Vernacular Ecumenism and Transcultural Unity Rethinking Ecumenical Theology after the Cultural Turn

Claudia Jahnel

Dr Claudia Jahnel was born and brought up in Daresallam, Tanzania. She now lives in Germany where she was a lecturer at the University of Erlangen's Mission and Religious Studies department. She has been head of Mission Eine Welt's intercultural and formation programme since May 2008.

Cultural Turn and its relevance for ecumenical theology

In her essay "Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse", one of the classics in postcolonial studies, Chandra Mohanty[1] holds a mirror up to western feminist scholars: their "well-meant" global solidarity with women from the South and the intention to "liberate" and "emancipate" these "poor", "powerless", "exploited" and "sexually harassed" "victims of multiple oppression" enhances, Mohanty states, not only an undifferentiated stereotype of *the* "third-world woman". It also uses women from the South as a contrast-foil for *the* western, emancipated woman. These feminist scholars are blind to the fact that a monolithic "other" – the "average third-world woman" – exists only as a construction of their own fantasy and is a product of ethnocentric analyses and projections. At the same time the solidarity-argument obscures the inherent racism, colonialism and imperialism and disguises the hegemonic position from which feminist scholars speak as do western scholars in general.

---

[1] Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse, in: Williams, Patrick/Chrisman, Laura (eds.), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*. A Reader, New York: Columbia University Press 1994, pp.196–220.

This essay's concern is to reflect some epistemological and ethical lessons that can be learned from the rich convergences and divergences between ecumenical theology, dialogue and encounter, on the one hand, and the "cultural turn", which characterizes a certain perspective and scientific approach that, in its more recent emergence, comprises various disciplines, on the other. An alliance and dialogue with this "turn", I argue, holds an innovative potential for ecumenical theology, the ecumenical movement, ecumenical encounter, and the rethinking of the unity of the universal church.

Mohanty's critique exemplarily illustrates some of the challenges involved in this endeavour and reveals a point that is pivotal in studies of the Cultural Turn: to question categories of western scholarship and to unmask them as results of a production of knowledge controlled by and serving the interest of western science – often to create a contrast-foil that confirms one's own culture and identity as superior, more advanced, or "the original".[2] "We have learned in recent decades", Sandra Harding states, "that Europeans produced an 'orientology' of other cultures' beliefs and practices […]"[3] as well as that knowledge is always local knowledge, shaped by a certain context, its discursive practice, and its ideologies.[4]

The cultural turn is not a new theory or paradigm[5] but a cumulation of various turns in different disciplines leading to a critical self-examination and interdisciplinary, multi-dimensional explorations of cultural, cross-cultural and inter-cultural phenomena. Beginning with the revival of the interest in "culture"[6] and the interpretive turn in the cultural anthropology and ethnology in the 1970s various disciplines generated new and differentiating impulses such as the performative, the reflexive, the postcolo-

---

[2] Regarding the conversion of knowledge into power for the "core nations" of the "First World" see e.g. Brockway, Lucille H., *Science and Colonial Expansion: The Role of the British Royal Botanical Gardens*, New York: Academic 1979.

[3] Harding, Sandra, *Is Science Multicultural? Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies*, Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1998, p.56. Harding is implicitly referring to the debate on Orientalism with Edward Said as the most prominent representative, see Said, Edward, Orientalism, New York: Vintage 1978.

[4] See Harding (1998), chapter 4, pp.55–72.

[5] For the rather antiparadigmatic, experimental, ephemeral and transitional character of the turns see Marcus, George E./Fischer, Michael M. J., *Anthropology as Cultural Critique. An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, Chicago, London: Chicago University Press 1986.

[6] Burke, Peter, *Was ist Kulturgeschichte*, Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung (bdp; Schriftenreihe Bd. 532) 2006.

nial, the translational, the spatial or the iconic turn.[7] This diversity and plurality corresponds to what the various approaches have in common, besides the mentioned epistemological and ethical obligation to theorize, historicize, and contextualize their own position and prevalent categories: an *anti-essentialistic and an anti-elitist understanding of culture*. Culture is not a given, monolithic entity, a "substance" or a "phenomenon in its own right"[8] nor does the term refer mainly to a "high" culture that applies to intellectual acts. Culture is understood as the product of an open-ended process of interactions and continual exchange, "an objective mirage that arises out of the relationship *between* cultures",[9] and: "culture is ordinary"[10] and refers to a whole way of life.[11] Accordingly, scholarly research after the Cultural Turn pays attention rather to *discontinuities, disruptions, barriers, differences* than to terms that convey coherence as tradition, identity or development.

Since the 1990s, due to a heightened awareness of the cultural impact of various migration-processes, terms like *transculturation*, *hybridity* and *transdifference* have been discussed.[12] Traditional patterns of dealing with cultural diversity, for instance the concepts of "multiculturalism" or "intercultural dialogue", which had been in vogue up to the '80s, were dismissed because they still approach cultures and identities as self-contained entities, and do not provide a framework that enlightens the far more complex dynamic of transcultural contact- and exchange processes taking place.[13]

Much attention in analyzing transcultural processes is directed to the genesis of "something new", something that is different but not quite or *almost*

---

[7] Bachmann-Medick, Doris, *Cultural Turns. Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Hamburg: Rowohlt 2006. For a critical survey of the Cultural Turn see Bonnell, Victoria E./Hunt, Lynn (eds.), Beyond the Cultural Turn. New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture, California: The University of California Press, 1999.

[8] Jameson, Frederic, On "Cultural Studies", in: Social Text 34 (1993), 1, pp.17–57, 33.

[9] Jameson (1993), p.33.

[10] Williams, Raymond, Culture is ordinary (1958), in: Williams, Raymond/Gable, Robin (eds.), *Resources of Hope*, London, New York: Verso Books 1989, pp.3–18.

[11] See Lindner, Rolf, "Lived Experience". Über die kulturale Wende in den Kulturwissenschaften, in: Musner, Lutz/Wunberg, Gotthart/Lutter, Christina (eds.), *Cultural Turn. Zur Geschichte der Kulturwissenschaften*, Wien: Turia & Kant 2001, pp.11–19.

