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THEOLOGY AS RELIGIOUS STUDIES: A PLEA FOR METHODOLOGICAL CONVERSION

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Studies in interreligious dialogue point out that the encounter between Christianity, grounded essentially in Eurocentric epistemology and other religious epistemologies, including African Religion, necessitates four options, which Paul F. Knitter enumerates: replacement, fulfillment, mutuality, and acceptance (Knitter 2002). In the African context, this amounts in practice to a choice between total overthrow of African epistemology, complete abandonment of European epistemology, reconciliation between the two, or mutual tolerance between them. The first option is obviously morally unconscionable, because it amounts to cultural genocide. It has hopefully become clear in the foregoing pages, further, that in this age of globalization, the second option is neither probable nor possible, if only, and especially, on account of the universal character of belief in Christ. The outstanding question for inculturation lies, therefore, in the last two alternatives: whether African and European epistemologies can be reconciled and whether, where this proves impossible, they can coexist in mutual acceptance of their differences.

Laurenti Magesa, What Is Not Sacred? African Spirituality,
Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, p. 126-27.

1. Introduction

This paper reflects on the question: What is theology? Or, what makes a theologian a theologian? The paper discusses: (1) the distinction between theology and religious studies; (2) the distinction between insider and outsider perspectives in the study of religion; (3) the distinction between seminary and university theology; (4) the distinction between simplex and duplex ordo systems; (5) the distinction between

empirical and hermeneutic studies of religion; (6) the distinction between methodological agnosticism and methodological conversion; (7) conclusions, arguing that theology is religious studies, as distinct from the science of religion, and demonstrating the relevance of these distinctions for the study of religion in Africa

2. Theology and Religious Studies

There has been a long tradition of clarifying what, exactly, theology as an academic discipline is, and there is a fierce debate in international professional organizations such as the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) and its African affiliate, the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR), regarding the boundary between theology and the science of religion. The misunderstanding between the AASR members Olabimtan (2003) and Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003, 2008) is telling. In general, the European and North American view is that the science of religion should not be “in [the] service of ideological, theological and religious agendas” (Martin & Wiebe 2012: 588).

The traditional definition of theology- ‘faith seeking understanding’- formulated by St. Anselm, is readily accepted by scholars in seminaries and divinity schools, but is considered problematic in university settings because it presupposes a standpoint of faith (Van der Ven 2005). Science must be neutral or objective. The theological position- and its distinction from the science of religion- can be explained from the perspective of the history of religious studies as an academic discipline. One can identify three distinct paradigms that developed successively, but now exist side by side (Platvoet 1990: 183-187). The academic study of religion began in the positivist mode. Sociologists, anthropologists and psychologists studied religion as an epiphenomenon within other arenas of reality; for example, religion as social (Tylor, Durkheim), economic (Marx) or psychological (Freud) processes. Positivists assumed that religious beliefs were spurious, that the meta-empirical beings that believers believed in did not exist and that scientific enquiry could prove that religions were illusions (McCutcheon 2007: 31-39).

In reaction to positivism, other scholars of religion launched into the study of religions as they were ‘in themselves.’ It was this mode of the study of religion that gained academic recognition in the form of chairs

at universities, first in Switzerland (University of Geneva, 1873) and thereafter in The Netherlands (University of Leiden, 1877, University of Amsterdam, 1878). It was known as the history and phenomenology of religion; or comparative religion. It was 'religionist' or religiously oriented in the sense that it assumed that religious beliefs were true; that the meta-empirical beings the believers believed in were autonomous realities in the sense that they existed *sui generis*, and that scholars of religion could access them by using their own methods (McCutcheon 2007: 21-29). This is the position which Olabimtan (2003) advocates.

