13 World Christianity as post-colonialising of theology

Mika Vähäkangas

In this chapter, I argue that the old-school confessional and ethnocentric theology has no place in today's Western secular academia. Therefore, a renewal is needed unless theology is to transform into religious studies of Christianity. This renewal has already taken place in mission studies, and has often led to the renaming of the discipline as World Christianity or a similar title. The point of view of this chapter is decidedly Northern European, and admittedly, the situation of theology, mission studies, and academia looks very different in other parts of the world.

Theology is an equivocal term, as it can refer to any meaning-making of religious experience or alternatively a rigorous methodologically prescribed way of arriving at religious or philosophical conclusions, or the study of either of the two, or any intermediate activities between those extremes. In the first sense, theology is wherever there are religious people. In this chapter, however, the focus will be on the academic discipline under the name "theology". This discipline consists of both constructive theology and analysis of others' theologies. In most cases, these two tasks are intertwined, as no one can begin theologising from *tabula rasa*, but there are always traditions upon which one's reasoning is building. The constructive theologian's understanding of these traditions through analysis is a necessary part of constructive theology. The crucial questions here, though, are on whose traditions one should construct, and for which audience.

Theology as a Eurocentric confessional enterprise

At a seminar in Finland a couple of decades ago, a student was pondering which good theologian's thought to write her dissertation on. She was not certain, but wished to work on someone who was not German. The professor thought aloud: "Are there good theologians other than Germans?" Whether that was a joke or a Freudian slip of tongue, it was very well in line with the spirit of the day. Traditional theology as an academic discipline could justly be described as a Eurocentric confessional enterprise, and this was the case with practically no exceptions until World War II, and even today in much of Europe the situation is not essentially different. The

notion of Eurocentrism covers here cultures of European background, thus extending to e.g. North America, covering the mainstream culture of European origin. But why would theology be called Eurocentric?

First, it was and largely still is Eurocentric simply because of being academic. Even if, at the time when theology was formulated as an academic discipline, there were traditions of extremely high intellectual quality in some other larger cultural areas, such as India, China, and the Islamic world, it was the Western European intellectual tradition that served as the basis of today's global academia. The campus culture is surprisingly similar globally even today. The form and content of teaching, as well as campus life, are similar in all the corners of the world. This is partly due to the Western roots of academic traditions and partly, of course, due to the global mobility of academics. Just as medieval universities helped to bring intellectuals from the margins into the centres, so does even today's academia. The questions of method and academic procedures are a part of the Western package that academic theology belongs to. English language, the paramount colonial language, functions as the modern Latin that almost all credible academics need to know.

Second, as a highly historically conscious discipline, theology builds predominantly on Western intellectual and ecclesial history. The Latin Church is the centrepiece, and Greek Church Fathers and some other Orthodox traditions are also often included. Orthodox academic voices are rather marginalised in the global theological dialogue even today, as, often, are voices from the majority world. Oriental churches' traditions are virtually ignored even in church history, in spite of them representing one of the mainstreams of Christian culture until the end of the first millennium.¹

Third, the content of theological debate that is most visible and published by most of the large publishing houses mirrors the questions and challenges of the Western world. For example, even though a debate between science and faith exists in the majority world, it is much more central in the industrialised countries. Whichever ethical debate happens to be on top of the agenda in the Western churches reserves the most visible place in the West-dominated international theology. For example, the responsibilities of a Christian under a corrupt regime or questions about religious persecution are seldom internationally heard in academic theology in spite of these being essential in the lives of multitudes of Christians in the majority world.

Fourth, those who are counted internationally as important theologians – that is, deserving of being researched and studied – tend to be 20th-century male German-speaking, and lately also English-speaking, men.² This has partly to do with the question of theological agenda. As long as theology is dominated by men of limited cultural (and social) background, one tends to attach importance to people who have a similar agenda. Additionally, one generally tends to favour not only the ones who think like, but also who are like, oneself.

The result is that there is theology in general, and additionally, there are specific theologies like feminist, Black, African, Asian, Mujerista, Minjung, etc. The implication, mostly not openly pronounced, is that theology without epithets is real or somewhat universal, whereas theologies with labels are second-rate endeavours that may be of interest to “real” academic theology by providing it with material to develop further. However, as pointed out previously, this theology without epithets could well be labelled Eurocentric (or later even Anglocentric), male, and bourgeois. The marginal theologies are called upon whenever theology without epithets needs to display diversity.