[12] Hock, Klaus, Religion als transkulturelles Phänomen. Implikationen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Paradigmas für die Religionsforschung, in: *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift 19* (2002), 1, 64–82.

[13] See Welsch, Wolfgang, "Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today", in: Featherstone, Mike/Lash, Scott (eds.), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World*, London: Sage 1999, pp.194–213.

the same but not quite – a "third space".[14] Church and Mission History give ample evidence of these complex processes as well as how they were perceived and evaluated. The genesis of African Independent Churches, for instance, is an illustrative example. These churches do not fit into a binary order that distinguishes "different" from "same". Therefore they were often labelled as "syncretistic", as phenomena of resistance or as political rather than religious institutions.[15] More recently scholars have started to question these appraisals and to re-examine the transculturation processes in its various dimensions. Afeosemime Adogame for instance in his study on the Celestial Church of Christ (CCC), besides emphasizing the often undermined "personal-innovative factor" of the charismatic founder Samuel Bilewou Joseph Oschoffa, points to the result of the Christianizing of elements from Yoruba tradition: through this process of religious change the CCC has become a "place to feel at home".[16]

In contrast to older models of the largely one-way spread of Christian and cultural ideas such as inculturation, accommodation or contextualization models, the assumption of the generation of something "New" or a "Third Space" reveals *many-directional interchanges* between different cultures. This leads last but not least to the question of how to re-evaluate these "new phenomena": which criteria – cultural, theological – should be applied? What does it mean in this context to take the epistemological and ethical obligation to reflect and question own prevalent categories seriously? There has been a long debate about what a "successful inculturation" means and who decides this – the answers given reveal rather the respective standpoint and interest than unambiguousness concerning the matter. In the "transculturation model" notions of "syncretism" in its derogative, assessing usage have disappeared, replaced by notions such as *hybridity*, *bricolage*, or *mélange*. Yet, given the fact that no category or research is value-free and that the assumption of value-neutrality itself is not at all value-neutral, the question of assessment and benchmarking still persists. Thus, what is required is the previously mentioned obligation to be transparent about presumed classifications and a "negative capability", as John Keats suggested, "that is, when a man is capable of being in

---

[14] Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, London, New York: Routledge 1994, pp.85, 92.

[15] Adogame, Afeosemime U., Celestial Church of Christ. *The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement*, Frankfurt/M. u. a.: Peter Lang 1999.

[16] Adogame (1999), p.208.

uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".[17]

The Cultural Turn, I argue, goes right to the centre of ecumenical theology – its concept of universal unity! – because the development and dialogue towards unity involved and involves transcultural processes. Ecumenical movement, dialogue and theology are "contact zones":[18] zones of bargaining, of negotiating differences, of two-way transcultural traffic, of mutual enrichment, of assimilation, integration and exclusion. These zones are by no means neutral or innocent.[19] On the contrary: they are permeated with benchmarks and criteria of evaluation, which have been given authority and power to define, decide, exclude and include.

My point of entry in reflecting on Ecumenical Theology after the Cultural Turn, as I have sketched it briefly, is the concept and construction of "the other". "The other" is, as seen, a core issue in the cultural studies; but encounter with "the other" also is *the* constitutive element in the ecumenical movement, dialogue, theology. The case studies chosen for illustration here and in the following emanate from African contexts, and, of course, this comprises the same trap that was described by Mohanty. I hope this article rather uncovers than furthers – in benevolent manner – certain stereotypes of "the African".

"The other" immediately involves interrelated questions that will be dealt with in subsequent paragraphs: the concepts of "the self" and of "identity" *vis-à-vis* "otherness" and "difference"; and the pivotal ecumenical concern for the "unity of the church" and the challenge of relating "the other" and "the self", difference and unity.

---

[17] Keats, John, Letter to George and Thomas Keats, 28 December 1817, in: Forman, H. Buxton (ed.), *The Complete Works of John Keats*, vol. IV, New York: Thomay Y. Crowell & Co., n. d., 50, quoted in: Lösch, Klaus, Begriff und Phänomen der Transdifferenz: Zur Infragestellung binärer Differenzkonstrukte, in: Allolio-Näcke, Lars/Kalscheuer, Britta/Manzeschke, Arne (eds.), *Differenzen anders denken. Bausteine zu einer Kulturtheorie der Transdifferenz*, Frankfurt a. M., New York: Campus 2005, 26–49, 28.

[18] See Pratt, Mary Louise, Scratches on the Face of the Country; or, What Mr. Barrow saw in the Land of the Bushmen, in: Gates, Henry Louis (ed.), *"Race", Writing and Difference*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985, p.139.

[19] See Jonathan Smith's notion that the study of religion is "by no means an innocent endeavour", in: Smith, Jonathan Z., *Drudgery Divine. On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990, p.34.

The two concepts of "the other" in Edinburgh (1910): Rethinking "difference" and "otherness"

I start at the beginning of the ecumenical movement in modern times: of the 1216 delegates at the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in June 1910, 18 came from the so-called "younger" churches, but none from Africa. Yet the lack of African delegates was not even noticed as we see in the report of W.H.T. Gairdner, a delegate from the Church Missionary Society in Cairo, working among Muslims who was impressed by:

> … the Oriental and African delegates, yellow, brown, or black in race were scattered among the delegates in that World Conference. For not only by their presence, but by their frequent contributions to debates, they gave final proof that the Christian religion is now rooted in all those great countries of the Orient and South; and not only so, but that it possesses in those countries leaders who, for intellectual ability and all-around competence, were fully worthy of standing beside the men – who have been mentioned – even without the traditions of two millenniums of Western Christianity at the back of them.[20]

After a detailed description of the delegates from the Orient Gairdner concluded:

> … and finally, men of African race, one a Negro of immense size, glorying in his African race, from Liberia, the only independent Negro organized state in Africa.[21]

However, the *"Negro […] from Liberia"* mentioned by Gairdner appears to be Rev. Alexander P. Camphor, an African-American of the Methodist Episcopal Board of Foreign Missions.

What comes through here is that Edinburgh had treated black Africa badly.[22] This becomes even more evident when we compare the treatment

---

[20] Gairdner, W.H.T., Edinburgh 1910: An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh, London: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier 1910, pp.56–57, quoted from: Friesen, J. Stanley, *Missionary Responses to Tribal Religions at Edinburgh*, 1910, New York et al: Peter Lang (Studies in Church History, ed. by William Fox, Vol. 1) 1996, p.27.

