

Engaging our Diversity through Interculturality

by Roger Schroeder

While the social sciences and business world have been using the term “interculturality” for some time, its appearance in theological and ministerial studies is more recent. Let us begin with several definitions. Internationality and multiculturalism refer to the fact that persons or groups of different nationalities and/or ethnic groups simply coexist, perhaps with little or no interaction. The minimum expectation is tolerance. Cross-cultural relationships point to a one-way movement from one worldview to another. As sincere as this may be, its goal is assimilation or accommodation. In contrast, interculturality implies a mutually enriching and challenging two-way exchange among different cultures. Theologically speaking, this is an image of the Reign of God. Sociologist-theologian Robert Kisala describes the meaning of interculturality as moving far beyond mere coexistence “to emphasize and make more explicit the essential *mutuality* of the process of cultural interaction on both the personal and social level.”¹ As a final definition, the term “culture” is used here in a post-modern understanding to include social location (generation, gender, economic class, etc.), social change, ethnicity/race/nationality, and particular individual and communal situations.² It is not limited to ethnicity.

The term “intercultural” appeared in some theological and missiological documents and programs in the 1980s, but the more systemized development of the understanding of the term began around the turn of the century in the writing of theologians like Robert Schreiter³ and Franz Xaver Scheuerer.⁴ The Center for the Study of Religious Life, which was located at Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago, published a set of materials in 2001/2002 to assist religious congregations through a “Cultural Audit” to move beyond multiculturalism.⁵ It should be noted that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) in the 1990s had introduced the term of interculturality in opposition to inculturation. His use of the term was based on an idealistic perspective of abstract anthropology which avoided interaction with concrete cultural realities.⁶ This is not how interculturality is being understood in this article or, generally speaking, in the Catholic Church today.

1 Robert Kisala, SVD, “Formation for Intercultural Life and Mission,” *Verbum SVD* 50, no. 3 (2009): 335.

2 Michael Rynkiewicz, *Soul, Self, and Society: A Postmodern Anthropology for Mission in a Postmodern World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011); Gerard Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, & Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

3 Robert Schreiter, “The Changing Contexts of Intercultural Theology,” *Studia Missionalia* 45 (1996): 359-80.

4 Franz Xaver Scheuerer, *Interculturality – A Challenge for the Mission of the Church* (Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation, 2001).

5 Center for the Study of Religious Life, *Cultural Audit: A Tool to Help Religious Congregations Determine the Cultural Influences on Their Communities* (Chicago: CSRL: 2001/2002).

6 Christian Tauchner, “Editorial/Vorwort: Interculturality Revisited,” *Verbum SVD* 58, no. 1 (2017): 7-9.

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Theologians, missiologists, and practitioners in the areas of interculturality benefit greatly from the excellent work of social scientists like Milton Bennett, Mitchell Hammer, Geert Hofstede, Eric Law, and Edward Hall. Bennett developed a model for “intercultural competency”⁷ which was later refined by his former colleague Hammer.⁸ They identified six stages of moving from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism, or what I would call interculturality: denial, defense, minimization, acceptance, adaptation, and integration. Ethnocentrism is the all-too-human tendency to use one’s own culture (in the broad post-modern sense) as the normative measuring tool for perceiving, judging, and treating others. Hofstede developed four dimensions of cultural differences: power distance, individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and femininity and masculinity.⁹ The aspect of power distance has been further nuanced by Chinese American Law.¹⁰ Hall identified high- and low-context communication styles, which can be identified with Hofstede’s collectivism (socio-centric) and individualism (individual-centric) categories for societies that give priority to the needs of the group in the former, and those of the individual in the latter.¹¹ The works of social scientists are very important resources to help church personnel to understand, appreciate, and engage cultural differences.

