and, on the other, *vis-à-vis* the ecclesio-genic narcissism that was rampant in the churches. The new intercultural paradigm did indeed attack the privileges both the western academy and the western church had been enjoying for a long time – including the holy cow of the secularization hypothesis, but only by making sure that nobody else could ever have epistemological privileges again in the new world order of

intercultural communication. Paradoxically, intercultural theology challenged hegemonic thinking but, at the same time, it universalized the critique of it.

4. Conclusions and Prospects

The theological repentance of the North, if this is how the idea of intercultural theology can be characterized, cannot let go of old habits it seems. Yet, are the achievements made by the North-Atlantic creators of the original vision of intercultural theology nevertheless useful today?

Firstly, it is a welcome reminder that the context of any given theology includes not only the particularities of culture and history, but also the sociology and, as it were, the political economy of theological production. It is no accident that missiologists employed by secular universities were the first to raise their voices. The collapse of coherence due to the collision between the North-Atlantic tribes' exclusive ways of pursuing academic knowledge, the fossilized traditions of faith in the West, and the uncontrolled influx of new Christian and other experiences from the South was most acutely felt by academic-religious cyborgs such as university professors of mission. Intercultural theology acknowledged that the perception of a global and post-colonial world constituted for the occidental Christian and academic discourse on truth a profound crisis of adaptation. Theologically, this meant to distinguish between a religious faith willing to remember and learn and, on the other hand, the regression into the obsessive *Heimat* of privileged religious knowledge. Margull used a term taken from the area of personal life, *vulnerability*, in order to express this distinction. Sundermeier later applied epistemological language (*Differenzhermeneutik*). His attempt at understanding the other without glossing over the essential non-comparability led him to contemplate the possibility of incommensurability (Sundermeier 1996; also PP Sundermeier 2008). Both languages, that of vulnerability and that of the hermeneutics of difference, lead to a comparable level of understanding. They address primarily the professorial world of academic discussion, but the academic discussion is relevant to the discourse of faith.

Secondly, intercultural theology addressed two issues that are perhaps specific to Western culture only, but by no means limited to it. Firstly, there is the "atheist temptation" (and the creeping resignation of those who lack the courage of having either faith or non-faith). The way intercultural theology dealt with this was, in the first place, by not writing off the very particular Northern

ways to God, but trying to liberate these ways from unhelpful roadmaps or the clutter of the pseudo-certainties that were smothering any encounter with the divine (Cruchley-Jones, 2008). Acknowledging the mutation of the memory of Christianity in the West (Davie 2002), namely the deep transformation of the cultural and spiritual topography, they began to analyse its religious archaeology and reveal the often implicitly Christian forces that condition much of the allegedly secular Western thinking (for example the recycling of the search for the Promised Land under a new name).⁴ The visionaries of intercultural theology addressed also, secondly, the success- or growth-orientation in much of Christian thinking and the very little conceptual space given to the study of the recessions (failures, the going and even the end) of Christianity; its teacher complex; its worries about “reputation” and “visibility” in the world and their “we have been here first” syndrome. They did this by emphasizing the counter-vision of the Christian transcendent as clearly supra national and anti-colonial, and by the reminder that the spadework for the enactment of the vision of peace should be done discretely (ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ; Matth. 6:4).

Thirdly, intercultural theology contributed helpfully to the new ethos that is required in international relations. The phrase “contributed” signals that there are also other theological candidates, and some of them are equally or better equipped to render this service. One of the most promising among them is contemporary postcolonial theory that looks into the way we handle language inequality, cultural difference and colonial (and other forms of) control (Sugirtharajah 2002). All the players active in global communication need intercultural awareness and skills, whether we talk about the media and the academy or the states and their policies, religions and their social ethics, businesses and their strategies, or the international organisations, including military ones. This new awareness is the result of a conglomerate of different variants of knowledge and hence is supported by a multi-disciplinary approach. For Christian theologians it requires a new set of theological skills in order to be able to say what the *Lordship of Christ*, or to walk in *faithful uncertainty*, or even to advocate a *survival- and liberation centred syncretism*, actually mean in a multi-polar and multi-religious world (Kerr 1991; Price 1996; Friedli 1995). It would be a completely different matter, however, for the Buddhists to reflect interculturally on *Buddha Nature*, the Hindus on the *Reality of Brahma* and the Muslims on the *Tauhid* of God. Intercultural theology does not think on behalf of others, but reflects its own premises in the presence of these others and, if

⁴ This approach describes more or less the kind of unfinished investigation I am currently myself engaged in (Ustorf 2000, 2004 and 2008).

things go well, together with them. What the intercultural approach certainly does not imply is to support the tendency of religious institutions to have their assets agreed and ratified by the international community (Margull 1973).