Beginning in the early 1970s, more and more scholars of religion became dissatisfied with these phenomenological approaches. Thus a third approach emerged, namely the empirical approach, claiming that both positivism and 'religionism' were ideological positions. A statement regarding a meta-empirical reality could not be falsified and thus was considered unscientific, theological, but not academic. Scientists of religion were advised to avoid truth claims with regard to meta-empirical realities and to limit themselves to evidence-based research. Hence the empirical paradigm claimed to be neutral and objective. It claimed to represent no particular point of view, letting facts speak for themselves. This is the position which Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003, 2008) advocate. It is my contention that the religionist paradigm within the academic study of religion can be equated with theology or theological religious studies, at least with one form of theology, namely university theology that is to be distinguished from seminary theology.

3. Insider and Outsider Perspectives

The difference between theology and religious studies is often explained by claiming that theology employs an 'emic' or insider perspective and religious studies an 'etic' or outsider perspective (Hock 2004: 152). Much has been written about this distinction (McCutcheon 1997: 49-57; Jensen 2003), but from a post-modern and post-colonial perspective, this distinction is oversimplified, naïve and dated.

The terms 'emic' and 'etic' are used in different ways with reference to religions. For example, the 'etic' or 'outsider' scholar of religion could be a 'Christian' who studies Islam, or the term could refer to scholars of religion who dispense with religious vocabulary altogether, using nonreligious or secular language. One could also use the terms with ref-

erence to disciplines, claiming that theology has ‘a confessional basis,’ whereas religious studies should strive to be ‘impartial and unbiased’ (Westerlund 2004: 15).

Emic and etic approaches are not equivalent, respectively, to the theological and the scientific study of religion. Emic (phonemic) and etic (phonetic) are primarily linguistic categories. Emic (phonemic) refers to folk terms or religious language while etic (phonetic) refers to analytic terms or scientific language (Jensen 2003). Both theology and religious studies as academic disciplines use scientific language. In this sense they do not differ (Flood 1999: 22-24).

Of course, there are theologians who see their task primarily as the reproducing of religious language, that is, reproducing the believer’s point of view. But this applies to many scientists and anthropologists of religion as well. It is seen as a hallmark of all ‘ethno’- approaches to describe the belief of believers from below and from within. But at some point, folk terms must be translated into analytic terms. This applies to both philosophy and theology (Hountondji 1996: 63).

Academic theologians do not see their task as simply reproducing the believer’s point of view, but it also calls for critical analysis of that belief. They do not regard the belief of believers as their frame of reference, but as their research object (Flood 1999, 18-20, 225-226). In other words, there are ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ approaches to both theology and religious studies. One cannot simply contrast them. Cox (2006: vii) identifies religious studies as “a field midway theology and social and cultural sciences.” Whether or not theologians or scholars of religion consider themselves believers is quite another matter. Whereas the theologian is often assumed to be a believer or participant (which is not necessarily the case), the scholar of religion is not. This is strange. Scholars such as Evans Pritchard, Turner and Geertz were devout Christians (Catholics), yet their academic work is considered to be highly scholarly. Often this criterion is not applied to theologians. They are perceived to be believers, and, consequently, as necessarily biased and not neutral or objective in the academic sense. At stake is the issue as to whether and how faith is used in academic enquiry.

The distinction between insider (emic) and outsider (etic) perspectives is not equivalent to the distinction between participants and observers (Jensen 2003). Emic and etic perspectives are not dependent on whether or not the scholar is a believer. The distinction refers not to the

research subject (the researcher) but to the language that the researcher uses to speak about and constitute reality. This discussion shows that we are dealing with languages; participant languages, observer languages, and insider/analytic terms. The difference between science and religion is that they are different narratives or different voices of reality. Each has its own logic. One is not necessarily better than the other, but merely different. And the distinction between science and religion is not to be equated with the distinction between the science of religion and theology, the latter being religious and the former not.

4. The University and Seminary Theology

The foregoing definition of theology as the study of religion from an emic or insider perspective applies only to theology as it was understood traditionally, that is, as confessional or ecclesiastic theology. Confessional theology is the theology that is practised in seminaries or divinity schools. But that type of theology should be distinguished from theology as practised in a university setting where academic rather than religious language is used and thus does not differ from religious studies (Flood 1999: 22-23).