However, it would be unfair to label all Western theologians as insensitive to the global realities of Christianity. Some of the European theologians considered among the greatest of their kind did react to the drastic changes in the state, nature, and role of Christianity in the world. Karl Barth, towards the end of his career, could be interpreted as having passed the baton to theologians from the majority world.³ Karl Rahner’s work on the role of non-Christian religions in salvation addressed a question utterly central in the majority world.⁴ Jürgen Moltmann was involved in an intensifying global theological dialogue which profoundly influenced his theological agenda.⁵ In spite of the elevated status of these men in Western theology, this openness has not expanded significantly, especially in Europe. One of the reasons in Europe may be the precarious situation of theology in the European academy.⁶ In such a situation, in order to secure the survival of the discipline at the university, one easily resorts to emphasising the historical importance of theology and Christianity to Western cultural roots and history, thereby limiting the discipline often both culturally and denominationally. However, this efficiently blocks the way to renewal and regained relevance. The attempted goal is thus not reached, and irrelevant theology is pruned out from the branch of humanities at an increasing number of universities.

This paralysing limitedness in Western theology stems basically from the European recent history of ideas. Modern ideas, with their emphasis on rationality and science, challenged the older theologically geared ground for thinking. In the past, majority Christian views formulated the ideological hegemony, in cooperation with the political power. At least since the French Revolution, this has been seriously challenged, and an individual’s freedom of conscience has been emphasised. The basic assumption of this emphasis was faith in human rationality. If humans only gained their freedom and came to know scientific truths, they would obviously choose them.

Since that time, one of the main tasks of academic theology has been to relate to modern thought. At times, the choice has been a frontal attack against modernity, and at times, contextualisation in the modern world.⁷ In both of these, unsurprisingly, there has been a common denominator in that religion is seen still to have a meaningful role in the modern world, and that religion is approached confessionally. Confessionality in this case means that religion is approached from within, and argumentation is related to a

specific faith community's argumentation, even if it may not be fully in line with it. In theology, inasmuch as it is constructive, and not only an analysis of someone's constructive approach, one stakes religious truth claims; this makes it confessional, no matter the content of those truth claims.

This confessionality has placed theology at loggerheads with modernist science. In spite of religion and science at times reaching a truce, whereby science was granted sovereignty in the increasing area of empirically provable facts, and religion in the shrinking gaps in between them, scientists have sometimes proposed their metaphysical convictions as scientific truths. In this case, rationalistic (or sometimes also mystical-religious) conclusions based on the empirical are applied to the non-empirical gaps as well.⁸

As the ideological hegemony moved from Christian faith to empirical sciences from the era of Enlightenment, and religion retreated in the unprovable gaps, religion increasingly became a matter of private conviction. As a result, universal truth claims began to look preposterous, considering that at the same time Europe was growing increasingly plural in terms of religion, especially after World War II. Yet, theology continued to be confessional – for to approach religion confessionally is what defines theology. This caused theology to turn into an anomaly in academia. From the modernist point of view, it is unscientific and therefore does not belong to academia, whereas from a late modern perspective, the obvious lack of pluralism makes it naïve and limited, as theology is still generally only a Christian exercise in Europe.

Is the only way forward to do away with theology and replace it with religious studies that have embraced the modernist project?⁹

The theologian's reality bubble holds no more

In spite of the apparent juxtaposition between modernist rationalism and Christian theology, these two were also engaged in a loop of mutual assertion in two ways. First, both of the partners propagated strongly (their version of) the Truth. Secondly, both of them mostly operated within the national projects.

Varying between times, places, and denominations, there has been tension or even conflict between “scientific” worldviews and Christian theologies. In the case of communist regimes, it was a matter of a mortal conflict, whereas in the Western bloc, the theme “faith and science” was played out in multiple variations. Within the modern framework, in spite of the occasional conflict, the idea of one undivided reality was the common ground for modern science and theology.¹⁰ The point was rather to convince the other about the veracity of one's conception of reality. In much of academic theology, one attempted to construct systems whereby modern science and Christian faith could be reconciled.

The other common denominator was the national projects. Even if both science and Christianity have universalising ideals, both of them mostly adapted to the project of construction of national states. In Christian

churches, this became most clearly visible in Protestant and Orthodox circles where the dominant churches in regions developed into national or even state churches. In spite of its decidedly universal character, even Catholicism became a vessel of nationalist, and sometimes even fascist, endeavours. Science was also harnessed to serve the national interest, and in times of conflict, Christians and scientists alike seldom provided much opposition to the hollow nationalist war frenzy.

As a result of the competing capitalist and communist economic systems and nationalism, in spite of the modern ideal of the one undivided truth, the world was a battleground of competing truths. However, these national truths were often able to gain a hegemonic position in the national states so that the justification and existence of the nation and the national state were not much questioned. In most cases, the national narrative was built on sameness: ethnic, linguistic, cultural, religious, etc. unity. The result was that the national plausibility pattern was unchallenged in the country, whereas across the border there was another plausibility pattern.¹¹ What was true in the Soviet Union was a blatant lie in neighbouring Norway – in history, economics, politics, religion, and culture. Each nation had its own universal truth, even if many of them overlapped even for the most part. For example, the set of Norwegian and Swedish national truth claims differed from each other only a little. The different national truths could stand on their clay feet because the connections between the nations were limited from today's perspective and thereby the incompatible views of the outsiders could be dismissed as curiosities.