Fourthly, intercultural theology takes seriously the experiences made in interreligious communication and the more recent theologies and philosophies of *religious dialogue* and *pluralism*. Currently no Christian missiology is able to avoid the pluralist challenge and yet make public sense. Missiologies that are intellectually sound do acknowledge the plural nature of human discourse – and therefore end up with a revision of the missionary mandate by assuming God's wider mission, which is believed to include also the contributions of other "co-workers for the Kingdom", that is the efforts of other religions. In Paul Knitter's "Kingdom-centred" approach the individual manifestations of mission are encouraged not to engage in attempts at superseding each other, but to equip themselves with the capability for dialogue and cooperation and a new readiness for having their particular knowledge of the Kingdom modified (Knitter 1996, 19, 119, 165; also Pranger 2003). If other religious traditions have a missionary, that is a divine mandate, any idea of Christian mission as a conversion project to the one and only "true" religion must necessarily become incoherent (Hick 1995: 13–16, in particular 116–119). The systematic theologian and scholar of Buddhism Perry Schmidt-Leukel states;

Conversion can mean here only to repeatedly convert to God. This does not exclude the possibility... that individual people find it easier or even to be the only way for them to continue their own spiritual journey in the context of a different religious tradition and, therefore, to convert to it. (Schmidt-Leukel 2002: 481).

Christians must be open to the call of the living God; but "openness" means to know that one believes – not to believe that one knows (Schmidt-Leukel 2002: 478). It is much more difficult to dismiss such assumptions and statements today than it was in the days of Margull. The reason is that the status of theological reflection is currently shifting from the position of *theological legislator* to that of *theological interpreter* and that "the constituting characteristics of the God of modernity: absoluteness, confidence and certainty" are in real difficulty (Sørensen 2007: 252 ff.). In today's world, any idea of mission must make sense to anybody else.

Reflecting on the promises and problems of the approach of intercultural theology, then and now, it has become quite clear that the theological discussion

must competently acknowledge and make public sense of the historical situation, including the globalised context that Christians share with other religionists, humanists and Marxists (Stackhouse, 2007). This is possible when and if we start decolonizing and de-imperializing the notion of what is “true”, “global” or “universal” and, on the other hand, let go the romantic but erroneous predilection for the archaic, simple and non-contaminated (misunderstanding, as it were, “inculturation” as an act of appropriating “truth”). For this to happen, the ideas on *convivencia* and *hospitality* should be explored further. The WCC could be on the right way. Jacques Derrida spoke of “hostipitalité” (Derrida 1997) combining the Latin terms *hostis* (stranger, public enemy) and *hospes* (host, guest, and foreigner). Practical hospitality can only be a (necessarily deficient) conditional one, but as such, it has to be constantly challenged by the notion of unconditional hospitality in the sense of unlimited generosity. The necessity for this double aspect of hospitality is not only the prohibition to reshape the “guest” in the image of the “host”, but also to reserve the right of those who thought they were hosts to become, at any time, guests – in other words to become “an other”. Not a bad description of the original programme of intercultural theology.

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Les origines culturelles de la "théologie interculturelle"

L'amnésie œcuménique accompagne une grande partie du débat actuel sur le remplacement des termes missiologie ou études missionnaires par ceux d'études interculturelles ou de théologie interculturelle. Ce texte essaie de traiter cette perte de mémoire. Nous rappelant l'époque où la nouvelle terminologie a été mise en place (les années 1970 et 80), nous pouvons prendre conscience des particularismes, des défis et des limites de la vision originelle de la « théologie interculturelle ». Parmi les particularismes, nous

retiendrons celui du missiologue professionnel travaillant à l'université publique; nous retrouverons les défis dans les reformulations du paradigme missionnaire; et certains traqueront les limites dans le fait que la théologie interculturelle a commencé comme élément de la conversation européenne sur la culture et la transcendance.

Los orígenes culturales de la „Teología intercultural“

La pérdida de memoria ecuménica acompaña mucho del debate actual cuando remplace el concepto de misionología o estudios de la misión por el de estudios interculturales o teología intercultural. Este artículo se refiere a esta pérdida de memoria. Al recordar el tiempo cuando la nueva terminología se estableció (en los años 70 y 80) nos damos cuenta de las particularidades, los desafíos y las limitaciones de la visión original de la “teología intercultural”. Entre las particularidades detectaremos que el misionólogo profesional trabaja en la academia secular; los desafíos se pueden encontrar en las reformulaciones del paradigma misionero; y muchos querrán ver las limitaciones en el hecho que la teología intercultural comenzó su vida como parte de la discusión europea sobre cultura y trascendencia.

Die kulturellen Ursprünge der „Interkulturellen Theologie“

Ökumenische Vergesslichkeit begleitet einen großen Teil der gegenwärtigen Debatte, wenn sie die Begriffe von Missiologie oder Missionswissenschaft durch interkulturelle Studien oder interkulturelle Theologie ersetzt. Dieser Artikel versucht diesen Erinnerungsverlust anzusprechen. Im Rückgriff auf eine Zeit, in der die neue Terminologie eingeführt wurde (in den 70iger und 80iger Jahren) werden die Eigenheiten, Herausforderungen und Begrenzungen der Grundperspektive der „interkulturellen Theologie“ deutlich. Unter den Eigenheiten stellt sich heraus, dass der professionelle Missiologe in der weltlichen Akademie arbeitet; die Herausforderungen zeigen sich in den Reformulierungen des missionarischen Paradigmas; und manche möchten sich wünschen, die Begrenzungen in der Tatsache zu sehen, dass die interkulturelle Theologie ihr Leben in der europäischen Diskussion von Kultur und Transzendenz begann.