



Formation Experiences in the Search for God and in Reciprocal Listening

Ideas for Theological Reflection in Support
of Pastoral Practices
in Intercultural Communities/Churches/Societies*

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Abstract

Starting from her own experience as a pastor and formator for the *Essere Chiesa Insieme* (Being Church Together) project of the Evangelical Churches of Italy, which welcomes migrant evangelical brothers and sisters, especially from various African countries, a case study is presented recounting the liberation of a Ghanaian widow that was experienced and celebrated within the community. The event evolved from the challenges and hopes for new approaches and the need for new skills, becoming a true intercultural workshop. In this short contribution some ideas for theological reflection are outlined, in support of updated pastoral practices in pluri-ethnic and pluri-cultural religious communities and churches. They can, however, also be applied in some way to multicultural congregations that wish to become intercultural. The challenge and effort involved in learning about these paths in itself holds the prophetic promise of healing and transformation. The LINFA intercultural seminars and the Master of Theology and Diakonia from an Intercultural Perspective, are introduced as examples of appropriate courses of study and as an endeavor of mutual formation, with an exchange of experiences and knowledge.

Keywords

Multicultural religious communities – Displacement – Awareness – Sharing – Mutual transformation – Prophecy

After graduating in Protestant Theology from the University of Heidelberg, **Anne (Annegret) Zell** was ordained as a pastor in 1993. In 1995, she moved from Germany to Italy and has since been registered as a Waldensian pastor with the Tavola Valdese. She has ministered in the Waldensian Valleys and in the Methodist Churches in Verbano, where she collaborated in setting up a home for immigrant families. She then became pastor of the Waldensian Evangelical Church in Milan, also involved in the Council of Christian Churches and the Forum of Religions. Finally, for more than 10 years she led the Waldensian Evangelical Church of Brescia, a multicultural community with a majority of believers from various African countries. For years she has been collaborating in the integration project "Essere Chiesa Insieme" of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy,

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promoting and accompanying intercultural training courses. In order to improve her own pastoral training and her ability to listen and mediate between different people, she achieved the first level of 'Clinical Pastoral Training', took part in a cultural exchange project between women ministers with a fellow pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Togo and a two-month internship in a church of the RCA (Reformed Church of America) in Holland, MI. She is currently pastor of the Evangelical Waldensian Church in Como, member of the advisory board for migration of the CCPE (Communion of Protestant Churches in Europe) and coordinator of the Master's in Theology and Diakonia from an intercultural perspective at the Valdese Faculty of Theology in Rome. She also regularly collaborates in the guidance of candidates for pastoral ministry and in the training of young intercultural mediators.

1

Introduction and contextualization

Here I would like to offer some ideas for theological reflection in support of pastoral practices (for people who provide a service or carry out a ministry) in intercultural communities, churches and congregations. I am not primarily a formator or instructor in intercultural training courses, but first and foremost an evangelical pastor. Although consecrated in one of Germany's large regional Protestant churches, I was then called to carry out my ministry in the Waldensian Evangelical Church in Italy, in various communities marked by issues related to minority groups and diaspora, but also striving to be a church, an intercultural community.

Beginning in the 1990s, in fact, the Waldensian and Methodist churches in the northeast, as well as in the large cities, have received the arrival of migrant evangelical brothers and sisters (mostly from Ghana and other African countries, but also from the Philippines or Latin-American countries) as both a challenge and a hope. Will "Being Church Together" be possible? In other words, will it be possible to provide more than just a place and a time for various groups and "their cult", and not live more or less undisturbed in separate compartments? Will we be able to celebrate together, in different languages and spiritual expressions, mutually accept, listen and dialogue with each other, in order to overcome misunderstandings and conflict?

In a certain sense, our churches have become a sort of laboratory, so to speak, or intercultural construction site¹; a junction of the faithful with different stories and sensibilities, but also with prejudices, shadows, and wounds. Yearning for a sense of belonging, they also need to safeguard their own roots. This is a context, as Davide Zolletto explains, "of high sociocultural complexity"².