[21] Gairdner (1910), p.58, quoted in Friesen (1996), p.27.

[22] For the treatment of Africa at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, 1910, see besides Friesen (1996) the insightful article from Brian Stanley, Africa through European Christian Eyes. The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, in: Koschorke, Klaus (ed.), *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century. Proceedings of the Third International Munich-Freising Conference on the History of Christianity in the Non-Western World (September 15–17, 2004)*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag 2005, pp.166–180.

of Africa to the treatment of the "awakening nations" of Asia, which where perceived as bearing a rich and respected cultural heritage and great missionary potential. In Africa, in contrast, the controversy over the African Church leadership during and in the aftermath of the disastrous Niger mission of 1841[23] was still present to the effect that the "young Churches", which once represented "the great mission field",[24] had fallen into disrepute.

The marginalization of Africa becomes obvious, too, when we look at the way non-Christian religions in Africa were conceived: while there were efforts made to find "points of contact"[25] with non-Christian religions in Asia in order to draw adherents of other faiths to the full revelation of truth in Christ, in Africa the points of contact between traditional beliefs and Christianity were regarded as *very few and all perverted*".[26] While Hinduism was recognized as a "religion", many missionaries denied that Africans knew religion at all, despite African belief in a "Supreme Being" being acknowledged by missionary observers.

What can be noted by this comparison is, first, that there were degrees of difference – a hierarchical order of less and more different. Secondly, this distinction between "near" and "far", "a little bit like us" and "not at all like us", depended on certain interests, attitudes (like the remnants from the Niger controversy), and categories that render Western episte-mology, such as the category "religion" – with Asian religions matching the relevant criteria while African religions were either labelled as "pagan" or as "culture".[27] Edinburgh conveys a certain interest in con-

---

[23] The complex story of this part of church history in West-Africa constitutes a paradigmatic example of the entanglement of imperialist, missionary, and economic interests as well as it stands for, especially with bish-op Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1806–1891) and his son, James "Holy" Johnson (1840–1917), a story of resist-ance that had influenced – and was influenced by – West-African nationalism, panafricanism and resistance. For further discussion see Walls, Andrew F., Samuel Ajayi Crowther (1807–1891). Foremost African Christian of the Nineteenth Century, in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, Jan. 92, Vol. 16 Issue 1, pp.15–21; Ayandele, Emmanuel Ayankanmi, *Holy Johnson: Pioneer of African Nationalism*, 1836–1917, (African Modern Library, No. 13) London: Franc Cass Publishers 1970; Ayandele, Emmanuel Ayankanmi, The Missionary Impact on Modem Nigeria: 1842–1914, London: Longmans 1966.

[24] See Stanley (2005), p.168.

[25] See Stanley (2005), p.174.

[26] See Stanley (2005), p.175.

[27] For the still prevalent "making" of "world-religions" see: Auffahrt, Christoph, „Weltreligion" als ein Leitbegriff der Religionswissenschaft im Imperialismus, in: van der Heyden, Ulrich/Stoecker, Holger (eds.), *Mission und Macht im Wandel politischer Orientierungen. Europäische Missionsgesellschaften in politischen Spannungsfeldern in Afrika und Asien zwischen 1800 und 1945*, Wiesbaden 2005, pp.17–36; Masuzawa, Tomoko, *The Invention of World Religions. Or; How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2005.

structing and maintaining difference, which supports Jonathan Z. Smith's observation that "difference is not something simply to be noted; it is, most often, something in which one has a stake. Above all it is a political matter".[28]

And, thirdly, Edinburgh maintained two different concepts and constructions of "the other": The African and the Asian. "The African" as "the other" does not speak: he appears like the barbarian who in Roman times was considered to be someone "out there" – "outside" of the "oikoumene", which back then was tantamount to the Roman empire as the inhabitable world.

The Asian in contrast did speak and was perceived as someone with whom reciprocal interaction was a real possibility. In fact, it was an Asian, V.S. Azariah from India, who delivered what was to become one of Edinburgh's best-remembered speeches. "With an assurance from Mott that he should bare his heart, Azariah spoke with utter candour. He urged missionaries to acknowledge the patronizing attitudes that were so often felt by persons in India. He asked not for 'condescending love' from missionaries, but for their 'friendship' and for the real 'love that permits to Christians to shake hands and eat together'".[29]

These two concepts of "the other" in Edinburgh – the African and the Asian – are not unparalleled, but rather mirror two utterly different concepts of "the other" prevalent at the end of the 19th and beginnings of the 20th century in the classic ethnographic tradition on the one side and in anthropological research on the other.[30] The ethnographic tradition conveys "the other" as merely different: therefore he does not call for exegetical labour, deciphering, or hermeneutical projects. "The other does not speak […] he is the barbarian, one who speaks unintelligibly. … [therefore:] For the classical ethnographer, the labour of learning an 'other's' language would be sheer folly."[31]

The anthropological tradition, on the other hand, holds that "the other" is an ambivalent category because it is a term of interrelation. "Otherness"

---

[28] Smith, Jonathan Z., What a Difference Difference Makes, in: Smith, Jonathan Z.: *Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press 2004, pp.251–302, 252.

[29] Friesen (1996), p.26.

[30] For further insights in the differences between these two approaches see Crapanzano, Vinzent, Hermes' Dilemma. The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description, in: Clifford, James (ed.), *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, Califorina: University of California Press 1986, pp.51–76.

[31] Smith (2004), p.262.

is not so much a matter of separation as a description of reciprocal inter-action. Due to this assumption, "otherness" is being relativized and efforts are made to decipher and decode the message of "the other" for "another" with the firm conviction that, because it is human, it will be intelligible.

