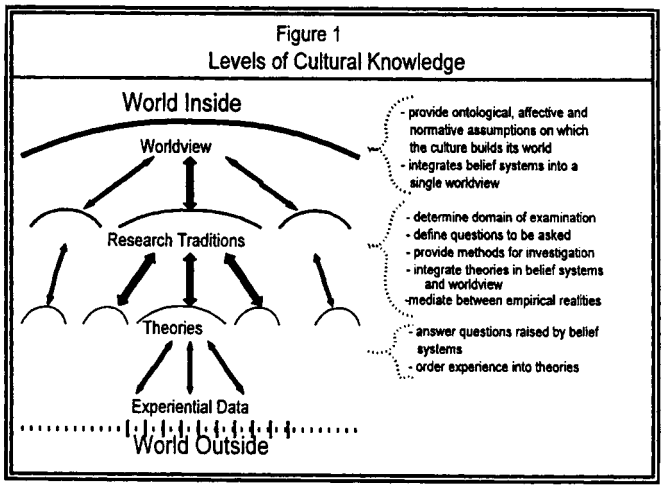
Missional Theology

Paul G. Hiebert and Tite Tiénou

In recent years, missiologists have increasingly drawn on the insights history and the social sciences provide for their work. One key question keeps arising: how can missions keep from becoming captive to the human sciences, and how can their findings be integrated into missions while keeping solid theological foundations? This problem of relating theology to science is not unique to missions. It underlies much of the discussion surrounding the inclusion of psychology in training ministers and Christian counselors, the integration of medical sciences and Christian healing, and the use of modern business sciences in the administration of churches and church institutions. Despite these discussions, a big chasm often exists between theology and the sciences.

At a deep level, the problem of integrating theology and sciences is a worldview issue (Hiebert 1994). It is due, in part, to our definitions and perceptions of what constitutes 'theology' and the 'sciences'. This article examines these and suggests avenues for a rapprochement between these two critical bodies of knowledge.



Larry Laudan (1977) classifies the sciences as `research traditions'--bodies of knowledge shared by communities of scholars seeking to understand the

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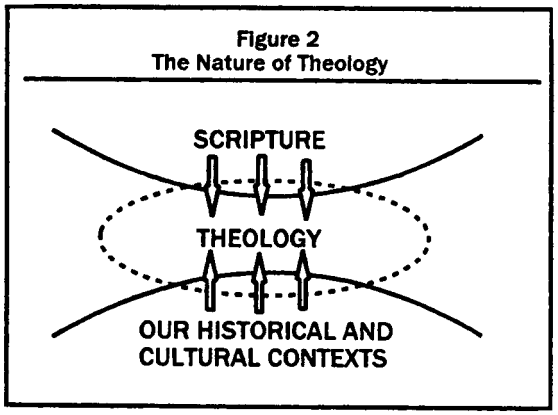
truth in their fields. Each research tradition is determined by: 1) the critical questions it seeks to answer, 2) the assumptions it makes about reality, 3) the body of data it examines, and 4) the methods it accepts as valid means of discovering answers (figure 1). Different answers or `theories' are offered to the key questions, and competing ones are debated until one or the other emerges as accepted doctrine until it is further questioned. For example, physics, as a research tradition, is the study of the building blocks of the material world, which it assumes to be real. It examines material objects using experiments, electron microscopes, ion chambers and other means to find answers to questions such as what are the basic components of matter, what are the major physical forces and how do these interact.