It is from the context of this ambitious but also complex project and process (considered a worthy undertaking by the Protestant sister churches in Europe, which are inspired by the Italian experience) of "Being Church Together" that the need arises to create specific training courses. We must seek new paths of theological study and explore other approaches to pastoral care – but this is not all.

2

A break and attempts to repair it (a case study)

In his article *Interkulturelle Theologie*³, Volker Küster, professor of Comparative Religion and Missiology at the University of Mainz, describes a radical epistemological break between contextual theologies and Western academic theology. He also refers to the official declaration of the first conference of EATWOT, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, which was held in 1976.

This "break", this crisis that forces us to look at things differently, is something I understood by experiencing it myself first hand and finding myself ill-equipped and inadequate as a pastor to answer the cry for help from one of the members of our

church, who is originally from Ghana. I would like to begin here, from the context of my ministry experience, from this moment of both crisis and awareness. By telling the story of my encounter with Rose (her name has been changed), I will be able to sketch out some paths of reflection to investigate, often in question form, on the necessity for intercultural theological and pastoral training.

The case study: Rose, newly widowed, asks me, her pastor, for a prayer session for liberation and healing. "I need deliverance and healing, pastor, come to my house, pray with me, or my husband will keep haunting me".

Her request bewilders me.

What is the context? Even though I am not in Ghana, but in a big city in Lombardy, in a Waldensian church, I am invited – not to say obliged – by Rose's request to go there, to travel elsewhere, to her, to her world, feeling her wounds and fears and understanding her need for healing and hope for liberation. Shifting or allowing yourself to be shaken off base is necessary, as the British theologian Michael N. Jagessar stresses using the expression, "displaced God talk"⁴; to speak of God from other places. Equally essential, however, is the respect for boundaries/limits that cannot be crossed: Belonging, not melting. The need to belong and participate should not involve the risk of (con)fusion, losing your identity.

I understand in part.

– *What is the request and at the same time, what is expected of me, the pastor?* The woman attributes an authority to me that I struggle to recognize in myself: Taming spirits, proclaiming healing? (The authority is really from the Word, of which I am minister). Beginning with the awareness of the bias of my point of view due to my Western theological education, for example, towards a certain biblical interpretation, etc., I recognize the need for mediation and teamwork. In this particular case I needed assistance, and I was supported, without being divested of my role, by a Ghanaian colleague, the Presbyterian pastor Elymas Newell, who was familiar with haunting and healing⁵. The key words here are reciprocity and complementarity.

Becoming aware of needing resources, of other charismas.

I start from what we have in common.

– I feel then that we need to start from the vulnerability, the wounds, the sense of feeling lost and from the need to heal, to be liberated, for new possibilities of life. The pandemic has forced us to recognize our fragility and precariousness. At the same time, however, it has also revealed and accentuated inequality and injustice; for example, with respect to access to vaccines and health care in general. Of course, traumas and wounds, both individual and of the entire community, are different. They are narrated – or silenced – differently. Nevertheless, with Amélie Adamavi-Aho Ekué, a Togolese theologian, I am certain that from there, from the wounds, we must begin anew towards an intercultural and contextual theology⁶. We must try to embrace and connect the diverse texts/narrations/cultures and admit that we know the truth only in part and need another viewpoint, another story, while respecting and supporting differences and even disagreement. This agreeing to disagree, or rather, the agreement on the possibility of having different and conflicting opinions while still maintaining fellowship, can be of help especially when facing thorny ethical questions.

Agreement on the possibility of having different and conflicting opinions while remaining in communion with one another.