The comparison of the different concepts of "the other" in Edinburgh, as well as in the ethnographic and anthropological traditions, clearly indi-cates the epistemological and ethical challenge for ecumenical theology and dialogue regarding "the other":

> Real progress has been made only when the 'other' ceases to be an ontolog-ical category [...] A 'theory of the other' requires those complex political and linguistic projects necessary to enable us to think, to situate, and to speak of 'others' in relation to the way in which we think, situate, and speak about ourselves.[32]

Constructing "the other" and keeping "one's own" "pure": Rethinking Christian Identity

Unlike the "progress" just mentioned, both constructions of "the other" in Edinburgh possess a disinterest in how "the other" conceives of Europe or North-America. The awareness mentioned by Smith or Mohanty that dealing with "the other" is at the same time dealing with one's own issues and "one's own" is also absent. Philip Potter, general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1970s, interpreted the conference in Edinburgh as dealing with the "white-man's burden" – a phrase that was popularized by Rudyard Kipling, who urged the British East India Company to take up its "civilizing" responsibilities in the imperialist era at the end of the 19th century. Even a very short remark in the final conclusion of the report of Commission IV at Edinburgh, which reveals a somewhat sneaking, yet exotic admiration for the vitality and immediacy of the "childlike faith" that African converts displayed,[33] retains the binary pattern of sepa-rating "the other" and "the self". This pattern, Brian Stanley, follow-ing Andrew Wells, stated, shows an ambiguity that was and is preva-lent with European Christians: on the one hand northern Christians feel uncomfortable with the "readiness of African Christians to treat

---

[32] Smith (2004), pp.275f. (emphasis CJ).

[33] World Mission Conference 1910. Report of Commission IV. The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions, Edinburgh, London n. d. [1910], pp.220f.

the frontier between the visible material world and the invisible world of spiritual reality and power as an open one"; on the other they "find themselves deeply impressed, humbled, and attracted by the apostolic faith and untroubled fervour of African Christianity, which appears to be recalling a dying northern Christendom to the roots of the Christian story".[34] Manas Buthelezi argued similarly regarding the missionaries "ethnographic approach" towards an "indigenous" theology in Africa: European missionaries in the middle of the 20th century perceived Christianity in Africa as "emotional and spiritual compensation" for secularist Europe, which had proven "unfaithful in her love".[35]

The binary order of separating "the other" and "the self", whether "the other" is constructed as exotic, wild, and noble or as the representative of the "Heart of Darkness", has a certain function: it serves to maintain "one's own order" and with it: to keep away what is un-orderly, a danger to purity, identity, certainty, morality, stability, authenticity. The psychoanalyst and social anthropologist Julia Kristeva even goes so far as to state that: "The stranger is within us, the hidden part of our identity, that part that we abhor and therefore displace and project onto the stranger outside who becomes the contrast foil of our own seemingly pure, authentic identity."[36]

Thus, concepts of "the other" and of "the self" or "identity" are interwoven and ecumenical dialogue is a continuous and dynamic balancing of these two factors. More recently, in an interview on the World Conference of Faith and Order in Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia in August 2004, for instance, Joachim Track, professor for Systematic Theology in Germany, stated: "Faith and Order is not in an easy situation. Church officials – not only the orthodox but others also – feel the need to put more emphasis on their identity."[37]

---

[34] Stanley (2005), 179, referring to Walls, Andrew F., "Christian Scholarship and the Demographic Transformation of the Church", in: Okere, T. I. (ed.), *Religion in a World of Change. African Ancestral Religion, Islam and Christianity*, International Symposion Owerri, 2002, pp.144–166, 157–159.

[35] Buthelezi, Manas, Toward Indigenous Theology in South Africa, in: Torres, Sergio/Fabella, Virginia (eds.), *The Emergent Gospel. Theology from the Underside of History. Papers from the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians*, Dar es Salaam, August 5–12, 1976, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Book 1978, pp.56–75, 64.

[36] Kristeva, Julia, *Fremde sind wir uns selbst*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1990. See also: Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, London: Routledge 2002.

[37] http://www2.wcc-coe.org/pressreleasesge.nsf/index/pr-04-34.html (11/2006).

This need for identity and distinctiveness is a constitutive element throughout the ecumenical dialogue. It has been given attention on various occasions such as on a Faith and Order Conference in Bossey held in November 1951 on the "Non-Theological Factors that may Hinder or Accelerate the Church's Unity".[38] A preliminary event leading to the conference was an open letter from Professor C.H. Dodd from Cambridge in 1949, reprinted as "A Letter Concerning Unavowed Motives in Ecumenical Discussions".[39] Dodd states:

> In the course of nearly forty years participation in conferences and discussions having reunion as their ultimate aim, I have often been puzzled by a recurrent phenomenon: when certain issues have been patiently thrashed out, and we have come, through a deeper mutual understanding, within sight of some real measure of agreement on those particular issues, suddenly the ground of debate shifts. Some fresh point of division emerges, which no one has spoken about, or thought about, much. Interest in the matters hitherto under discussion evaporates, and the measure of agreement attained appears quite insignificant. We are thrown back to the beginning.[40]

Dodd continues by stating that what hinders the church's unity most often is the fear to lose one's own confessional or cultural-national identity. Similarly, the conference in Bossey in 1951 very frankly states that the obstacles to the visible unity of the church are not clear-cut theological ones. Rather they are mixed with issues of cultural and national identity and with the anxiety to lose one's own proudly cherished specialty – a fear that often emerges when a real chance for agreement comes within sight.[41]

Much attention has been paid to "identity" as well in the interreligious dialogue programme of the WCC. Dialogue with members of other religions has been a continuous topic on the agenda of the WCC since its assembly in Nairobi in 1975 and the follow-up WCC consultation in Chiang Mai (Thailand) in 1977. Chiang Mai, which regarding the concept of "the

---

[38] Die Bedeutung sozialer und kultureller Faktoren für die Kirchenspaltung, mit Beiträgen von C. H. Dodd, G. R. Cragg, Jacques Ellul, Kurt Dietrich Schmidt, einem Vorwort von Oliver Tomkins und dem Bericht einer ökumenischen Studienkonferenz, veröffentlicht im Auftrage des Ausschusses für Glauben und Kirchenverfassung im Ökumenischen Rat der Kirchen, n. d. [Geneva 1951].

[39] Dodd, C. H., A Letter Concerning Unavowed Motives in Ecumenical Discussions, in: *The Ecumenical Review*, Vol. II, Autum 1949–Summer 1950, pp.52–56.