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WAYS OF DOING THEOLOGY

If theology is, indeed, a research tradition, how does this change our perception of it as a discipline? Before answering this, we need to clarify what we mean by theology. I am assuming here
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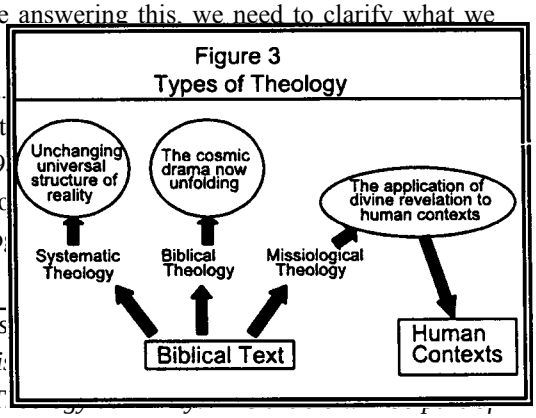

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remember, too, that there are great gulfs between biblical times and our times, between universal theories and the particulars of everyday life, and between synchronic theologies which examine the unchanging structure of reality and diachronic
theologies that study cosmic history. It is important in any theological reflection to work to bridge these differences.

An examination of literature shows that theology, like the sciences, is divided into different research traditions, each seeking to answer specific questions, making certain assumptions, and using different methods of research (figure 3). We will examine some of these types briefly.

Philosophical Theology

In the West, by theology we traditionally mean systematic theology which uses the assumptions, questions and methods of philosophy. It is important here to note that different cultures have developed different philosophical traditions built on other assumptions, questions and logics. We need to examine some of these by way of illustration.

Western Systematic Theology

One important research tradition in the west is systematic theology. This emerged in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Greek logic from the universities of the Middle East and Spain (Finger 1985, 28-21).[10] At first, systematic theology was seen as the "queen of the sciences," but over time it became one discipline among others in theological education-alongside biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, history, missions and other disciplines (Young 1998, 78-79).

The central question systematic theology seeks to answer is: "What are the

[10] It is based on the resurgence of Platonic realism that gave rise to scholasticism and later the humanistic school of Erasmus and culminating in the Enlightenment school. For a historical summary of its emergence see Fuller 1997). See also G. R. Evans, A. E. McGrath and A.D. Gallway (1986, particularly pp. 62-173).

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unchanging universals of reality?" It assumes that there are basic, unchanging realities, and if these are known, we can understand the structure of reality.[11] It also assumes that ultimate truth can be known, and is ahistorical and acultural - literally is true for everyone everywhere. It uses the abstract, digital, algorithmic logic and rhetoric of Greek philosophy, which are propositional in nature. It rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.[12] Its goal is to construct a single systematic understanding of ultimate truth [in modern terms a Grand Unified Theory] that is comprehensive, logically consistent and conceptually coherent.[13] To arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cognition from feelings and values, because the latter are thought to introduce subjectivity into the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental elements and categories in Scripture. It gives us a standard against which to compare our own understandings, and helps us understand the biblical worldview. We need to understand the ultimate nature of reality as God sees it in order to test our own human understandings of reality.

Systematic theology has its limitations. Because it sees ultimate reality in structural, synchronic terms, it does not adequately deal with the cosmic drama or plot in Scripture. History and narrative events in that drama are out of focus. It must deal with changes in God's attitudes as surface phenomena, not intrinsic to God's ultimate nature.

Because systematic theology focuses on universals and an ascent to knowledge through contemplation divorced from everyday life, it does not tell us how to deal with the particular beliefs and practices found in different cultures, or the

[11] This is rooted in the Newtonian assumption that everything is composed of basic building blocks and put together as a machine. This view leads to determinism and a engineering approach to reality based on technological solutions. It also leads to the division of the sciences into disconnected disciplines which creates a division of labor and absolutizes the gap between experts and laity.

[12] An algorithm is a formal logical process which, if carried out correctly, produces the right answer. Algorithmic logic is sometimes called ‘machine’ logic because it is the basis on which calculators and computers work, and can be done faster and more accurately by these than by humans. For an introduction to fuzzy categories and fuzzy logic (see Hiebert 1994, 107-136).