The 'science' of religion constitutes a reaction against religionist or theological studies of religion. Academics devoted to the study of the history and phenomenology of religion developed an approach that claimed to study other religions on their own terms. They adopted the other's point of view. They sought to do away with any hidden agenda and studied other religions as they-were-in-themselves, free from bias and prejudice (Platvoet 1998). They aimed at studying the belief of believers. They tried to grasp, in Malinowski's classical definition of ethnography, "the native's point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world" (Malinowski 1922: 25), or in Victor Turner's terms, the (Ndembu) "inside view" (Turner 1969: 11).

In reaction to prejudice and bias, methodological agnosticism became the principle of the academic study of religion, making the epochè (bracketing presuppositions) of phenomenology permanent. The quest for the history and phenomenology of religion became, at least in Europe, the 'science' of religion, copying the methods of 'natural,' 'exact' or 'hard' sciences. Religious studies had to be evidence-based. Paradoxically, to the extent that religious studies copied the 'hard' sciences,

imitating what other disciplines already were doing, religious studies was considered superfluous and succumbed to crisis (Jensen 2003: 11, 22) or malaise (Jensen 2003: 144), whereas theology continued to do what it had always done with great confidence.

Consequently there was growing tension between the 'theological' and the 'scientific' approaches to the study of religion. Whereas sciences of religion, as far as history and phenomenology of religion or comparative religion (anthropology, sociology and psychology of religion have different histories) are concerned, were taught in theological faculties, in Catholic faculties- often in conjunction with philosophy of religion or mission studies (a practice that survives at various German universities), these disciplines have liberated themselves from theological control and are taught in faculties other than theology and schools of divinity.

There are prejudices and accusations on both sides (Schmiedel 2008: 230-231; Nielsen 2004). In Islamic studies, for example, theologians and scholars of religion compete (Hock 2004: 152). Some theologians claim that their knowledge of Islam is superior to that of scholars of religion, because theologians study Islam within a religious paradigm, whereas scholars of religion do not and thus have less understanding of Islam as a religion. On the other hand, some scholars of religion claim that their knowledge of Islam is better because they are uninvolved and practise methodological agnosticism, hence are less prejudiced and more objective.

The same applies to the study of African Religion. Whereas Olabimtan (2003: 335) claims that the dominant response to economic and political crisis on the continent has been religious and that the object of religious studies (religion) must dictate its method of enquiry (Olabimtan 2003: 339), Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003: 150) claim that Africans are and have been religiously indifferent, and that any view of religion must be founded on verifiable historical data if academic status is claimed for it (Platvoet and Van Rinsum 2003: 143). According to them, there is no science but empirical science (Platvoet and Van Rinsum 2008: 162).

5. Duplex Ordo and Simplex Ordo

Sometimes the debate goes so far as to argue that theology is not a science and therefore should have no place in academic institutions (Van

der Ven 2005). As Laurenti Magesa was a visiting professor in both the State University at Utrecht and the Catholic University at Nijmegen in The Netherlands, he is familiar with this debate, but in my view the argument that theology is not an academic discipline applies only to one form of theology, i.e., seminary theology.

This debate is not new at all. Already in 1900 Bruining argued in his inaugural lecture as professor of religious studies in the University of Amsterdam for theology as the science of religion. Three decades earlier Tiele (1866), who was the first professor of history of religion at Leiden University, did the same. He proposed a shift from confessional theology to scientific theology. According to him apologetics, polemics and dogmatic theology were to be removed from university curricula and returned to the seminaries. Exegesis and hermeneutics were to be located in the faculty of arts and philosophy. He advocated practical theology as 'applied science' of the science of religion. 'Applied science of science of religion' could be used to enhance Christian religion through teaching and preaching, and to propagate Christian religion through mission. But according to Tiele (1866) the aim of mission was not to eliminate other religions but to reform them.