[40] Dodd (1949/1950), p.52.

[41] For further interpretation see: Käßmann, Margot, *Die eucharistische Vision. Armut und Reichtum als Anfrage an die Einheit der Kirche in der Diskussion des Ökumenischen Rates*, München: Kaiser, Mainz: Grünewald 1992, pp.38–51.

other" can be assessed as "real progress" in Jonathan Z. Smith's sense,[42] developed "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths and Ideologies", which were adopted by the WCC central committee in 1979 and recently, in 2002, revised as "Ecumenical Considerations for Dialogue and Relations With People of Other Religions". In this context the issue of "identity" came up as a fear that "interreligious dialogue" might imply giving up a clear Christian identity and might enhance a syncretistic identity. This had led to a careful consideration of the relation between "gospel and culture" and a heightened awareness for the various forms of "cultural synthesis" that Christian religion has generated.

How can this – so often repeated – quest for identity and its ascertainment be understood and reflected in light of the apparently contradictory scepticism towards the idea of a consistent and coherent identity in the Cultural Turn? Where are the points of contact between persistent pronouncements of the continuity of denominational and religious identities and the perception of cultural amalgamation and fragmenting?

The presumptions and claims on identity in the Cultural Turn perspective and in ecumenical theology and dialogue do not necessarily contradict, but enrich and, yet, even challenge each other. Two aspects of "Christian identity" might illustrate this point – this list is not meant to be exhaustive:

Christian Identity is concrete identity

The anti-essentialism of the cultural studies neither naively implies that there is only the celebration of hybridity or the complete melange with no "I" and no "other" and, thus, no difference any more. Nor does it assume a simple coexistence of multiple identities. That is not the point. What is stressed is rather to become sensible to differences, ambivalence and heterogeneity, for the biographical and cultural disruptions and the uncertainty of continually changing identities.

This view entails critical-subversive potential as it questions seemingly homogenous entities and claims that the meaning of distinctive identities

---

[42] Zehner comments on the development in the time from Edinburgh (1910) to Chiang Mai (1977): it "documents the turn from a 'one-way street' in mission to the 'two-way traffic' of dialogue and, thus, a historical turn in the Ecumenical Movement," in: Zehner, Joachim, *Der notwendige Dialog. Die Weltreligionen in katholischer und evangelischer Sicht*, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn (Studien zum Verstehen fremder Religionen Bd. 3) 1992, p.65 (trans. CJ).

is continually redefined and restated. The identity of a person, tradition, denomination, religion or culture can only be assured in time and space.

Referring, for instance, to one of the crucial symbols of Christian faith and identity, the canon of the Bible,[43] the Cultural Turn perspective implies that this canon of scriptures, though it is a fixed, distinguishable entity, is not an entity with a fixed or self-explaining meaning. Rather, the meaning is open-ended and generated anew with every interpretation. The Bible as canon and as text is continually interacting with time and space and, thus, going through translation, transculturation and contextualization.

This presumption might evoke objections on behalf of Christians who claim that the Bible *is* the Word of God. Yet, this equation is prevalent, as Tinyiko Maluleke has demonstrated for the African context, in not only more obviously bibliological "schools", like in Byang Kato's theology, but also in the more "diluted" bibliology of John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Lamin Sanneh or Jesse J. Mugambi. "None of them", Maluleke states, "questions the validity of the equation: Bible = Word of God fundamentally".[44] The problem this "absolutization"[45] of the Bible creates is that its presumption of an extra-incarnate "Word of God" is blind to the fact that every reading and hermeneutical explanation of a biblical text, as well as the canon as a whole, is ideologically bound; and the presumed equation of Bible = Word of God is, because of its innate pretension of an ideology-free Bible, even more an ideological construction.[46]

This contradictory assumption of an ever-changing process of translation of the Bible does not, I argue, imply unlimited and indifferent liberalism regarding biblical hermeneutics; it does not induce an absolute relativism concerning the interpretation of the Bible. Rather: the reader is inevitably located in the context of a hermeneutic community and tradition and his or her location provides for continuity of the meaning generated, and fur-

---

[43] See Manzeschke, Arne, Kanon, Macht, Differenz, in: Allolio-Näcke/Kalscheuer/Manzeschke (2005), pp.86–103.

[44] Maluleke, Tinyiko Sam, Black and African Theologies in the New World Order. Time to Drink from our Own Wells, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* (JTSA) 96 (Nov. 1996), pp.3–19.

[45] See Oduyoye, Mercy Amba, *Daughters of Anowa. African Women and Patriarchy*, Orbis: Maryknoll 1995, p.174: "Throughout Africa, the Bible has been and continues to be absolutised: it is one of our oracles that we consult for instant solutions."

[46] Maluleke (1996), referring to Mosala, Itumeleng J., *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

thers identity. This interplay of Bible, reader and community of tradition facilitates a continuous re-lecture and re-interpretation of the Bible and a plurality of meaning, each sustaining Christian identity in a concrete time and place.[47]

The same is true for other symbols of Christian faith as well as for special denominational symbols that are held to be authoritative within a denomination. They are not transcendent, unconditional, or ideology-free but "clothed" and entangled with the immanent and conditional.[48]

Thus, Christian identity and its symbols as well as the identity of a denomination emerge in a dynamic and interacting-syncretistic process of ever renewing meaning. This process can be "simply" observed and described like other processes of religious continuity and change. Yet, from the theological-"inside" point of view what needs to be added is that it is no accident that Christian identity is dynamic and inclusive; rather, the continuous reshaping and renewing of Christian identity follows from "hermeneutic imperative" that is a specific Christian principle.[49]

Christian identity is shaped by interaction, not a product of strategies

Transcultural processes are not to be understood as planned, controlled, or supervised processes initiated by – for instance – a group of "transcultural agents". Rather, they happen rhizomatically[50] – criss-cross-wise: local agents take over elements from other cultures and transform them,

---

[47] For a telling illustration of how an unconcrete, timeless and placeless interpretation of the Bible furthers an ideology (here: colonialism and imperialism) see Dube, Musa, Savior of the World but not of This World: A Post-Colonial Reading of Spatial Construction in John, in: Sugirtharajah, R. S. (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1998, pp.118–135.