All through the 20th century, there were growing voices challenging the modern concept of truth. These voices opting for polyvalence of truth, and deconstruction of essentialising and reifying of social realities like nation or gender, came to be labelled, for example, as postmodern or late modern, depending on the emphasis and degree of critique against modernism.¹² This critique sometimes took the form of judgement against the grand narratives in terms of both content and use. Several historical developments contributed to the development of pluralism in the Western societies, which was the precondition of postmodernism.

Globalisation was intensifying through colonialism, Christian mission, and trade in the earlier part of the century. Later, heightening of industrialisation led to labour-based immigration to the Western industrialised countries, creating notable cultural-religious minorities. Eventually, tourism increased the movement between different parts of the world. Intensified means of communication, especially the internet, have made the world shrink like never before. An affluent person with the right passport and sufficient funds can communicate with any part of the world at any time, and usually travel there within a day or two. Western societies began to turn pluralistic not only through immigration but also from within, with political, cultural, and religious alternative movements which often fetched some of their inspiration from outside of the West. The quintessential white man

started to see his hegemonic position crumble. While Western societies have turned more pluralistic, older minorities that have always been there – like ethnic, religious, and sexual – have also become more visible and vocal. The turn from monolithic to pluralistic societies is thus partly true and partly a fabrication, as there were never any completely unified national states.

Academic Christian theologies with their universal claims were a part of this game. They thrived in national states' reality bubbles where there was one nation, one religion, and one reality (even though whether it was religious or "scientific" was often a matter of contention). By their very existence, these universalising theologies provided support for patriarchy, nationalism, and confessionalism. Within their limited bubbles, these theologies could be universal, relevant, and credible as the correct interpretations of the Christian Truth.

In the pluralistic Western societies, where there is an intensified experience of global unity, any universalising claims are met with deep suspicion. Even the nationalist populist wish to seal off the rest of the world outside of the national boundaries and to restore national unity is an acknowledgement of this pluralism. If all immigrants would leave, and all ethnically national people would think the same, one would be back to the good old days, the argument goes.

In grassroots theology, Christian churches can, if they so will, continue marketing their doctrines as the universal Truth very much in the same manner as any café can market the "best coffee in the world". Academic theology, however, has the responsibility to be critical and to attempt to formulate argumentation in a manner that can communicate beyond the devotees of a single religious circle. Even if a theologian would not subscribe to a relativistic worldview for philosophical and/or theological reasons, the plurality of worldviews is an issue that she/he needs to address not only as a topic to be dealt with, but as the context in which theology is constructed. This plurality needs to be a part of the package from the very beginning. Traditional Western academic theology is generally ill-equipped to this task, due to its long-time engagement with modernism. Methods, approaches, and theories in mainstream Western theology have often bypassed the pluralisation process of our societies.

From the point of view of credibility, as well as of ethics, Western Christian theology needs to be thoroughly renewed. It has no space in Western academia if it concentrates on defending the existing positions by arguing for the historical relevance of theology. In that case, theology can be transferred to departments of history to aid analyses of Western intellectual history. Academic theology only as Christian theology has no place in Western academia in the long run when the level of religious participation in the former national and state churches is declining and is not being replaced even by growing churches established by immigrants. Ethically, explicit or implicit Eurocentric universal claims tally all too well with the colonial project. The expulsion of such theology from academia is therefore even righteous.

Mission studies and contextual theologies as a widening of the horizon

Mission studies has represented a widening of the horizon in theology in the sense that through it, non-Western cultures and religions have gradually been introduced into the theological agenda, resulting in contextual theologies where the interaction between faith and culture is lifted into focus.

Expressed in a pointed and generalised way, mission studies used to be a rather colonial study of a rather colonial Christian enterprise. The reality, of course, was that there were a multitude of approaches to colonial atrocities, colonialism itself, Eurocentric paternalism, and local religions and cultures.¹³

In spite of the similarities and connections, there was an inherent difference between mission and colonialism in terms of their logic. In colonialism, the mother country was in the centre in all perceivable ways: administration, hierarchy, resources, economic structures, etc. In mission, it was the (expected) convert who was in the centre. The goal of Western mission of that time was to convert individuals or peoples or to establish churches. In all of these variations, the goal is inherently bound to the local people. This would be the case even in the most paternalistic and Eurocentric mission enterprise where the local cultures would be completely despised and the goal would be to transform the converts into Europeans, albeit with strange physical appearances. Colonial logic, in comparison, does not rule out a genocide and colonisation of the country with settlers.