[13] Peter Lombard founded systematic theology when he sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent and synthetically consistent account of all the major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate the rational credibility of Christian faith (Finger 1985, 19) . Lombard's Scentences, written in the 1140's, provided the form of much of later Medieval and Reformation Theology (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 71, 132).

change, flux and the particularlity of human contexts and history. Its focus on rational coherence and consistency can turn it into an intellectual exercise remote from life's real issues. This also leads to the modern enlightenment distinction between `pure' and `applied' theology, and the relegation of the latter to a position of lesser importance because it deals with the subjective and changing messiness of human lives.

In its critical search for objective truth, systematic theology separates cognition from affectivity and valuation, because the latter introduce subjective dimensions into knowledge. This has led to the Platonic fallacy of equating knowledge with virtue, or of making theology an intellectual exercise divorced from feelings, morals and worship.[14] This divorce of theology from ethics can be seen in most seminary curricula and graduation criteria, which are strong in the emphasis on truth and weak in their emphasis on moral character for graduation.[15]

The search for a comprehensive system based on algorithmic logic implies that humans can grasp the fullness of truth with clarity. It leaves little room for the ambiguities of life, the mysteries that transcend human comprehension, and wisdom that can deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of a rapidly changing world.[16] It

[14]Nicholas Adams and Charles Elliott examine this dichotomy, and propose a solution (19##). Moonjang Lee, an Asian theologian, notes that in modern theologies - both systematic and biblical - the individual is taught to read texts critically, and humans are the judges of truth (19##). He calls for an Asian approach to theology in which readers come to hear the truth as it is revealed to them through the Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

[15]This disappearance of moral curriculum is most evident in modern American universities. In 1896 Maine Agricultural College, which became the University of Maine the next year, defined its task as "It shall be the duty of Trustees, Directors and Teachers of the College to impress upon the minds of the students, the principles of morality and justice, and a sacred regard for truth; love of their country; humanity and universal benevolence; sobriety, frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and all other virtues that are ornaments of human society." Today this sounds archaic. Universities are no longer known for teaching "sobriety, frugality, chastity, and temperance."

[16]Larry Laudan (1996) argues that positivism sought to build comprehensive systems of certain knowledge on the basis of algorithmic logic, but that current studies show, on the basis of this logic, that

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is built on linear logic acting on well formed categories and on the law of the excluded middle, and cannot deal with the 'fuzzy' sets and 'fuzzy logic' of human experiences (Zadeh 1965). It also tends to be deterministic and reductionist in nature.

Systematic theology often has a weak sense of mission. "Systematic theology arose as a branch of academic study pursued in universities and not primarily as a task of the church involved in the world at large (Finger 1985, 20-21)." Missiology is not a division in systematic theology, and systematic theology is not the driving force behind missions.[17] Missiology tends, in fact, to be relegated to the category of practical disciplines.

Finally, systematic theology was itself a product and reflection of western intellectual history. Calvin, Luther and their successors appealed not only to *sola scriptura*, but logic, rhetoric and other methods available to them to shape their theologies. In so doing, they allowed scholasticism in at the back door. G. Ebling notes,

> What was the relation of the systematic method here [in the post-Reformation] to the exegetical method? Ultimately it was the same as in the medieval scholasticism. There, too, exegesis of holy scripture went on not only within systematic theology, but also separately alongside of it, yet so that the possibility of a tension between exegesis and systematic theology was a priori excluded. Exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology (1963, 82-83).

Systematic theologians need to examine the cultural and historical contexts in which they formulate their theologies to discern the biases that these might introduce in their understanding of Scripture. All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in worldviews that shape the way they see things. There are no culture-free and history-free theologies. We all read Scripture from the perspectives of our particular context. This does not mean we can know no truth. It does mean that we must never equate our theology with Scripture, and we need to work in hermeneutical communities to

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these systems are all under substantiated. The instrumentalism that is currently replacing positivism has no new logic to offer, and, therefore, ends up in relativism. Laudan argues that we need to return to a broader concept of `wisdom' which enables us to make valid decisions regarding truth on the basis of partial and ofttimes conflicting findings.

