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Ecumenical ambiguities: The case of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians¹

Abstract

One of the crucial observations of contemporary Christianity states a shift of its centre to the “global South”. Such a transition is reflected in the demand of the “epistemological break”, the one that stresses the need for applying endemic notions and categories while theologising. The shift is becoming important for the ecumenical movement as a more major role is being played by the Churches and organisations outside the Western world. An assessment of this change would seem to be ambiguous. On the one hand, it increases an ecumenical dynamism, on the other it brings the danger of an inclusive understanding of ecumenism. The article presents some of the main theological reflections developed within the Ecumenical Association of the Third World Theologians, an organisation that clearly exemplifies the discussed ambiguity. This presentation focuses on the criticism of the so-called “post-religious paradigm” promoted by the association.

Keywords: EATWOT, theology, ecumenism, Global South, religious, post-religious.

Ekumeniczne dwuznaczności: przypadek Ekumenicznego Stowarzyszenia Teologów Trzeciego Świata

Streszczenie

Jedna z głównych teologicznych diagnoz dotyczących współczesnego chrześcijaństwa stwierdza przesuwanie się jego centrum na tzw. globalne Południe. Trend ten znajduje swe odzwierciedlenie w postulatcie tzw. zmiany epistemologicznej, która podkreśla konieczność stosowania endemicznych pojęć i kategorii w teologizowaniu. Wpływa również na ruch ekumeniczny, w którym coraz większe znaczenie mają Kościoły i organizacje spoza świata zachodniego. W ocenie tego zjawiska zaznacza się ambiwalencja. Z jednej strony zwiększa ono dynamiczność ekumenizmu, z drugiej jednak niesie niebezpieczeństwo inkluzywnego modelu ekumenizmu, w którym dialog wewnątrzchrześcijański zmienia się w dialog międzyreligijny, a chrześcijaństwo traci swą wyjątkowość. Artykuł przedstawia główne kierunki teologiczne rozwijane przez Ekumeniczne Stowarzyszenie Teologów Trzeciego Świata, organizację, która stanowi wyraźny przykład wspomnianej ambiwalencji. Prezen-

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tacja koncentruje się przede wszystkim na krytyce tzw. paradygmatu postreligijnego, który sformułowany jest przez stowarzyszenie.

Słowa kluczowe: EATWOT, teologia, ekumenizm, globalne Południe, religijny, postreligijny.

Both currents of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical theology reflect tendencies in global Christianity. This very obvious statement also refers to the frequently repeated observation on the Churches' shift to the southern hemisphere. Both ecumenism and non-Western theological approaches are indeed interconnected and overlap with each other. The largest ecumenical and pan-confessional organisations, in particular the World Council of Churches and the World Communion of the Reformed Churches, are increasingly influenced by Christians and theologians from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and their theological interpretations, activities and programs reveal different cultural, ethical and epistemological contexts. Yet the outcomes seem to be sometimes ambiguous. On the one hand, Christianity in its global dimension desperately needs the dynamism and ardour of young churches from outside the European area and, on the other hand, some of these theological interpretations are being accused of theological and cultural syncretism and, furthermore, of going beyond Christian orthodoxy. In many cases the semantic scope of both the notion of ecumenism and ecumenical theology becomes diluted and lacking in its solid biblical and dogmatic foundations.

This harsh judgement could apply to some specific theological approaches and to some theological organisations. Such a distorted understanding of ecumenism is clearly depicted in the concepts developed by, and in the activities of, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. The question of how EATWOT understands ecumenism stems from the controversial teaching presented by the associations: on the nature of Christianity; on the future of religion; the meaning of liberation; and the significance of the Western theological concepts for the globally grasped theology. The article aims to present EATWOT's theological interpretations and question its most important theological inspirations. It also discusses the meaning of ecumenism as developed by the theologians of the organisation.

1. The Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians: a brief historical sketch

EATWOT may be described as a theological cluster for theologians from the countries of the Global South. Its origin can be traced back to the 1970s and

the Catholic University in Louvain, where a group of young theologians from emerging postcolonial states expressed the need to establish an inter-church and inter-confessional body to represent the voice of Christians from non-Western areas. The founding leader of the organisation was Oscar Bimwenyi-Kweshi, the former Secretary of the Zaire Catholic Bishops' Conference, although the most numerous of its members were theologians from the Latin America. It is worthwhile mentioning that the doctoral dissertation of Bimwenyi-Kweshi entitled "Theological Discourse Negro-African" is assumed to be one of the most crucial elaborations on the African theology of inculturation. His thesis about the theandric structures of the faith experience, as well as epistemological transformations entailing inspirations by the indigenous oral tradition (as proverbs, myths, stories, fairytales), was declared to be ground-breaking for the further development of this theological approach².