The relative proximity to the locals resulted in many missionaries turning into skilful ethnographers and eventually studying theological questions related to the local Christians' spheres of life.¹⁴ Consequently, missionaries and missions were generally eager to support the creation of local contextual theologies, albeit often within the parameters of their denominational preferences. The role of context in theology was thus profoundly acknowledged in many missionary circles from early on. In this manner, what should have become a concern for all theology became predominantly the hobby of mission scholars, even though the need to recognise the context was just as great in the West, where theology and ecclesial practices were often quickly losing contact with people's everyday realities. Even in cases when there were serious attempts at contextualisation, like Rudolf Bultmann's demythologisation (*Entmythologisierung*),¹⁵ the similarities between the Western and non-Western projects were often missed together with opportunities for mutual enrichment. A partial reason for the lack of communication may be that while missionary circles tended to be on the conservative side, Western contextual theologies often had a radical or liberal edge. This contextuality was, however, for the most part, a matter of relating to the scientific Western world, which was seen as the paramount culture and therefore universal. De facto contextuality did not necessarily translate into understanding one's cultural limitedness.

Gradually, contextual theologies of the majority world would stand on their own feet as majority world Christianity grew academically stronger. This would first be the case on a larger scale with Latin American liberation theologies from the 1960s. The importance of contextual theologies to theology has been that they have reminded Western academic theologians that there is no universal theology, but that all theology is crafted in a context. Additionally, contextual theologies have diversified theological enterprise so that even if the paradigmatic middle-aged Euro-American white man is still the dominant type, there is an understanding that there are other theologies and theologians as well. Contextual theologies have also reminded academic theology of its mutual dependence on the faith communities. Without faith communities' interest in academic theology, there is little value in it outside the limited academic theological circles, and there would hardly be any students of theology, thereby risking the future of the discipline. This interest in academic theology stems from relevance in two senses. On one hand, academic theology should deal with issues that are relevant for faith communities and use their life and thought as a starting point. On the other hand, academic theology must provide added value in the sense of challenging the faith communities' traditional approaches. Finally, contextual theologies have also explored ways to interact with academic disciplines other than philosophy, most notably sociology, political studies, and cultural/social anthropology.¹⁶

Meanwhile, mission studies would increasingly pay attention to local initiatives in majority world Christianity at the cost of concentrating on the role of Western missionaries.¹⁷ Mission studies have maintained a close link to contextual theologies, but mission studies often become more empirical. Previously, mission theology held the place of pride in mission studies, but now different empirical approaches seem to have become the mainstream.¹⁸ While mission as an object of study has aroused interest, e.g. among general historians due to the abundant data on intercultural encounters available in mission archives, what goes under the title of mission studies or missiology has remained almost completely a theological enterprise. This has meant that the discipline has remained theological and one of the major tasks of mission studies within academic theology has been to remind theology of Christianity's global character and of the plurality of religions.

World Christianity as a renewal of mission studies

Mission studies as a title of a discipline has often become a liability in Western secular academia, while in many majority world as well as confessional contexts it still enjoys relative popularity.¹⁹ In the West, mission is considered colonial, intrusive vis-à-vis people of other faiths, and narrow-minded.²⁰ Redefinitions of the term mission have not made the situation any better, because there does not exist a commonly agreed-upon postcolonial definition of the term that would also be known outside of the discipline. In

this junction, postcoloniality would denote not only the end of overt colonial structures, but also conscious attempts to break free from the inherited colonial patterns of thought that still largely direct the relations between the West and the former colonies.

There have been various different attempts to replace the title “mission studies”. There have been new names emphasising the theological nature of the discipline, like intercultural theology or interreligious theology. In some other cases, the title simply refers to the object of study, like World or Global Christianity or Christianity in the Non-Western World. In spite of the fact that these latter names do not reveal any allegiance to an older academic tradition, it is clear that most of the people involved in these studies come from a theological background. This means that the border between mission studies and the study of World Christianity is porous, as many scholars would feel familiar with both. However, the relationship that needs more clarification is between theology and World Christianity.

It goes almost without saying that World Christianity does not share the old-school theological Eurocentrism. Rather, it can be seen as a critique of theology that got stuck to Western Christendom and missed possibly the greatest and fastest religious change in history: Christianity’s shift of gravity to the majority world.

Contextual theologies were an early reaction to theological Eurocentrism. There, in addition to paying attention to the contexts and opening up to disciplines other than philosophy, as indicated previously, another major issue was the question of the interlocutors. In these new theologies, the prime interlocutor was no longer the privileged academic, but often rather the oppressed with whom and by whom these theologies were constructed, at least ideally.²¹ In World Christianity, the question of context is central, and openness especially to empirical realities allows many disciplines to contribute. However, the question about for whom, with whom, and by whom World Christianity is done is not quite as articulated as in many contextual theologies. By virtue of World Christianity being more pronouncedly academic and definitely less ecclesiastical than many contextual theologies, it either tends to overlook the question of interlocutors or implies a general post-colonially minded academic audience. As no production of knowledge is innocent, this difference is notable. This difference may stem from the fact that this new discipline needs to establish itself in Western academia.