[17] Few trained as theologians go into missions, and many schools with strong departments of theology have no spirit of missions. On the other hand, all missionaries, of necessity, must become theologians.

check our personal and cultural biases.[18]

Different human contexts also raise different questions. Donald Shultz writes,

> The time is also past when Western theologians had all the "definitive answers". Asian theologians now bear the responsibility and willingly accept it. The latter have discovered that Western definitive answers do not automatically fit the Asian situation and often answer questions not asked in Asia (Shultz 1989, 23).

Nonwestern Philosophical Theologies

Today, theologians in nonwestern churches are formulating theologies. Many of these are philosophical theologies based on assumptions and methods different from western philosophy. For example, in Africa one central theological question is: "What are the ultimate relationships in the cosmos?" This question is reflected in African worldviews and philosophies: "things stand in relation to one another by a unio and ofica (Sundermeier 1973)." Equilibrium must be maintained. Meaning in many African philosophies is not gained by understanding for a logical progression, but by grasping the relation of the parts to the whole.

Nonwestern theologians are also using other logics to construct their systems. African theologians often use extrinsic relational sets and concrete functional logic rather than intrinsic digital categories and abstract analytical logic. Indian theologians use analogical categories and 'fuzzy' logic. Each of these logics helps us gain new insights in the Scriptures, and force us to ask what are the logical systems the writers used.

[18] Scholasticism is a particular methodological and philosophical development in the West. Its attractiveness lies in the possibility of constructing a scientific theology resting on well-defined presuppositions and methods, whose logical coherence would commend respect and attention. The influence of Scholasticism on Reformed theology "effectively destroyed the delicate balance of Calvin's theology through [the] desire for systematization and internal consistency (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 155)."

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Biblical Theology

A second theological tradition to emerge in the West was Biblical Theology. Reacting to the scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. He saw theology as a practical science, and stressed experience and the illumination of the Spirit (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 170-71). His central question was, "What did the biblical passages mean at the time of those writing them, and what lessons can we learn from them today?" In so doing he advocated a return to the Bible as history, and an emphasis on the unfolding of the cosmic story.

Biblical theology examines the narrative nature of Scripture. It assumed that the heart of revelation is historical in character – that there is a real world with a real history of change over time which is 'going somewhere', and which has meaning because it has a plot and culminates in God's eternal reign.[19] Biblical theology argues that this view of truth as cosmic story is fundamental to the Hebrew worldview and to an understanding of Scripture. To describe ultimate reality, the Jews told and reenacted in rituals the acts of God in their lives. Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us that God is not only the ground of all existence, but all of history is a revelation of his existence and reign (1968).

Biblical theology uses the questions, methods and assumptions of modern historiography.[20] It uses the temporal logic of antecedent and consequent causality, and accepts teleological explanations in which God and humans act on the basis of intentions. Biblical theology is important because it gives us the diachronic dimension of a biblical worldview. It gives meaning to life by helping us see the cosmic story in which human history and our biographies are embedded.

Biblical theology also has its limits. It focuses on diachronic meaning, leaving the unchanging structure of reality in our peripheral vision. It focuses on past biblical history, not on present events. It looks at the universal story, not the particular lives of individual and communities outside the biblical narrative. It does not directly help us apply biblical truth to the problems we face in specific cultures and persons today. If we are not careful, it can become a study unto itself with little

[19] We use the term 'plot' here in the way Paul speaks of the `mystery' now revealed to us (Rom. 16:25, Eph. 1:9, 3:3, 6:19, Col. 1:26). This is to say that there is real history, that it is moving in a direction and not changing randomly, and that behind it is a 'plot' or drama - a cosmic story that gives it meaning because it is 'going somewhere'. For us it is the story of God creating a perfect world, redeeming the lost who turn in faith to him, and restoring creation to perfection in which all will bow before Christ the Lord.