EATWOT was officially constituted during the founding meeting in December 1976 in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In its founding declaration the members proclaimed they were "doing theology from the vantage point of the poor seeking liberation, integrity of creation, gender co-responsibility, racial and ethnic equality and interfaith dialogue for promotion of all humanity"³. The dominant traits of its theology are therefore a comprehensive emancipation as a declared theological value and a social, cultural and economic experience as a declared source of theological reflection. The organisation's activity encompasses a wide participation in the works of other interdenominational and inter-confessional bodies, and, moreover, the association releases a journal entitled "Voices from the Third World". A survey of the articles published in this journal demonstrates the crucial fields of EATWOT's theological involvement. The theologians deal with such topics as: a theological interpretation of the ecological crisis; globalisation and its influence on various destructive tendencies in the Third World; the postcolonial contexts, gender equality and gender justice; Christians participation in the peace activities; inter-religious dialogue; questions referred to the theological inculturation; and feminist theology and the future of Christianity in the post-religious world. The social thought of the association is strongly inspired by its cooperation with various alter-globalist organisations as the World Social Forum.

A deep insight into the teaching of the association reveals its strong anti-systemic thought. EATWOT's theologians take a harshly critical view on the present

² J. ESTERMANN, *Südwind: Kontextuelle nicht-abendländische Theologien im globalen Süden*, Münster 2017, p. 98; E. KAMPHAUSEN, 'African Cry'. *Anmerkungen zur Entstehungsgeschichte einer kontextuellen Befreiungstheologie in Africa*, in: K. KOSCHORKE, J. HOLGER SCHJØRRING (ed.), *African Identities and World Christianity in the Twentieth Century*, Wiesbaden 2005, p. 78.

³ D. IRARRAZAVAL, *A New World and Our Theologies: President's Report*, "Voices from the Third World" 39 (2006) 2, p. 7.

socio-economic order. They promote an extremely inclusive model of ecumenical theology which extends to the inter-religious dialogue, they reject the paradigm of the confessional identity and, furthermore, they include the scopes of the sociological and anthropological research to their theological agenda. The thinking presented within the association is far removed from the mainstream of the ecumenical dialogue led by many Christian churches. On the other hand, in some of the new trends within the ecumenical movement, and also in the Western area, the inspirations exemplified by EATWOT are clearly reflected.

2. The hermeneutics of the epistemological break

The theological reflection on contemporary Christianity appears sometimes to be homophonic. The dominant theme in this theological homophony is played both by the crisis narration of secularisation of Western countries and by the dynamic growth of the Churches in the Southern hemisphere. Theologians from all corners of the world have made various attempts to interpret and to explain the theological and socio-cultural significance of the undergoing shift of the centre of Christianity to the so called Global South. Consequently, missionaries and ecumenists stand at the head of meeting with new theological approaches in the Churches from postcolonial countries. Christians in non-Western areas are increasingly apt to emphasise their contradictory views on the transmission of faith since the content of Christian beliefs is, in the opinion of many theologians, expressed exclusively in the Western cultural paradigms and patterns. They also increasingly propose that their own cultural categories be applied to theological reflection. This tendency is manifestly exemplified by the ecumenical careers of such notions as *Ubuntu* or *Sumak Kawsay*, commonly adopted in various programs of the World Council of Churches⁴.

The shift of Christianity to the Global South has inspired many new theological schools and approaches such as postcolonial theology, intercultural theology, global and inter-religious theology and contextual theology. Contextualisation is not a new concept in the history of the Churches and theologies. Both the missions of Jesuits such as Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili in 16th century Asia and the controversies around the method of cultural accommodation in theology referred to the nature of problem⁵. Yet nowadays this thought gains a new meaning. Muller has noticed that “the work of contextualisation has been a part of the interpretive task of the church throughout history but

⁴ M. RAMOSE, *African Philosophy through Ubuntu*, Harare 1999, p. 208.