At universities in The Netherlands, Dutch Law institutionalized the distinction between scientific and confessional positions, in the so-called duplex ordo system in 1876 (Platvoet 1998). At public (or state) universities such as Leiden, Amsterdam, Utrecht and Groningen students were offered 'sciences' of religion in a neutral way, alongside ecclesiastic disciplines, which proceeded from a specifically religious standpoint. Confessional universities (the Dutch Reformed Free University at Amsterdam, the Roman Catholic Radboud University at Nijmegen), which adhered to the simplex ordo system, took into account that science was always theory-laden and thus never neutral. After Olabimtan's 'response to Platvoet and Van Rinsum' these authors had to admit that their approach was inspired more by Okot p'Bitek's *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (1970) claiming that African religion is a Western invention, than by Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* (1969) stating that Africans are 'notoriously religious' (Platvoet and Van Rinsum 2008: 157-158). Thus, they did have a point of view. Their approach was less neutral and more biased than they first claimed.

6. Empirical and Hermeneutic Religious Studies

In a post-colonial and post-modern situation in which religion is perceived of as a Western construct (Dubuisson 2003) and people as polyphonic selves who have multiple identities, and who switch between and mix different languages, the distinction between duplex ordo and simplex ordo is no longer tenable. Boundaries between insiders and outsiders are blurred. Stated differently, 'religion' is a construct and the boundary between religion and non-religion is not fixed but fluid (Asad 1993). There is no religious core experience, innate property or essence (Wijzen 2013). Thus what is considered 'inside' or 'outside' is not clear and depends on the context. Under the influence of post-modernism and post-colonialism a neutral academic position was declared a fiction. Scholars of religion always have a certain standpoint in history. Facts cannot be collected like flowers in a field, but are generated within a particular theoretical framework (Bourdieu 1990).

Flood (1999: 9) distinguishes between two main paradigms in the study of religion: a phenomenological and a hermeneutic paradigm. The phenomenological paradigm dominated the study of religion in the past. In reaction to the biases of theology, phenomenology of religion aimed to study religions in objective ways (Jensen 2003: 45-72). This paradigm has been criticized from a post-modern perspective by pointing out that every approach, including phenomenology, is rooted in tradition, hence is not neutral.

The heritage of phenomenology can be interpreted in light of the distinction between subject and object that underlies the entire Western tradition, including the Enlightenment or Romanticism (Flood 1999: 104). There is a 'radical distinction' between the knowing subject and the objective world, a 'gap' between 'me' and 'the other' (Flood 1999: 107). The objective world exists independently of the observer. It appears in the observer's consciousness, whereupon phenomenologists analyse their consciousness. Although Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye (professor of science of religion in Amsterdam, 1878-1899), who coined the term 'phenomenology of religion,' was not influenced by philosophical phenomenology (Jensen 2003: 81), later phenomenologists of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw (professor of science of religion in Groningen, 1918-1950) were inspired by Edmund

Husserl's project to return to the 'things themselves' (Flood 1999: 93).

This phenomenological paradigm, which also features in anthropology and sociology, is criticized from hermeneutic and post-modern perspectives. Individuals are not independent actors, closed off in themselves, but are tied up in webs of meaning, integrally inter-subjective, and are caught up in language communities. Thus the distinction between phenomenology and hermeneutics underlies the shift from the philosophy of consciousness, in all its varieties and complexities, to the philosophy of signs or language (Flood 1999: 9, 107; Jensen 2003: 14; 449-453). The objectivist approach is based on a philosophy of consciousness. The narrative approach is based on the philosophy of signs or languages. In other words, scholars of religion do not analyse the contents of consciousness; they construct meaning out of signs or languages (Flood 1999: 117, 216, 219). Stated differently, Flood (1999: 63-64) takes religions to be 'binding narratives,' thus placing 'language at the centre of enquiry.' Human artefacts or practices are not religious because of innate properties but because believers situate them in a narrative context by which they become religious artefacts and practices (Bourdieu 1991).