[20] For G. Vos, Biblical Theology is the "History of Special Revelation" (1948, 23). Biblical Theology is Historical, Systematic Theology is logical.

relevance to us today. We must focus on the cosmic story, but we need to remember that God speaks to us through Scripture in the context of concrete settings of human and personal history.

Biblical theology is important because it helps us develop a biblical worldview, but like systematic theology, it has not been a strong motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

Tropological Theology

As Western Christians, particularly those of us in academic pursuits, we have been deeply influenced by Greek and Hebrew thought. We find it harder to understand Eastern Orthodox theology, which is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental and iconic nature of truth. The central question Eastern Orthodoxy addresses is, "How can we know complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic and human reason?" Here `know' is includes cognitive and affective knowledge and response-the comprehension of and response to the knowledge of truth and the experience of mystery in the presence of God who transcends all our categories.

Tropological theology is based on tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966). It recognizes that ordinary discursive words and logics are not enough to speak of transcendent realities. We must use tropes such as metaphors, types, parables and icons, and nondiscursive symbols - words, pictures and other symbols which point to transcendent realities by way of analogy, allegory, type, narrative, and ritual.

Tropological theology has a long history in Christianity. Origen and other early Church Fathers made wide use of allegory in their theologies, seeking to understand the Scriptures and apply it to human realities. During the middle ages, stained glass portals of biblical stories served as theological lessons to oral laity, and in many parts of the world theology is done in songs, in what John Carman calls ‘lyric theology’. This is the theology of the Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

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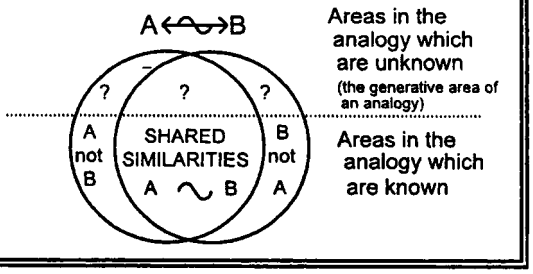
Tropological theology is generative in nature (figure 4). It recognizes that there is great mystery in seeking to understand God and his infinite nature. Consequently, there is room for the unknown. It uses the logic of analogy which recognizes that (1) in some ways two entities, A and B, are like, (2) in some ways A and B are different (areas in which the analogy does not hold), and (3) there are areas in which it is not clear whether there is a similarity or not. It is this area of uncertainty that generates new insights as the mind explores the power and limits of the analogy.

Tropological theology is doxological.[21] It is not an abstract reflection on the nature of truth for the sake of truth itself. It sees theological reflection as an essential element in worship. Christopher Hall (1998, 67) writes, "For the [early church] fathers, the Bible was to be studied, pondered, and exegeted within the context of prayer, worship, reverence, and holiness." Ideas, feelings and values were integrated in the act of worship. Tropological theology assumes that we must use all our senses - sight, touch, hearing and smell – to experience truth. It calls for emotional and moral involvement with truth that leads to godly character in the theologian. For example, among the Russian Orthodox, the spiritual leader must be "knowledgeable in the Holy Scriptures, just, capable of teaching his pupils, full of truly unhypocritical love for all, meek, humble, patient and free from anger and all other passions - greed, vainglory, glutton . . ." (Oleksa 1987,14). In other words, one cannot trust a brilliant scholar if he or she is arrogant, unfaithful, impatient or deceitful.

Figure 4
The Generative Nature of Analogies



One of the limits of topological theologies is their application to human settings. Christians can learn to see all their lives as worship to God, but how does the Gospel relate to the secular world that rejects God in its daily existence? Like western systematic and biblical theologies, they do not deal well with the fuzziness and ambiguities of concrete human life.

[21] Doxology is not absent from Western systematic theology. Geoffrey Wainwright authored a textbook entitled *Doxology* (1980) with the purpose of seeking a "liturgical way of doing theology." The doxological dimension of theology is not, however, a major concern in much of systematic theology.