Still another difference between contextual theologies and World Christianity lies in their methodology. Contextual theologies, in spite of their criticisms of Eurocentric theology, still generally participate in the project of traditional theology, namely making sense of Christian faith. This sense-making is, in the case of contextual theologies, largely a logocentric exercise whereby written texts are made to relate to each other. The contextual theologies’ insistence on lived realities seldom translates into major methodological modifications. References to lived realities often remain on an anecdotal level or are based on the author’s life experience. Here, World Christianity

definitely differs, as in many cases the analysis of Christian faith in a context builds on robust empirical data. This data is often collected ethnographically or in other qualitative ways. This turn to empirical data is a logical next step in the process of dismantling the hierarchical and centralised ideas of faith communities and theology that contextual theologies began. In contextual theologies, the consciously theologising subject becomes central, with the result that, in spite of attempts to the contrary, academic theologians become pivotal. When studying Christianity empirically, a possibility of listening to the often oral grassroots theologies is opened up.

Does this mean that World Christianity is the name for religious studies that concentrate on the study of Christianity (also) beyond the Western cultural sphere? Do the researchers of World Christianity approach their topic from outside, as if not involved? Were it so, the launching of World Christianity would be for religious studies what Anthropology of Christianity is for anthropology. Traditionally, anthropology studied exotic cultures. However, when anthropologists of religion could no longer ignore the rise of Christianity in many of their fields, they began to address it, first in exotic places but then also back home.²² Is there a difference between Anthropology of Christianity and World Christianity other than that World Christianity is not bound to the anthropological academic traditions?

Traditionally, an anthropologist is a specialist in crossing boundaries of culture.²³ She lands in an exotic culture, learns the language, customs, and the rest of the culture, and makes an analysis of that with the help of anthropological theories (to which her study ideally contributes). She comes from outside but becomes in the fieldwork a marginal insider and thus a broker between the Western academic and the local world. When returning home, she re-enters the Western academic culture and interprets the object of study to the rest of that community. The boundaries between insiders and outsiders have been blurred in many ways when anthropology has been studied in Western contexts, and some of the anthropologists do not come from the Western cultural sphere. Yet, the described case still is the paradigmatic one. A scholar in World Christianity can work in the same manner, but that is not necessarily the standard approach to the same extent.

What makes it difficult for a researcher of World Christianity to wholly embrace the paradigmatic anthropological approach described previously is that inasmuch as World Christianity is a theological discipline, it profoundly shares the world that it is studying. World Christianity covers not only faith communities of the majority world, but also of the West, leading to the conclusion that in the theological endeavour of meaning-making, the researcher and the researched are facing the same task. It is, therefore, not so easy to make clear divisions between the field and academia back home. Considering the foundational criticism against theological Eurocentrism inherent in World Christianity, it would appear false simply to bypass the world's Christians' critique and replace the theological Eurocentrism with a secular one. Therefore, it seems right to exercise World Christianity as a

theological discipline in the sense of entering into the theological debates of Christianity all around the world, and also remaining within that discourse when analysing the data.

Therefore, inasmuch as World Christianity can be seen as an offshoot of theology, the relationship between the researcher and the researched is very complex. Unlike anthropology, theology is a practice-related discipline, rather like law or medicine. Medicine is researched and practised in hospitals and clinics, and law is applied and pondered in courts. Likewise, theology grows and lives in faith communities where it is applied and practised, and in the case of World Christianity, also researched. In medicine, there is generally one normative paradigm that is usually regarded as objective by the practitioners. Theology, therefore, comes closer to law. Law is based on values, and there is no universally accepted approach to law. Yet, even if a lawyer represents a different school of thought, she can participate in the legal discussion and can analyse legal systems and theories other than her own. If she comes to a normative judgement of a legal theory, she has no Archimedean point to stand upon. Likewise, a theologian may be or may not be a member of the faith community she is studying. However, irrespectively of her own convictions, she is a member of the community of theologians in search of transcendental meaning, and in this sense a stakeholder in the process of the faith community, irrespectively of her own faith commitments.

If the World Christianity researcher is a Christian theologian, as is often the case, the relationship between the researcher and the researched can get very complex, no matter how unproblematic the fieldwork as such might feel. There are not only the usual power relation issues, but also questions related to various fault lines within Christianity or within a denomination or a church.²⁴ When there is a shared faith commitment on both sides, the researcher can be at the same time a cultural outsider (becoming hopefully eventually a marginal insider) and an insider as a member of the same imagined community. However, if the variation between the researcher's confessional background and the studied community becomes extensive, there may exist doubt about belonging to the same imagined community, or it may be denied by one of the partners. And yet, there are bound to be many familiar elements in the studied community. In such a case, the studied could be seen as quasi-others.²⁵

World Christianity's approach to the study of religion should be thoroughly postcolonial.²⁶ This means that it may not take a Western normative position, be it theological or secular. The faith of the studied communities has to be taken seriously, and if and when the researcher ventures into normative judgement, it needs to be system immanent. System immanence means that the phenomenon is assessed according to its own premises. For example, if a church claims not to be proclaiming a prosperity Gospel, one needs to figure out how the term prosperity Gospel is understood within the church and compare it to the proclamation of that church to see whether

this is the case. Thus, the researcher's cultural and religious background does not become normative. Its influence on the research process is inevitable, though, and needs to be assessed self-critically.