From the church perspective, two very significant works on interculturality were published in 2015. *Living Mission Interculturally* by Anthony Gittins¹² is an excellent resource for leaders and members of religious congregations and all practitioners of church ministry. Gittins draws upon his anthropological training and years of preparing women and men for Christian ministry. It is hoped that this book will soon be translated into Spanish. Lazar Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing co-edited a two-volume work on intercultural living and mission,¹³ with contributions from a wide spectrum of international, ecumenical, and professional perspectives. A single volume of selected articles from this work was published in Spanish,¹⁴ and Orbis Books will be publishing a similar volume in English in 2018.

Theologically, interculturality is grounded in the Trinity and the *missio Dei* (“mission of God”), which was foundational for the Second Vatican Council. The second paragraph of the conciliar document *Ad Gentes* (AG) offers the powerful image of God the Father as a life-giving fountain of love watering the world and calling all peoples back to the fullness of God’s life. Furthermore, the Spirit continues stirring in creation and history, and “Jesus Christ, as God incarnate and the ‘face’ of the Spirit, called the disciples and the Church to continue his mission.”¹⁵ Since cultures are graced by God’s life, the church is to acknowledge those “seeds” of the Word (AG 11, 22) and “a sort of secret presence of God” (AG 9) in every culture. All cultures also contain “weeds” which are contrary to God’s reign. Therefore, interculturality must recognize the presence of both the “seeds” and the “weeds” in every culture or context. In this way, interculturality is to be mutually enriching and challenging as all God’s people journey together back to God. The movement toward interculturality has been described recently as a theology, practice, and spirituality of prophetic dialogue—both dialoguing with God’s presence in all cultures and taking a prophetic

7 Milton Bennett, “Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity,” in *Education for the Intercultural Experience*, ed. M. Paige, 2nd ed. (Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press, 1993), 21-71.

8 See work of Mitchell Hammer at *Intercultural Development Inventory*, <http://idiinventory.com>.

9 Geert Hofstede and Michael H. Bond, “Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions: An Independent Validation Using Rokeach’s Value Survey,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 15 (1984): 417-33.

10 Eric Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993).

11 Edward T. Hall, *Beyond Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 74-123.

12 Anthony Gittins, *Living Mission Interculturally: Faith, Culture, and the Renewal of Praxis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015).

13 Lazar Stanislaus, SVD, and Martin Ueffing, SVD, ed. Vol. I: *Intercultural Living*; Vol. II: *Intercultural Mission* (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Steyler Missionswissenschaftliches Institut, and New Dehli, India: ISPCK, 2015).

14 Lazar Stanislaus and Martin Ueffing, ed. *Interculturalidad: en la vida y la misión* (Estella, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino, 2017).

15 Roger Schroeder, “Interculturality as a Paradigm of Mission,” in *Intercultural Mission*, Stanislaus and Ueffing, 157.

stance against any elements that are contrary to God's reign and/or failures to acknowledge God's presence in that culture.¹⁶

Along with the theology of interculturality itself, much has been done in intercultural theology, particularly in Europe. In his excellent extended review essay of *Intercultural Hermeneutics*,¹⁷ the English translation of the first of three volumes by Henning Wrogemann, Terry Muck states that the author identifies the two major challenges facing the church as “coming to grips with its global diversity and . . . doing something about the misunderstanding that often results from that diversity.”¹⁸ Wrogemann advocates for a means of “developing a hermeneutic, a way of understanding, that facilitates conversations among the various sectors of the church.”¹⁹ While a fuller treatment of this major endeavor in intercultural theology by many authors is not possible here, it is important to note how interculturality is also impacting the content and methodology of doing theology itself.

Interculturality also implies practice. The Committee on Cultural Diversity of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2011 approved five guidelines for intercultural competence in ministry. A number of resources, training programs, and courses are now available to address varied pastoral challenges and opportunities related to cultural diversity, multicultural or “shared” parishes, and Catholic educational institutions.²⁰ Patricia Wittberg widens the parameters by addressing the perspectives of not only ethnic cultures but also generational cultures in the US Catholic Church.²¹ The growing initiatives of the past ten years to address the phenomena of short-term mission experiences, parish “twinning,” and non-US-born priests and religious serving in the United States should continue to draw upon the theology and practices related to interculturality.²² Many religious congregations are now more intentionally attending to issues of interculturality both domestically and internationally in a variety of programs.²³ Other concrete issues related to interculturality include reconciliation,²⁴ conflict resolution,²⁵ bullying, racism, inter-gender and inter-generation relations, personality and culture, intercultural communication,²⁶ immigrant/refugee situations, and the use of social media and the arts.