Missional Theology

To communicate the Gospel in human contexts, we need a fourth way of doing theology - a way of thinking biblically about our lives here and now, a way of dealing with the contemporary, particular problems we face in missions.

Missionaries, by the very nature of their task, must become theologians. Mission, Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago, "is the mother of theology." It began as "an accompanying manifestation of the Christian missions, " and not as "a luxury of the world-dominating church" (1971, 189-190). David Bosch notes, "Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (1991, 124)." Elwood points out (1980, 75), "Asian theology cannot afford to be purely academic and philosophical, but rather it is valid only if it is produced not primarily in between piles of books, but in the "field" where it is put to the test every day."

The question arises, how do mission theologians do theology, and how is this different from other ways of doing theology? Their central question is: "What is God's Word to humans in their particular situations?" Mission theologians assume that mission is the central theme in God's acts on earth, and that all Christians are to be a part of this mission. They also assume that all humans live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the Gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. Eugene Peterson writes,

> This is the gospel focus: you are the man; you are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it's always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it's always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you've done; whom I am and what I've done (1997).

The task of the mission theologian is to translate and communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularity of their lives, so that it may transform them and their cultures into what God intends for them to be.

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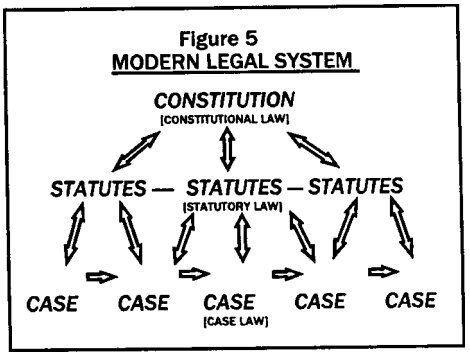
Missional theology seeks to build the bridge between Biblical revelation and human context. Missional theology, or, according to David Bosch, missionary theology (1995, 36) constantly deals with matters of death and life, God and idols. Missionary theology also seeks to bridge the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, the Christian intellectual elite and the people.

The logic of missional theology is that used in modern common law, particular as this has been developed in England and the United States. In the United States there are three levels of law: constitutional law, statutory law, and case law (Romantz, and Vinson, 1998. Figure 5). The Constitution is the unchanging foundation on which the legal system is built. Constitutional law examines statutory and case laws to see if any violate the Constitution. If they do, they are declared invalid. Statutory laws are laws passed by legitimate government bodies such as Congress, state governments and government agencies. They seek to interpret constitutional principles in a changing world. For example, federal agencies determine what is private property with the introduction of new technologies and information. Case laws are the legal guidelines that emerge out of legal rulings in precedent cases on specific instances. Judges are bound by the principle of *stare decisis* which calls for them to make their judgments in accord with the legal findings in the past of judges on similar cases, except where such precedents can be shown to be unconstitutional.



In missional theology, Systematic Theology plays the role of constitutional law. It lays the fundamental foundations in which all reflections regarding specific human cases must take place. Biblical Theology and church creeds and confessions play the role of statutory law. They show how the universal principles revealed in Scripture have been interpreted by God's people in an ever changing world. Biblical Theology is definitive, because it is part of divine revelation and shows us how God manifest his being and character in human history. The theological definitions of the Church are corporate attempts to extend that application of divine principles to the world around it. These findings must be taken seriously, but they are not definitive in the sense that Biblical theology is. Missional Theology plays the role of modern case law. It seeks to apply these in the infinitely diverse and particular situations of human life. It draws on Systematic and Biblical theologies, and on precedent cases in the life of the church - on how

other Christians have ruled in similar situations.