[48] One of the most prominent theological "ancestors" of the idea that the transcendent becomes known to us only in immanence and the unconditional in the conditional is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, see especially his letters from prison: Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, Widerstand und Ergebung. *Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft*, ed. by Eberhard Bethge, Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn [13]1985.

[49] See Sparn, Walter Helmut, Synkretismus ist die Zukunft der Religion. Hermeneutik, sakraler Raum und Realpräsenz, in: *Informationes Theologiae Europae* (Internationales ökumenisches Jahrbuch für Theologie) 9, Frankfurt a. M. u. a.: Peter Lang 2000, pp.285–300.

[50] The term "rhizome" originates from botany and is used to describe a usually underground, horizontal stem of a plant that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. Deleuze and Guattari had transferred the term into a frequently absorbed sociopolitical philosophical theory, see: Deleuze, Gilles/Guattari, Felix, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. According to Deleuze and Guattari a rhizome is characterized by connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity: Any point of a rhizome system can be connected to any other point, no point must come before another; thus, a rhizome is anti-hierarchical in structure. Further, a rhizome may be "shattered at a given spot, but will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines." (9) Summarized: "The rhizome is an accentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organizing memory or central automation, defined solely by a circulation of states." (21)

thereby creating something new. Again, the history of Christianity, its theological reflection, and contemporary Christian life are full of examples that give evidence to this phenomenon:

Lamin Sanneh, for instance, considers the uncontrollability and the anti-strategic process of generating Christian identities not only as a fact but as *the* vantage point for Christianity to become a lived and inculturated faith and praxis. The Christianizing of Africa went along with the Africanizing of Christianity because the inculturation of Christianity in Africa was not mainly manufactured by the missionaries but by vernacular speakers. In the process of "translating the message"[51] these indigenous experts, "behind the backs of the imperial masters", took control of the Bible and furthered its "indigenous assimilation".[52]

Similarly, the controversial debate about inculturation has led to the recognition that inculturation is neither a one-way process nor can the design of Christianity and Christian identity in a certain cultural context be prescribed. Inculturation, Mercy Amba Oduyoye states, is a process from below, not a process planned by an academic theological elite;[53] it is to be perceived in the everyday life of Christians and their stories.

The uncontrollable and rhizomatic genesis of Christian identities bears a subversive potential that opposes political or religious strategies and hegemonic prescriptions. Behind the backs of the powerful "hidden transcripts", a metaphor James Scott uses to describe subaltern discursive and subversive practices, are generated.[54] Beverly Haddad's study on and with women's groups in South Africa can be mentioned as a telling illustration of this theory: "Hidden" from the eyes of male dominated church-hierarchy Christian women gathering in women's groups have established a counter-hegemonic discourse; starting from their immediate need for survival what has been generated in these groups is a theology of survival that developed into a powerful and changing force within the concrete Christian community.

---

[51] Sanneh, Lamin, *Translating the Message. The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Orbis: Maryknoll 1989.

[52] Sanneh, Lamin, The Horizontal and the Vertical in Mission. An African Experience, in: *International Bulletin of Missionary Research 7*, 4 (October 1983), pp.165–171, 166.

[53] Oduyoye, Mercy Amba, African Culture and the Gospel. Inculturation from an African Woman's Perspective, in: Oduyoye, Mercy Amba/Vroom, Hendrik M., *One Gospel – Many Cultures. Case Studies and Reflections on Cross-Cultural Theology*, Amsterdam, New York: Blackwell 2003, pp.39–62, 48.

[54] Scott, James C., *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1990. For an illustration see: Haddad, Beverly G., Constructing Theologies of Survival in the South African Context. The Necessity of a Critical Engagement Between Postmodern and Liberation Theory, in: *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 14, 2 (1998), pp.5–18.

A final example of the un-regulated character of the formation of Christian identity is the phenomenon of double and multiple confessional or religious belongings. Votes like "I am Presbyterian during the week and Pentecostal on the weekends" correspond to postmodern and Post-Cultural-Turn theories of patchwork-, bricolage-, hobbyist-, crazy-quilt-[55] or, less euphoric, nomadic or flexible-fragmented[56] identities. Stuart Hall, former director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, describes the "postmodern subject" as follows:

> [It is] conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity becomes a 'movable feast' […] The subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent 'self'. Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about […] The fully unified, complete, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with – at least temporarily.[57]

On this condition, perceptions of a compact and indivisible identity and exclusivistic or monolithic views on, for instance, denominational identities, are not adequate any more. In light of cultural studies, the quest for identity in ecumenical controversies oscillates between a relic of a long time ago, a last refuge for coherent identities, the fear of losing a centre of stability regarding identity, a helpless search for new and alternative ways of defining a certain denominational identity, or as a "strategic essentialism".[58]

---

[55] See for "patchwork-identity" and "crazy-quilt-identity": Keupp, Heiner, Auf der Suche nach der verlorenen Identität, in: Keupp, Heiner/Bilden, Helga (eds.), *Verunsicherungen*, Göttingen: Hogrefe 1989, pp.47–69.

[56] See for instance Sennett, Richard, *The Corrosion of Character. The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, New York: W W Norton & Co. 1998.

[57] Hall, Stuart, The Question of Cultural Identity, in: Hall, Stuart/Held, David/Mc Grew, Tony (eds.), *Modernity and its Futures*, Milton Keynes: Polity Press/The Open University 1992, pp.273–316, 277.

[58] The term "strategic essentialism" was created by postcolonial-studies-scholar Gayatri Spivak: assuming that the endless deconstruction of identity might inhibit political action especially on the part of subaltern and minority groups Spivak suggests that a strategic deployment of the "subaltern identity" enables the subaltern to acquire a new consciousness as subject and not merely object of history: "It is in this spirit that I read *Subaltern Studies* against its grain and suggest that its own subalternity in claiming a *positive* subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times." Spivak, Gayatri C., Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing Historiography (1985), in: Landry, Donna/MacLean, Gerald (eds.), *The Spivak Reader. Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, New York, London: Routledge 1996, pp.203–253, 217. Spivak's suggestion risks that in the end the essentialism that had been constructed for strategic reasons will be manifested as "real" essentialistic imputation on certain groups; yet, under the mentioned reservation the "strategic essentialism" might be a model for Christian identity in, and this needs to be stressed, *real* minority situations.

