JOURNEYING TOGETHER TOWARDS AN ECUMENICAL MISSIOLOGY

Erbacher Hof in Mainz (Germany) was the venue from 15 to 18 July 2019 for a conference entitled "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology: Witnessing Christ" attended by 35 theologians from Africa, Asia, North America, the Middle East, Oceania, Latin America and Europe. In the course of their presentations they examined the Christological perspectives that are fundamental, on the one hand, for their respective continental context and, on the other, in their individual churches. The speakers focused on the missiological implications of the different contextual Christologies with a view to stimulating an exchange between them. The aim of the conference was to pinpoint contextual and denominational convergences and divergences in the understanding of mission and to discuss whether mainly contextual or denominational localisations are pivotal in epistemological terms and identity-forming for missiology and theology.

Approaches from the Continents

The conference began with a review of African Christological perspectives conducted by the African theologians Paul Béré (Abidjan, Ivory Coast), Timothée Bouba Mbima (Yaoundé, Cameroon) and Faith Lungaza (Butare, Rwanda). The second panel with Stephen Bevans (Chicago, USA), Jayakiran Sebastian (Philadelphia, USA) and Petros G. Malakyan (Pittsburgh, USA) threw light on Christological approaches in North America. One striking feature here was that the "North American" panel included two theologians with an immigrant background, which modified the structural principle of the conference in post-modern, "cross-cultural," context-related and intercultural terms. This raised the question of whether it was more appropriate to have the modern-day church in North America represented by "Native Americans" or rather by immigrants (as far the Catholic Church is concerned, note should be taken here in particular of the increasing significance of "Hispanics," who are increasingly shaping the face of the church in the USA). At a third panel the theologians Wilbert van Saane and Martin Accad (both from Beirut, Lebanon) examined Christology in the Middle East in general and more particularly the concepts of "Phoenician Christology," "Arab Christology" and a "Palestinian Christology" as contextual Christological approaches in the Middle East. Margit Eckholt (Osnabrück, Germany), Lisanne Teuchert (Bochum, Germany) and Johannes Reimer (Ewersbach, Germany) from Europe looked at which contextual Christological perspectives point the way forward for ecumenical missiology. Samuel George (Allahabad, India), Ambroise Mong (Hong Kong) and Septemmy Lakawa (Jakarta, Indonesia) presented Christological approaches from Asia. Septemmy Lakawa's presentation was particularly impressive. Starting with the cross, he outlined a theopoetic Christological approach which does justice even to the traumatic expe-

rience of violence, war and terror. In the concluding sacred dance that followed Lakawa showed that theological exchange confined to a semantic debate characterised by a Western understanding of knowledge is self-restricting (especially with regard to injuries, the experience of suffering, traumata) as long as it dispenses with essential forms of poetic and physical expression. In the last continental panel Olga Consuelo Vélez Caro (Bogota, Colombia) and Ruth Padilla de Borst (Casa Adobe, Costa Rica) looked at Latin American Christological perspectives on a "Christology from below."

Contextual Epistemologies

It transpired in the course of the conference that contextual Christologies in the different regions have to respond in different ways to the challenges posed, for instance, by inter-religious dialogue, ecological issues, exclusive forms of nationalism and ethnicism, the emergence of new kinds of spirituality, the intensification of individualism and concomitant loneliness, scientific findings, post-socialist and post-modern atheism, and the experience of a hierarchical and centralist church. Numerous presenters expressed the view that in many contexts a Christology focused on the cross does not appear very helpful. Although contextual theologies are often associated with the local churches of the global South, the conference in Mainz showed that it is the churches and theologies of Europe and North America, in particular, which are lagging behind in epistemological terms. Whereas the churches of the South realised at an early stage that the theologies they formulated were always influenced by context, numerous theologians in Europe and North America still delude themselves at the beginning of the 21st century that the theologies they have formulated in their own context embody a universal claim (to truth). There is ground to be made up here in epistemological terms so that future generations do not classify this theological and ecclesiastical Eurocentrism as theological provincialism.

Long Ways into the Future

The conference "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology—Witnessing Christ" made something else abundantly clear, although this conclusion can only be formulated very cautiously for the moment. There are clear methodical and modal differences between Catholic and Protestant as well as Evangelical/Free Church/Pentecostal theology and missiology. First and foremost there are different styles in the theological traditions. Specific material differences only emerge later. At least the convergences and divergences in the Christologies and their missiological implications do not run along strictly denominational lines. Continental and cultural affiliations seem to have a much stronger impact in forming identity and therefore exert a greater influence on theological perspectives than the accustomed denominational environment does. One observer at the conference went so far as to posit the idea

that the structural principle of a denominationally differentiated review of theological approaches, which is a hallmark of the "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology" series of conferences, reflects a "specifically German perspective." This initially very cautiously formulated hypothesis needs to be examined in other intercontinental ecumenical conferences with a different focus (going beyond Christology).

Desiderata were expressed at the end of the conference. It was felt to be important that Orthodoxy be taken into account in the conception of future ecumenical conferences and that issues should be addressed which were not considered at the Christological conference in Mainz: digitisation and mission; mission—power and structures; mission and abuse within the churches; mission in the age of interculturality; mission and migration; mission in the age of secularisation; mission and dialogue; mission and development; cross-cultural mission, etc.

It is all the more important, therefore, that the recent conference was not a "one-off" occasion. In order to transcend denominational boundaries and foster a worldwide exchange of views on questions of mission, the International Catholic Mission Society *missio* has joined the Association of Protestant Churches and Missions in Germany (EMW) in launching the ecumenical missiological initiative "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology." As part of this ecumenical initiative *missio* and the EMW have been joined by their cooperation partners in organising biennial international conferences which bring together theologians from Africa, Asia, North America, the Middle East, Oceania, Latin America and Europe. The aim of this initiative is to conduct an ecumenical debate in a global framework on differences and convergences in the understanding of mission. The Protestant missiologist Claudia Jahnel (Bochum) highlighted the importance of this approach in writing in the run-up to the conference: "The worldwide ecumenical movement is a space for learning in which we can discover new perspectives not only on ourselves but also on the world and our coexistence in diversity. In times of identitarian differentiation I have increasingly come to regard mission as the conversion of our view of others. In ecumenical missiology we have the best of both worlds: learning with each other and building the plural and peaceful society of the future." *Missio* and the EMW as the initiators have been joined as participants in the ecumenical project "Towards an Ecumenical Missiology" by the (Free Church/Baptist) Elstal Theological Seminary and the (Free Church/Evangelical) European School of Culture and Theology in Korntal (both in Germany). The conference contributions will be published and thus pave the way for a contextually-related series of books on ecumenical missiology.

Klaus Vellguth