3

Some open questions (and no conclusion)

- *Developing intercultural aptitude is therefore necessary. But how?* The experiences of the LINFA⁷ intercultural training seminars from the FCEI (Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy) and the Master of Theology and Diakonia from an Intercultural Perspective at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology⁸, are endeavors of reciprocal formation, grassroots, with the exchange of experience and knowledge. It is not a course “for” faith leaders, or religious leaders from other cultures to facilitate integration, but a course of study “with”, valuing all resources. Recognizing a) the limits of one’s own knowledge/education as well as b) the resources of other people, makes the boundaries between instructors and students fluid; it invites dialogue, reciprocity and mediation and it requires teams who complement one another. These are just some of the possible paths and endeavors⁹.
- *Is the idea and the project of intercultural theological training for everyone? Or is it essentially ours (Western theologians); our need and attempt to remedy, recover and repair?* This uncomfortable question also applies to the “Being Church Together” project of the Evangelical Churches of Italy mentioned above. For example, Lutherans have founded “ethnic” churches of German language and culture in Italy. On the other hand, we expect our Ghanaian brothers and sisters to be open to inter-culturalism, while perhaps they need to pray and sing in Twi, to cultivate their own language and preserve their roots. The discussion remains open.
- *Many universities have created “intercultural theology programs”* (which were sometimes former institutes or programs of Missiology or something similar) and institutions for intercultural training. But I ask: shouldn’t we aim instead to permeate and reform all theological thought and teaching, in a radical change of setting? As a result, shouldn’t we endeavor to transform the very structure of our churches, which have fallen behind on issues concerning the imbalance of power and areas for participation?

4

On the horizon

Even while aiming towards the most intercultural theology possible and having welcoming pastoral practices, without borders, which seek to reconcile, heal and instill empowerment...we will not be the ones to put all the broken pieces back together again and heal the wounds. They will remain painfully visible.

The horizon, which transcends our limits and which expands beyond borders, is not ours, but God’s and of His promise of healing and salvation, of life in abundance, of walls torn down and enmities reconciled. At times, though, surprisingly and by pure grace, this horizon opens up in the midst of our labors, defeats and doubts in the here and now and it transforms us; as with Rose, or thanks to Rose and her hope for deliverance.

For this reason, in conclusion, I would like to return to her story. In the end, we prayed at her house in various languages (again, together with the Ghanaian pastor Newell). We taped the words, “I’m washed with Jesus’ blood”, on her front door as a confession of faith and assurance of protection. Then during Sunday worship in the Waldensian church, together with the whole community, when the promise of liberation (from the past and from the bonds of her husband: “He’s gone, he’s not here...”) and a new life (symbolized by the gift of new, very colorful clothing) was publicly proclaimed, the horizon opened. Other women, and not only the Ghanaians, laughed and cried, receiving (this is what they said), deliverance, closure, and a promise of a new beginning, new paths, and new horizons for their own stories of separations and complicated relationships. The power of the word “liberation”¹⁰, announced within a rite that was rich in cultural significance but translated and made understandable,

was able to cross boundaries and allowed others to experience empowerment and transformation as well.

Doing theology in an intercultural way involves harder work¹¹. Being a pastor in an intercultural context is challenging; it requires humility, self-criticism and the courage for trial and error even before specific training concepts. However, it carries with it the prophetic promise of transformation, of healing and of deliverance¹².

The LINFA Project (*Laboratorio Interculturale di Formazione e Accoglienza*) Intercultural training workshop

LINFA is a program that supports intercultural growth in communities opening themselves up to new arrivals and encourages the process of hospitality, cultural exchange and integration. It aims to build the unity of the Church despite linguistic and cultural barriers. LINFA was created by the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy (FCEI) to face a historical fact: One third of Italian evangelism is made up of immigrants.

Promoted by the commission, “Studies, Dialogue, and Integration – Being Church Together” of the FCEI and in collaboration with the Baptist Evangelical Christian Union of Italy, the Waldensian and Methodist Churches, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the Waldensian Faculty of Theology, the Pentecostal Faculty of Religious Sciences, and the Evangelical Youth Federation of Italy (FGEI), LINFA is open to all active members of the participating evangelical churches, whether Italian or foreign. It offers a hybrid course of study, including intercultural exegeses, comparative ecclesiology, the history and development of missions, conflict mediation, group dynamics and techniques of cultural outreach. The methodology of the workshop – whose activities will be conducted in Italian – is cooperative learning, a method which favors shared reflection and study, woven into working in the local communities.