Yet, more recently, ecumenical movement and theology have re-owned an aspect that responds to the rhizomatic dynamic and the plurality of identity: the pneumatological dimension of ecumenical dialogue.[59] The end of the "oblivion of the Holy Spirit", Hermann Brandt suggests, began at the 7th assembly of the WCC in Canberra. The assembly conveyed an "inconclusiveness" (*Unabgeschlossenheit*) and uncertainty that mirrors the work of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit has continually challenged and threatened the authority of the Bible, a fixed understanding of the dogma, and the order and institution of the church.[60]

The Holy Spirit is not to be reduced to a "totalizing-metaphysical, only speculative-trinitarian, abstract-mystical and irrational" theory, Michael Welker claims;[61] quite the contrary! The Holy Spirit is relational, dynamic, life- and experience centered, and – what comes even closer to the issue at hand: the Holy Spirit furthers dialogue, unanimity and unity, but not to a unity that forecloses differences. Rather, the "unity in the Spirit" encompasses and maintains "differences […] that do not contradict God's justice, mercy and cognition".[62]

Thus, the resurging pneumatological paradigm – or "turn" – with its emphasis on process, plurality, differences, encounter and uncontrollability contains a point of contact between postmodern scepticism regarding the idea of a coherent identity and the quest for identity in ecumenical controversies and, furthermore, the idea of the "unity" of the church.

Vernacular Ecumenism as Community of Sharing: Rethinking the "Unity of the Church"

Concepts of "the other" and "identity" are, as seen, interwoven, and build an interdependent relationship. The ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology have reflected, envisioned, and regulated this relationship by developing various models of the unity of the church. Responding to

---

[59] The rediscovery of the pneumatological dimension of ecumenical dialogue became explicit in the 7th assembly of the World Council of Churches in Canberra, 1991, on the theme "Come, Holy Spirit, Renew the Whole Creation", followed by the World Mission Conference in Athens, 2005, with the motto "Come, Holy Spirit, Heal and Reconcile" and various ecumenical publications.

[60] Brandt, Hermann, Ende der Geistvergessenheit. Das Thema der Vollversammlung des Ökumenischen Rates der Kirchen als pneumatologisches Signal – mit einem Rückblick auf «Canberra», in: *ZThK* 33, 4 (1991), pp.496–525.

[61] Welker, Michael, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*, Neukirchen-Vlyun: Neukirchener 1992, 11 (English: God the Spirit, Augsburg Fortress 1994) (Translation here: CJ).

[62] Welker (1992), p.33 (Translation: CJ).

shifts in the ecumenical vision of the unity to be achieved, diverse descriptions of the goal have substituted, complemented, or contradicted one another, such as the models "united, not absorbed", "a communion of communions", "reconciled diversity", "covenant", "sister churches", "organic union", "conciliar fellowship" and lately especially "koinonia", a concept that claims not to be a new model but rather a biblical framework and theological foundation of different models of unity.[63]

It is stressed that unity does not mean unifying, a giving up of the own distinctive identity, a melting together; to the contrary! But a not-unifying unity does not contradict – what in Cultural-Turn terminology would be called – a transcultural, transconfessional and therefore dynamic unity either. This transcultural vision came in view frequently in the last few years. For instance in the proposal for a "Global Christian Forum", that emerged in 1998 "in the context of the process of reflection on the Common Understanding and Vision of the WCC".[64] Its provisional purpose was stated as follows:

> […] to create an open space wherein representatives from a broad range of Christian churches and interchurch organizations, which confess the triune God and Jesus Christ as perfect in His divinity and humanity, can gather to foster mutual respect, to explore and address together common challenges.[65]

Transcultural unity also comes through in the recommendation of the "Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC" to create "ecumenical space" for "deepening encounter", the creation of "networks", and for the "breaking down of barriers".[66] This idea has been set into action, for instance, in the "synaxeis"[67] at the Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Athens/Greece, 2005, and in the "mutira os"[68] at the ninth assembly of the WCC in Porto Alegre,

---

[63] See Best, Thomas (ed.), *On the Way to Fuller Koinonia: Official Report of the Fifth World Conference of Faith and Order*, Geneva: WCC Publications 1994.

[64] *Van Beek, Huibert (ed.), A* Handbook of Churches and Councils. Profiles of Ecumenical Relationships, Geneva: WCC 2006, p.15.

[65] Van Beek (2006), p.15.

[66] *Final Report of the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC.* (http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/assembly/porto-alegre-2006/3-preparatory-and-background-documents/final-report-of-the-special-commission-on-orthodox-participation-in-the-wcc.html; 11/06).

[67] Synaxis is the Greek word for "gathering"; at the World Mission Conference in Athens the term "synaxeis" was used to signify "marketplaces of ideas and experience".

[68] Mutirão is a Portuguese word and means a place to gather and to do communal work together; in Porto Alegre the term signified places for the sharing of thoughts, ideas, to celebrate and for expositions.

2006. On the grassroots-level these ecumenical spaces have probably always existed. Transcultural unity comes through in "fresh ecumenical experiments [that] are", as Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary of the Reformed Church in America, states, "present today, but tend to be found on the periphery of established structures and institutions".[69]

There is a striking analogy between these "experiments" of transcultural unity envisioned and realized at the geographical and institutional periphery and the perception – and vision – of cultural-studies scholars, that in postmodern times communities are constituted through sharing:

> The community is neither a horizon, nor an end, nor an essence, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy had stated. It is made of and by the sharing; it understands the sharing to be infinitely finished (completed) in the other by the other, in you by me, in us by us. This surely cannot be a new groundwork for the community. But perhaps it indicates a new task with regards to the community: neither its reunion, nor its division, neither its assumption, nor its dispersion but its sharing. Perhaps the time has come to withdraw every logical or teleological founder of the community, to withdraw from interpreting our being together, […] We communicate in this sharing and we present ourselves in this sharing, 'since we are a dialogue and we are heard from one another' (Hölderlin).[70]

What can be observed in the "ecumenical spaces", as well as in Nancy's community of sharing, is a paradigm shift or – as paradigm shift might be associated too much with the generation of a new, hegemonic, scientific "mega narrative":[71] a *turn*. The community constituted through sharing with no really fixed goal, end, and essence says goodbye to the paradigm of evolution that had permeated various disciplines since the late 18th century – including ecumenical theology. While the evolutionary paradigm held that a community or nation or unity is continually developing and improving, the model of community through sharing is interested mainly in the here and now as well as in the "concrete other"; that

---

[69] Granberg-Michaelson, Wesley, The Future of Ecumenism in the 21st Century. October 21, 2005, Symposium hosted by His Holiness, Aram I
(http://www.oikoumene.org/index.php?id=1426&L=2%09%C2%9Dj%C3%88; 11/06).