Theological pluralism in World Christianity style

The renewal needed for theology in Western academia can use World Christianity as its model. What works for World Christianity works *mutatis mutandis* in theology. The resulting theology (as a discipline) needs to be religiously, culturally, and methodologically pluralistic.

Academic theology as a discipline can no longer be only Christian. While Christian traditions historically play a central role in the formation of European (and American) identity, one may not overlook the Jewish and Muslim contributions of the past.²⁷ Today, the reality is far more plural, and academic theology needs to cover not only these three monotheistic religions from the Near East, but also any other major religions in each location.

The first step in encountering the challenge of religious pluralism is to acknowledge the syncretistic nature of all religions.²⁸ For some, this sounds like a truism, while many theologians still stick to the notion of pure religion. In the study of World Christianity, the interaction between Christianity and other religions is sometimes the central question, and in most other cases it simply cannot be overlooked, and is thus an important dimension of the analysis. When much of such research is done on majority world Christianity, there is a danger of Western theologians viewing the majority world Christians as syncretistic while overlooking the syncretistic elements in their own theologies and churches. This hints at the tendency of Europeans to see majority world Christians first as specimens of ethnicities and only secondarily as Christians, whereas one often lumps Europeanness together with Christianity in spite of the fact that we are speaking of the world's most secularised continent. When syncretistic elements grow old enough, like in Europe, they tend to turn into pure orthodoxy, and a syncretistic attitude towards the secular Enlightenment is not often counted as syncretistic because the counterpart is not counted as religion. What is done in the study of World Christianity needs thus to become a standard approach in theology.

Additionally, in World Christianity, one can seldom bypass the question of interreligious relations. Christian life takes place in a world of religions and ideologies, and both Christian practice and theological thought need to be consciously placed in this context. Majority world Christianity, even in cases when it is now in the majority, has usually recently been a minority religion and thus the encounter with the religious other is in its DNA, whereas in the West, the tradition of these encounters has often been forgotten and results in European Christianity's Chihuahua syndrome – a big dog's soul in a small body. Likewise, many former national or state churches have not become used to a situation where they represent the minority of the population.

This interreligious encounter must enter into the very core of theological exercise. Therefore, Christian theology must become a strand among others, adding Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, etc. theologies and theologians in the faculties and departments.²⁹ This would inevitably lead to projects of comparative theologies and interreligious theologies,³⁰ depending on the positions of the academic staff. What needs to be emphasised here is that the need for theology as a discipline to turn religiously plural does not necessarily mean that all resulting theologies would be pluralistic. A pluralistic discipline is truly pluralistic when it allows for multiple voices. However, a pluralistic context of theology can be expected to lead to more pluralistic theologies.³¹ Additionally, because of the differences in seeing the reality and the religion's relation to the world, various religions' theologies even in academia are bound to differ from each other. Therefore, one cannot expect them to be equivalent to Christian academic theology in their goals, methods, and practices, and yet one may expect that they should learn to be conversant with each other.

There are several ways of dealing with the challenge of religious and ideological pluralism in a situation in which a hegemonic position is not attainable for an academic theology, not even in a limited sense of a national-confessional reality bubble. One way would be to give up any metaphysical truth claims and simply concentrate on the analysis of existing theologies and religious phenomena. In that case, however, theology would lose its central task of posing the fundamental human existential questions and turn into religious or historical studies. Another possibility is to resort to absolute or temporary relativism. In absolute relativism, one claims that no credible judgements are possible between e.g. religious movements, and in temporary relativism, the judgement is postponed to the possible eschaton.³² However, I do not need to wait until the eschaton to judge that ISIS is less acceptable than Engaged Buddhism, for example. It means that I have a certain set of values and truths against which I assess religious ideas and practices, even if I would shy away from expressing them in less obvious cases. In order that these values and truths may serve a pluralist theology, they need to be formulated in an ecumenical and interreligious theological dialogue, and be open to modifications and even rejection when encountering strong arguments. This is open confessionality, in contrast to closed confessionality where the outcome of theologising is already known at the outset: it will be theology within a certain denominational and school of theology mould. Possible truth claims in this kind of pluralistic theological project need to be based on a theory of knowledge that allows for not only truth claims, but also humility and flexibility.

In World Christianity, one tends to celebrate cultural pluralism. This is very much in line with the *Zeitgeist* of globalisation. Western academic Christian theology is still relatively monocultural, as described previously. Theology can no longer afford to externalise the task of cultural plurality to contextual theologies, mission studies, or World Christianity, but the

multiple voices in terms of cultures and subcultures need to be recognised throughout. All theology is contextual in the sense of it being constructed in a time and a place, and failure to recognise this does not make it universal. Once one has recognised the cultural boundedness of one's work, there is an opportunity to ponder how to best communicate across the disciplinary, cultural, linguistic, religious, etc. borders.