<https://www.fcei.it/linfa/>; <https://archive.is/xylKt>

Theology and Diakonia from an Intercultural Perspective – Master’s degree (level 1)

Migratory movements and globalization have brought people who were once far away near, with their own expressions of faith and spirituality and with their own version of Christianity. In this course, the “overseas” mission and ecumenism are revisited with the paradigm of an “intercultural theology”, which aims to theologically examine new issues that have emerged from the meeting of diverse cultures, religions, theologies and spiritualities, paying special attention to developments in how diakonia in the church is understood.

The Master’s program is organized in ten intensive sessions spread over two years. Each session includes alternation between lectures by various specialists (theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and legal experts); meetings with workers in intercultural environments and institutions; and conversations with people sharing their personal stories.

Some of the topics covered in the course are:

- Intercultural theology: The emergence of a new discipline, the context, the field of research, the course of study.



- The religious factor in migratory processes and integration.
- The Christian Mission and the meeting of cultures; inter-religious dialogue.
- Biblical and intercultural hermeneutics; postcolonial hermeneutics.
- New spiritual needs.
- The dialogue between cultures in intergenerational relationships.
- An introduction to Africa, Latin America and Asia; their cultures and traditional religions.

The Master's course is for anyone, foreign or Italian, pastor or social worker, who intends to work or already has a position of responsibility in a multicultural community or service center.

<http://facoltavaldese.org/it/master>; <https://archive.is/fmvdB>.

Endnotes

1. For further study on this aspect see the research by P. NASO – A. PASSARELLI, *I giovani evangelici e l'immigrazione: una generazione interculturale*, Carocci, Roma 2018.
2. See the contribution by Davide Zoletto in this volume (D. ZOLETTO, *Training in Pedagogical Research in Contexts of High Socio-Cultural Complexity*, in E. OTTONE – L. PANDOLFI (eds.), *Education in Multiculturality, Education to Interculturality In Ecclesiastical Institutions of Higher Education and in Formation Communities for Catholic Consecrated Life in Italy*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2023, 333-341) and D. ZOLETTO, *Bibbia e Intercultura*, Claudiana, Torino 2011, 11-24.
3. Cf. V. KÜSTER, *Interkulturelle Theologie*, in P. SCHREINER – U. SIEG – V. ELSENBAST (eds.), *Handbuch interreligiöses Lernen*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh 2005, 179-191.
4. M.N. JAGESSAR, *Dis-place Theologising. Fragments of Intercultural God-Talk*, from the introduction to the Master in Intercultural Theology at the Waldensian Faculty of Theology, spoken on 31/01/2020.
5. For previous discussion on this theme, see W.J. HOLLENWEGER, *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit, Interkulturelle Theologie 1*, Kaiser, München 1979, 22-24.
6. Cf. A.A. EKUÈ, *Verso una teologia interculturale: implicazioni culturali, teologiche, etiche e pastorali per l'unità della chiesa*, "Protestantesimo" 74 (2019) 3-4, 187-196.
7. Cf. <https://www.fcei.it/linfa/>; <https://archive.is/xylKt>.
8. Cf. the LINFA and Master's degree projects respectively, on the websites of the Federation of Evangelical Churches in Italy at www.fcei.it [<https://archive.is/Ld6py>] and the Waldensian Faculty of Theology at <http://facoltavaldese.org>; <https://archive.is/mHLic>.
9. See also C. LANOIR, *Quale didattica per una formazione teologica interculturale?*, "Protestantesimo" 66 (2011) 4, 373-381.
10. Cf. M.A. ODUYOYE, *African Women's Theology*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2001, 22-38.
11. See the chapter, *Leitsätze zur interkulturellen Theologie*, in W.J. HOLLENWEGER, *Erfahrungen der Leibhaftigkeit*, 51.
12. Cf. ODUYOYE, *African Women's Theology*, 122.