[70] Nancy, Jean-Luc, Sharing Voices, in: Omiston, Gayle L./Schrift, Alan D. (eds.), *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, Albany: SUNY Press 1990, pp.211–259, 248.

[71] Bachmann-Medick (2006), pp.16–19.

means: the "other" who speaks and with whom one becomes involved through mutual relationship and through commitment.[72] The community, through sharing vis-à-vis concrete others as well as vis-à-vis its antipole, postmodern laissez-faire and randomness, furthers the growth of commitment as to what is pivotal here – the everyday-life or, in cultural studies turn terminology, culture as a "form of life", in which, for instance, "greeting behaviour and other forms of communication are considered to be more important than poems or symphonies".[73]

Thus, the farewell to ongoing evolutionary advancement and amelioration implies – in theological terminology – the recognition of the fullness of life and of unity already present, as well as a farewell to the idea that we can or should master the full truth (Oduyoye), and a welcome to ecumenic imperfectionism.

This leads to the title of the essay "Vernacular Ecumenism"; the term is an oxymoron, i.e.: a connection of two words that apparently contradict each other. For "vernacular" connotes an affiliation to a domain that is local, finite;[74] "ecumenism", with a contrasting etymology invokes an orientation to a world larger than one's own immediate *habitus*. How does one yoke them together? What does this oxymoronic juxtaposition generate? How can the vernacular, local, concrete community of sharing be related to the more global ecumenism and unity?

I deduced "Vernacular Ecumenism" from "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism", a term that was coined by literature and cultural studies scholar Homi Bhabha[75] and that belongs "to a family of concepts, all of which combine in similar fashion apparently contradictory opposites: cosmopolitan patriotism, rooted cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan ethnicity, working-class cosmopolitanism, discrepant cosmopolitanism".[76] In Bhabha's understanding vernacular cosmopolitanism has a very non-elitarian connotation:

---

[72] See Benhabib, Seyla, The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan Controversy and Feminist Theory, in: *Praxis International* 6 (1986), pp.38–60.

[73] Welsch (2005), p.334.

[74] The origins of the word "vernacular" lie in the term "verna" which etymologically denotes the language of slaves in Roman republics.

[75] Bhabha, Homi K., Unsatisfied: Notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, in: García-Moreno, Laura/Pfeiffer, Peter C. (eds.), *Text and Nation: Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities*, Columbia: Camden House 1996, pp.191–207.

[76] Werbner, Pnina, Vernacular Cosmopolitanism, in: *Theory Culture Society* 23, 2006, pp.496–498.

> […] what I am proposing is not a moralism of the local against the global, or a materialism of ever-increasing specificity against ever inflating generality. I am interested in cosmopolitan community envisaged in a *marginality*, even metonomy, that I find in Anthony Appiah's vision of a certain postcolonial translation of the relation between the patriotic and the cosmopolitan, the home and the world: 'It is because humans live best on a smaller scale that we should defend not just the state, but the country, the town, the street, the business, the craft, the profession … as circles among the many circles narrower than the human horizon, that are the appropriate spheres of moral concern'. It is precisely this border – narrower than the human horizon – that attracts me; this space that somehow stops short (not falls short) of the transcendent human universal, and for that very reason provides an ethical entitlement to, and enactment of, the sense of community.[77]

Thus, "vernacular cosmopolitanism" is not only an analytical category that explores processes, such as identity politics of national elites leading to the production of vernacularity and cosmopolitanism.[78] It is also a political theory and agenda that intends to produce critical knowledge via questioning the destructive and often hierarchical dichotomous either-or division between central canonical cultures and modernizing cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and everyday cultures or vernacular traditionalism, on the other.

"Vernacular ecumenism", understood and constructed this way, represents a condensed form of the proposals that the Cultural-Turn perspective provides for a rethinking of ecumenical theology. In scrutinizing the construction of a binary opposition between vernacular, concrete Christian communities, identities and local ecumenical activity, on the one hand, and global ecumenical reflections, activities, or organizations, on the other, the term re-opens the debate about the relation between "centre" and "periphery", "self" and "other" in the ecumenical movement.

There are lingering and nagging questions on the unity of the church evoked hereby that cannot be swept aside by installing "ecumenical spaces" or by stating that the concept of "the other" has radically changed. One of them implies the self-critical examination of whether the term "unity" obscures the fact that this unity is not a universally given ideal but

---

[77] Bhabha (1996), 195, quoting Appiah, Anthony, Loyalty to Humanity, in: *Boston Review* XIX.5 (Oct./Nov. 1994); see also: Sennett, Richard, Christian Cosmopolitanism, *Boston Review* XIX.5 (Oct./Nov. 1994).

[78] See Breckenridge, Carol A./Pollock, Sheldon/Bhabha, Homi/Chakrabarty, Dipesh (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism*, Duke: Duke University Press 2002.

rather a construction, most probably a "unity under western eyes". Like other concepts the concept of and quest for unity is not unideological or "innocent". Following the ethical and epistemological obligations Cultural Turn theories pose, ecumenical theology is called to unmask the "hidden" presumptions, and, therefore, to look to Christianity as it "was and is created at the margins, the boundary, the periphery", because here "the validity of all boundaries and peripheries" as well as the validity of the concepts of the unity of the church is challenged.[79]

---

[79] See Ward, Kevin, Mission Studies in Leeds, in: *British Association for Mission Studies 1996*, 2, quoted in Gerlof, Roswith, Editorial, in: *International Review of Mission* 89/354, 2000, pp.275–280, 278.