⁵ W. KOWALAK, *Pojęcie misji przed Soborem Watykańskim II*, „Nurt SVD” (2016) 2, p. 12.

this age-old exercise has been recognised, analysed, and consciously attempted only recently”⁶. He has also stated that while contextualisation remained unnoticed, it was actually occurring. The notion itself is rather new and is also a manifestation of the epistemological break. It was mentioned for the first time in a report of the Theological Education Fund entitled *Ministry in Context*. Contextualisation was there defined as “an approach designed to supersede the indigenisation approach that had been dominant in mission theory for over a century”⁷ and, consequently, the term of indigenisation was rejected as it was burdened with the colonial legacy. Instead, the approach of contextualisation contains in its scope a crucial entitlement to theologise according to cultural and linguistic categories. Moreover, it democratises a theological reflection when adopting the source of existential experience. This specific democratisation was described by Bosch, and other theologians, as “epistemological break”. Contextual theologies claim that they constitute an epistemological break when compared with traditional theologies. Whereas, at least since the time of Constantine, theology was conducted from above as an elitist enterprise (except in the case of minority Christian communities, commonly referred to as sects), its main source (apart from Scripture and tradition) was philosophy, and its main interlocutor the educated non-believer, contextual theology is theology «from below», «from the underside of history», its main source (apart from Scripture and tradition) is the social sciences, and its main interlocutor the poor or the culturally marginalised”⁸.

Contextual theology influences the theological reflection and theological activity of EATWOT. Both context and experience are declared to be an important theological source, consequently their theologians call for the epistemological break. The applied hermeneutics of the association was emphatically expounded in the Dar es Salaam declaration, “The theologies from Europe and North America are dominant today in our churches and represent one form of cultural domination. They must be understood to have arisen out of situations related to those countries, and therefore must not be uncritically adopted without our raising the question of their relevance in the context of our countries. Indeed, we must, in order to be faithful do the gospel and to our peoples, reflect on the realities of our own situations and interpret the word of God in relation to these realities. We reject as irrelevant an academic type of theology that is divorced from action. We

⁶ R.A. MULLER, *The Study of Theology: From Biblical Interpretation to Contemporary Formulation*, Grand Rapids 1991, p. 202.

⁷ D.J. HESSELGRAVE, *Contextualization of Theology*, in: W.A. ELWELL (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Grand Rapids 2007, p. 294f.

⁸ D.J. BOSCH, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll 2011, p. 360.

are prepared for the radical break in epistemology, which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on praxis of the reality of the Third World”⁹.

The quotation blatantly emphasises the contextual and liberation paradigm of the theological approaches developed within EATWOT. Julio de Santa Ana, one of the most prominent theologians of the WCC and a promotor of the social teaching of the ecumenical movement, has listed five crucial areas of the theology of the association. The list claims to be representative, since it refers to the results of questionnaire research that has been conducted among the members of EATWOT. The five distinguished points help to make the theology of the association more familiar. Firstly (insists de Santa Ana) the reflection is influenced by the assumption of the epistemological break. The notion is here defined by indicating several important premises: experience is an indispensable stage of a theological action; human existence must be regarded as the crucial point of reference of every theology; the theology should put the stress on the question referring to the gender equality; ecological justice and option for the poor; and finally, the theology has to respect a balance between its practical and philosophical dimension. Secondly, EATWOT’s theology promotes women’s involvement in a theological action and stresses the significance of the feminist theology. Careful observation of the theological discourse proves that it is inspired by many representatives of the feminist approach such as Nancy Chodorow or Julia Kristeva¹⁰. Thirdly, the activity of EATWOT is organised around the paradigm of liberation that encompasses many dimensions of reality: society, economy and politics, race, gender and ethnicity. Theology, therefore, must be able to robustly face different dimensions of social exclusion. Fourthly, reflection of EATWOT exemplifies various specific areas of the theological struggle for emancipation (Dalits in India, Indigenous in Latin America). Finally, the theologians of the association propose an inclusive meaning of ecumenism. This point appears to be the most controversial, as well as polemical, and it also puts the Christianity of the organisation at stake. The members of EATWOT call for a complete theological deconstruction of the Christological perspective in particular. Yet the ways they have adopted lead to the abandonment of Christian orthodoxy and soteriological exclusivism. The intentions of the associations are blatantly expounded in the Final Statement of the Fourth Assembly of EATWOT held at Tagaytay City, Philippines in 1996: “Today we are aware that religions are the response of the finite to the Infinite. God is experienced in many ways, and the experiences are expressed in diverse

⁹ G. WEST, *The Bible and the Poor: a New Way of Doing Theology*, in: CH. ROWLAND (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, Cambridge 1999, p. 130.