Methodological pluralism is probably one of the fields where there is most willingness to change in theology. World Christianity is not the only model pupil in the class, but there are also other theologians who are open and innovative in terms of looking for new partner disciplines, methods, and theories. This openness is generally a prerequisite for innovative approaches in any of the humanities. After the era of grand narratives' hegemony, religions can no longer be approached solely as ideas, ideals, doctrines, or principles. Lived religion cannot be bypassed in any discipline of theology any longer. These methodologically progressive researchers have already largely moved on to including lived realities in their agendas, and the rest of theology is to follow. While the death knell of grand narratives was definitely premature, the world of ideas must today be related to the tangible and social realities in the study of religion and theology as well.

Conclusion

Theology as a Eurocentric discipline needs to be renewed if it is to retain its academic and ethical credibility. This renewal needs to cover its self-understanding so that theology is no longer a Christian enterprise in dialogue with Western modernity, but is rather an interreligious process in which religions and (post)modernities are in interaction with each other. Instead of earlier closed national-confessional bubbles, theology needs to exercise open confessionalism whereby truth claims do not lead to exclusion, but rather inclusion of dialogue partners. This renewal needs to cover methodologies, too, by opening towards lived religion without losing sight of the role of contents of faith or religious ideals.

World Christianity as an academic discipline can serve as a resource in this renewal because it can be seen as a result of a similar process of post-colonialisation in mission studies. In this process, mission studies and World Christianity have needed to engage in a global balancing between Western secular academia and Christian faith communities (which sometimes run universities or theological seminaries of their own) all over the world. Losing a hearing in the first would lead to expulsion from secular academia, which would be a loss for both secular academia and the discipline. The discipline can provide secular academia with vistas on the most populous religion around the globe that other less involved disciplines would miss, whereas secular academia is a constant source of methodological and theoretical contributions, as well as constructive criticism. Losing a hearing among the faith communities, on the other hand, would have strong adverse

effects on the social impact of the discipline and thereby indirectly on the credibility of the discipline. World Christianity can and should function as a critical partner in dialogue with faith communities. Likewise, theology needs to find itself a new postcolonial and academically credible role that does not lose its relevance in the eyes of the faith communities.

Notes

- 1 There are exceptions, though, like the MOPAI-project led by Prof. Samuel Rubenson, which has produced an electronic library of early Christian sources in Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Greek, Latin, Slavonic, and Syriac (see *Monastica* [s.a.]. *A Dynamic Library and Research Tool*, accessed March 20, 2017, <http://monastica.ht.lu.se/>). On early medieval World Christianity, see Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity: The Thousand-year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia – And How It Died* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). Oriental Christian traditions are the non-Chalcedonian ones like Coptic, Ethiopian (Tehwado), Syriac, etc.
- 2 A case in point would be the widely distributed *The Modern Theologians*, where only white males have reached the heights that allow them a place in the chapter headings. See David E. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1st ed. 1989, 2nd ed. 1997, 3rd ed. 2005). The book has evolved into an increasingly plural collection by way of extension – adding chapters on other than the standard in theology.
- 3 Paul Duane Matheny, *Contextual Theology: The Drama of Our Times* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 59–60.
- 4 Karl Rahner, *Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church*, Theological Investigations 12 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974); Karl Rahner, *Observations on the Problem of Anonymous Christians*, Theological Investigations 14 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976).
- 5 For example, in *Der gekreuzigte Gott*, he refers to a couple of Latin American liberation theologians, and two Japanese thinkers, whereas in *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, Latin American liberation theologians are already one major discussion partner. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1972); Jürgen Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt: Beiträge zur öffentlichen Relevanz der Theologie* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser, 1997).
- 6 See e.g. Moltmann, *Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, 219.
- 7 The frontal attack approach was most visible in Protestant fundamentalism (see Margaret Bendroth, “Fundamentalist Imagination,” *Church History* 85, no. 2 (2016): 328–42), whereas liberal theology represented an attempt to contextualise Christianity into the European and American academic male sphere (on liberal theology, see James J. Buckley, “Revisionists and Liberals,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David E. Ford, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Blackwell, 2005], 213–28).
- 8 An example of the first rationalistic conclusions on existential questions by a natural scientist is Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Books, 2006), and of mystical-religious Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration on the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala Publications, 1975).
- 9 It has to be noted that not all religious studies would fit in this category. See, for example, Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman, “Introduction,” in *The Participatory Turn: Spirituality, Mysticism, Religious Studies*, eds. Jorge N. Ferrer and Jacob H. Sherman (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 1–80.