Like common law, missional theology begins by a careful study of the specific case at hand-the participants, the events and the sociocultural and historical context. They study the participants, events and socicultural and historical context using empirical analysis and reason to organize their findings. This provides them with their own understanding of the problem in which they seek to understand the world as the people whom they serve understand it. They must also seek to discover the categories, logic and culture of the people involved, for these have deeply informed their behavior. This emic analyses help them see the world as the participants in the case see it, but they do not provide us a comprehensive understanding of human realities, nor a bridge for inter-cultural communication. Missional theologians must take a second step and compare different cultures in order to provide a metacultural 'etic' grid that enables them to translate between cultures. In this step the methods of the human sciences and history, among others, enable missional theologians to develop broader generalizations and theories about humans, and their cultures and histories based on careful comparisons.

Having studied the case, missional theologians, like the judge in modern law, examines constitutional, (i.e. systematic theology), statutory (i.e. biblical theology and church history), and case (i.e. precedent cases) laws as these apply to the case at hand. They turn to Scripture to throw light on the problems they face in specific human settings. They do so by examining Scriptures using the questions, categories, assumptions and logic they bring with them. In the process, they must take another critical step, namely, they must examine and change their own questions, categories, assumptions and logic in the light of biblical revelation.

Missional theologians must then evaluate the human situation in the light of biblical truth and the history of how the church has interpreted that truth in specific situations, and pass judgment on the issues under investigation and prescribes a course of action.[22]

[22]For a full discussion of this process see "Critical Contextualization" (Hiebert 19##). For an application of it to issues raised in folk religions see *Understanding Folk Religion* (Hiebert, Shaw and

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Missional theologians must go beyond the role of modern judges. They are part of the church, the community of people they judge. They must seek to help the church and the people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. This is a process of transformation that includes individuals, and corporate social and cultural systems. We cannot expect people simply to abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. They can only move from where they are by an ongoing process of transformation.

Because missional theology is based on systems not linear logic, the missional theologian begins either with questions emerging out of Scripture, or out of human contexts. Each leads to the other in a hermeneutical spiral of translation and transformation.

One strength of missional theology is its focus on mission. It takes humans seriously, in the particularity of their histories, societies and cultures. It integrates cognition, affectivity, evaluation in their response to biblical truth, and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, nor as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs and feelings that lead to response and, obedience to the call of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology, and sees ministry as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

This approach also recognizes that as human we all live in and are shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts, and we can only begin with our existing systems of thought. Recognizing this, missional theologians consciously reflect on and alter their questions, assumptions, methods and theories in the light of revelation. This reflection needs to be done by the community of theologians - including systematic, biblical and tropological theologians, because they can help correct one another's biases. Similarly, this hermeneutical community should involve theologians from different cultures to correct cultural biases.

COMPLEMENTARITY

How do these theologies relate to one another? The Enlightenment project sought to build one Grand Unified Theory (GUT) which integrated all knowledge into one comprehensive system. Today we know that that is not possible. Our human minds are finite and cannot comprehend the full measure of even all truth about nature, let alone of an infinite God. Moreover, Gödel pointed out the limits of human knowledge systems: they can be two but not all of the following: 1) powerful [able to explain many things]; 2) logically consistent [have no internal contradictions], and 3) self-contained [needing no explanations external to the system].

Tienou, 1999).

Today, there is a growing awareness of ‘complementarity’ as a way of relating different but overlapping understandings of reality. Just as an architect makes different blueprints for the same building - structural, electrical, plumbing and so on, and as planners use different maps to map a city - roads, population density, zoning and so on, so we as humans need to look at reality from different perspectives and through different lenses. Different theologies throw different light on the nature of God, and his works and revelation.

We need systematic theology to help us understand the questions, assumptions, categories and logic found in Scripture regarding the structure of reality, knowing that we bring to the task the methods of Greek thought. We need biblical theology to help us understand the cosmic story unfolding in Scripture, the `mystery' now revealed to us. We need iconic theology in order to transform our theologizing into worship. We need missional theology to communicate the transforming Gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves. We need to make theological reflection central to mission. We also need to view mission as integral to theology.

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