Finally, the theology, theory, and practice of interculturality must be accompanied with an appropriate spirituality. Theological and sociological knowledge regarding diversity would alone not lead to a change in interactions and attitudes among people of different backgrounds. Christian individuals, parishes, institutions, religious congregations, dioceses, and the church in general need to respond to an ongoing process of conversion from all forms of ethnocentrism, racism, and prejudices against those considered different or marginalized.²⁷ There is a strong biblical foundation for interculturality. Jesus Christ was the “Word . . . made flesh” (Jn 1:14) in a particular culture and context. However, he witnessed to the inclusive Reign of God by his practice of sharing food with those Jews

16 Roger Schroeder, “Interculturality and Prophetic Dialogue,” *Verbum SVD* 54, no. 1 (2013): 8-21.

17 Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, trans. Karl E. Böhmer (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016).

18 Terry Muck, “Intercultural Hermeneutics: Vol. I of Intercultural Theology,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 41, no. 3 (2017): 194.

19 Muck, “Intercultural Hermeneutics,” 194.

20 See <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/index.cfm>

21 Patricia Wittberg, SC, *Catholic Cultures: How Parishes Can Respond to the Changing Face of Catholicism* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

22 For a further reference to the developments in the past ten years in these areas, see Roger Schroeder, *What is the Mission of the Church? A Guide for Catholics*, rev. and exp. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, forthcoming in 2018), chapter 8 and appendix 3.

23 For example, The Center for the Study of Consecrated Life (CSCL) at CTU is currently sponsoring a thirty-month program on “Interculturality and Consecrated Life” for twenty-one religious congregations, and the International Union of Superiors General (UISG), representing 2,000 women’s religious congregations, is planning to have a two-week program on interculturality in Rome in January 2019.

24 Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998).

25 Mitchell Hammer has developed a very useful framework for understanding four cultural models for conflict resolution. See <https://icsinventory.com/ics-inventory/the-ics-improves-communication-conflict-resolution-across-cultures>.

26 Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, *Communicating Between Cultures: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*, 4th updated ed. (Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications, 2012).

27 Philip Gibbs, SVD, “Conversion from Ethnocentrism,” in *Intercultural Mission*, Stanislaus and Ueffing, 3-16; Adriana Carla Milmanda, SSpS, “Inserted Life: The Radical Nature of an Incarnated Spirituality,” in *Intercultural Living*, Stanislaus and Ueffing, 38-52.

considered impure and marginalized according to a strict interpretation of Jewish table fellowship of some of his contemporaries (Lk 5:29-30; 7:36-38; 19:5-6). Furthermore, there were three major turning points or “events” for Jesus in relation to the Gentiles: a transformative encounter with the Canaanite woman (Mt 15:21-28; Mk 7:24-37), opening new spaces for dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn 4:1-30), and his reference to a Samaritan as the ideal disciple (Lk 10:25-37). Later, the intercultural journey of the disciples of Jesus can be traced through the Acts of the Apostles,²⁸ particularly in the “intercultural conversion” of Peter around his encounter with Cornelius (Acts 10:9-35, 44-48) and the communal/ecclesial “intercultural conversion” at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:5-21). The church needs to undergo such ongoing “conversions” in its encounter with new cultures and contexts today.

This relatively new theological and intentional pastoral focus on interculturality has been developing in many exciting and challenging ways—theologically, missiologically, ministerially, practically, and spiritually. Fostering mutually enriching relationships across our differences is an urgent need in our society and church today, and it is a profound counter-cultural prophetic expression of God’s Reign.

²⁸ Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014). See chapter one.