- 10 Lesslie Newbigin's concern for maintaining trust in science under the onslaught of postmodern critique is quite telling, especially when he considers that it is Christian theologian's responsibility to do so. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
- 11 On plausibility patterns, see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1991 [1966]), 110–21.
- 12 See Lawrence Cahoon, "Introduction," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 1–13, 1–2.
- 13 See Mika Vähäkangas, "Can the Study of Mission Become Postcolonial? On Mission Studies in Today's World," *Ortodoksia* 56 (2016): 39–64.
- 14 In Tanzania, Bruno Gutmann (1876–1966) would serve as a paradigmatic pioneer-era example, whereas Raimo Harjula is a later missionary example of a champion of African theology and study of African traditions. See Ernst Jaeschke, *Bruno Gutmann, His Life, His Thoughts, and His Work: An Early Attempt at a Theology in an African Context* (Erlangen: Verlag der ev.-luth. Mission, 1985); Raimo Harjula, *God and the Sun in Meru Thought*, *Annals of the Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics* 16 (Helsinki: The Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics, 1969); Raimo Harjula, "Towards a Theologia Africana," *Svensk Missionstidskrift* 58 (1970): 88–102.
- 15 E.g. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christus und die Mythologie: Das Neue Testament in Licht der Bibelkritik* (Hamburg: Furche, 1964).
- 16 See Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation*, *Studia Theologica Lundensia* 42 (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988), 9–10.
- 17 In this sense, it is telling that the history of the International Association for Mission Studies was titled *Witness for World Christianity*. See Gerard H. Anderson et al., *Witness for World Christianity: The International Association for Mission Studies 1972–2012* (New Haven, CT: OMSC Publications, 2012).
- 18 This was clearly visible in the International Association for Mission Studies general assembly in Seoul in 2016, where there were about 130 papers and only a small minority took a purely theoretical-theological approach, in comparison to different empirically based papers.
- 19 See Stephen Bevans, "Migration and Mission: Pastoral Challenges, Theological Insights," in *Reforming Theology, Migrating Church, Transforming Society: A Compendium for Ecumenical Education*, eds. Uta André, Benjamin Simon, and Lars Röser-Israel (Geneva: WCC, 2017), 178–91, 179.
- 20 See Matheny, *Contextual Theology*, 3.
- 21 Frostin, *Liberation Theology*, 6–11.
- 22 Jon Bialecki, Naomi Haynes, and Joel Robbins, "The Anthropology of Christianity," *The Religion Compass* 2, no. 6 (2008): 1139–58.
- 23 Michael Jackson's book title *At Home in the World* describes well this ideal. Michael Jackson, *At Home in the World* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).
- 24 On the complicated relations between the researcher and the researched when both are stakeholders in the same community, see Mika Vähäkangas, "Om mig, den andre och mig i den andre: Med Weber och Lévy-Bruhl på besök hos en tanzanisk helare," in *Årsbok 2014*, ed. Henrik Rahm (Lund: Vetenskapssocieteten i Lund, 2014), 158–73.
- 25 On Kimbanguists as quasi-others, see Mika Vähäkangas, "How to Respect the Religious Quasi-Other? Methodological Considerations on Studying the Kimbanguist Doctrine of Incarnation," in *Faith in African Lived Christianity: Bridging Anthropological and Theological Perspectives*, eds. Karin Lauterbach and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

- 26 On postcoloniality, see, for example, Robert J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).
- 27 This insight is extensively expressed in the Nordic joint Master's programme Religious Roots of Europe, where the contributions of all three monotheistic religions to European identity and culture are studied. See www.ctr.lu.se/utbildning/nordisk-masterutbildning-religious-roots-of-europe-120-hp, accessed March 20, 2017.
- 28 Mika Vähäkangas, "Theo-logical Positions vis-à-vis Syncretism," in *Theological and Philosophical Responses to Syncretism: Beyond the Mirage of Pure Religion*, eds. Patrik Fridlund and Mika Vähäkangas (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 68–87.
- 29 For example, in Münster, there is Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic theology, and at the Free University of Amsterdam, Protestant and Islamic theology. This approach comes close to the second of the three alternatives for theology described by Moltmann (*Gott im Projekt der modernen Welt*, 220–21). On Islamic theology in northern European universities, see Oddbjørn Leirvik, "Islamic University Theology," *Studia Theologica* 70, no. 2 (2016): 127–44.
- 30 Comparative theologies could be seen as theologies where different faith traditions are involved in the theological argumentation in a comparative manner, whereas in interreligious theology, the resulting theology consciously takes influences and contexts from several religions. However, they can be defined in various ways. See e.g. Paul Knitter, "Comparative Theology Is Not 'Business-as-Usual Theology': Personal Witness from a Buddhist Christian," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 35 (2015): 181–92. See also David Tracy, "Theology: Comparative Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, vol. 14 (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 446–55; Leirvik, "Islamic University Theology," 133.
- 31 The concept of pluralism is tricky in theologies of religions, because there does not exist a consensus on what pluralism might mean. Thus, Gavin D'Costa analyses that many theologians who perceive themselves as pluralists actually are not such. Gavin D'Costa, *The Meeting of Religions and the Trinity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000).
- 32 John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 178.