7. Methodological Agnosticism and Methodological Conversion

While no modern scholar of religion wants to revert to 19th century positivism, at present their empirical and hermeneutic positions can be equated, respectively, with scientific and theological study of religion. It is not so much their objects and methods that differ, but their research perspectives and views of science ('objective' and 'explanatory' versus 'engaged' and 'interpretive'). These distinctions reflect the debate regarding old phenomenological issues such as empathy and *epochè* (Flood 1999: 28-33). Whereas the empirical school makes *epochè* permanent and is premised on methodological agnosticism, the hermeneutic school is more empathetic and its premise is methodological conversion.

Ultimately the distinction between modernity and post-modernity is epistemological (Flood 1999: 150). This is the core of the misunderstanding between Olabimtan (2003) and Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003, 2008). A presupposition underlying Western epistemology has to do with the separation of subject and object. Richard Rorty speaks about a shift from epistemology to hermeneutics (Flood 1999: 68, 79):

explanation or interpretation; 'function' in terms of antecedent and consequent relations- causes and effects; or 'meaning' in terms of intentions (Flood 1999: 93; Kippenberg and Von Stuckrad 2003: 52-53). Whereas Platvoet and Van Rinsum (2003: 153) claim that the science of religion gives a better picture of religions if they are "put into their own extra-religious contexts," Olabimtan (2003: 333) claims that religions are best understood from "the plausibility of a transcendent reality."

To understand is to be convinced, says Raimundo Panikkar (1999: 34); "We cannot understand a person's ultimate convictions unless we somehow share them." For conviction one needs to be converted. Thus, contrary to phenomenological *epochè* (bracketing) and later methodological agnosticism, Cox (1998: 93-96), who is yet another AASR member, proposes 'methodological conversion.' According to Cox (1998: 95) 'methodological conversion' is "a genuine advancement within the phenomenology of religion." Doing away with methodological agnosticism also makes room for what is called "critical," "engaged" or "practical" science of religion in which scholars of religion take a religious point of view and promote dialogue and understanding between religions, without propagating one religion as better than the other (Tworushka 2008). In a seminary or divinity school the methodological conversion becomes confessional and academic language becomes religious language in the context of priestly formation. This differentiates seminary theology (not better or worse) from university theology.

8. Conclusion

I consider theology to be the 'religionist' paradigm within the academic study of religion, or simply 'religious studies', where the adjective 'religious' qualifies the noun 'studies' as distinct from 'science of religion.' I do not see the distinction between theology and science of religion in respective insider and outsider perspectives. If the essentialist notion of religion from a post-modern perspective is ignored, the boundary between insiders and outsiders becomes blurred. I do not see the distinction between 'normative' and 'neutral.' In my view, no science is 'neutral' (Bourdieu 1990). There is also a critical science of religion that advocates the emancipation of women within religions, or within minority religions. Last but not least, it is not the distinction between 'engaged' or 'disengaged;' the only difference is the research

perspective or view of science, empirical or hermeneutic, or maybe 'explanatory' versus 'interpretative' science.

What makes a theologian a theologian? My answer: the practice of methodological conversion as distinct from methodological agnosticism. What is the relevance of all these distinctions for the study of religion in Africa? European scholars of religion collaborating with colleagues at African Departments of Religious Studies are often surprised to find theology in departments of religious studies (Wijisen 2012). Within the African Association for the Study of Religions the same debate prevails. Recently I became involved in the establishment of a Religion and Society Research Centre at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. One of the reasons why its establishment is proceeding slowly is that the administrators fear religious involvement and they fear the potential confusion between religious studies and theology. According to them, seminaries teach theology. It is therefore most relevant in the African context to clarify the distinction between seminary and university theology. But, in a context where the overwhelming majority claims to be religious, methodological agnosticism does not make sense.

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