¹⁰ A. ELLIOTT, *Koncepcje Ja*, Warszawa 2007, p. 120.

symbols. God's saving action may not be seen as confined to Judeo-Christian history. Nor is God's saving action confined to Jesus of Nazareth. Is it not an urgent need, then to consider other sources of God's Word than the Bible alone: creation, for instance, the religious experience of peoples, and their sacred Scriptures? Is there not an urgent need to dialogue with followers of other faiths and secular ideologies, and to articulate the Christian truth from within such dialogue? Then the uniqueness of Jesus will not be formulated in the language of exclusivism and superiority, but in terms of his mediation of creation and of the whole of human history. Then the Christ-centrism of the New Testament will not be isolated from Jesus' own theo-centrism"¹¹.

3. The post-religious paradigm as a challenge for Christianity

An inclusive meaning of ecumenism converges with the forecast of the revolutionary religious transformations of cultures and societies. The change is compared to the shift from Paleolithic to Neolithic since the present crisis of Christianity observed in the Western Europe, in the opinion of EATWOT's theologians, is not confined to this religion and this area only, but reflects the crisis of religion itself. José Maria Vigil, one of the most prominent representatives of liberation theology, emphatically stresses that "the crisis that Christianity is actually experiencing in Europe is not a crisis in Christianity itself, but a crisis in Christianity as a religion" and he continues: "In the recent past, we have seen this as a crisis in Christianity, but today we are aware of the fact that the crisis is deeper: religion itself is in crisis (...) It must be understood that religion (in its anthropological-social-cultural form, a form assumed by human spirituality during the past ten thousand years) is going to disappear. Religiosity and human spirituality will continue and endure, but they will be transformed as they pass through a type of mutation or metamorphosis from which something perhaps unrecognisable will emerge"¹².

A deep socio-cultural transformation of rising of either the "knowledge society" or "information society"¹³ will marginalise the Neolithic religious systems. "Neolithic" refers to the time when the great religions were emerging during the historical transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agrarian societies. Such

¹¹ SEARCH FOR A NEW JUST WORLD ORDER: CHALLENGES TO THEOLOGY, *Final Statement of the Fourth Assembly of EATWOT*, "Voices from the Third World" 22 (1999) 2, p. 207f.

¹² J.M. VIGIL, *The Crisis of Religious Life in Europe, a Call to Religious Life World Wide*, "Voices from the Third World" ("Theology for Another Possible World") 28 (2005) 1, p. 118.

¹³ M. CASTELLS, *Galaktyka Internetu. Refleksje nad Internetem, biznesem i społeczeństwem*, Poznań 2003, p. 47.

a global epistemological change would spark a new post-religious paradigm instead of religious one. Yet, theologians from EATWOT stipulate that this premise refers mainly to the institutional and symbolic dimension of religions. They remark that for the contemporary, post-industrial and post-religious society, religions are something alien. In other words, a vast part of humankind is becoming alienated from religion, seeing it as a historical phenomenon which can be studied outside its own logic. Consequently, an awareness of their cultural origin and nature brings about both an epistemological emancipation from the previous religious categories and a split of spirituality and religiosity. Referring to the post-Enlightenment tradition of the criticism of religion, the EATWOT theologians define a post-religious paradigm as “this way of living the deep dimension of the human being that overcomes, ignores or rejects the mechanisms typical of the Neolithic-agrarian societies”¹⁴. The list of these mechanisms reveals the significance of the discussed transition: 1) mythical epistemology; 2) the monopoly over spirituality; 3) requirement of submission, of blind acceptance of some beliefs as revealed by God; 4) exercise of political and ideological power over society; 5) imposition of a heteronomous moral, coming from above, with an interpretation of the natural law from an officially imposed philosophy with a moral not subject to a democratic examination; 6) the control of the human thought, with dogmas, and with the institutions of their enforcing; 7) the proclamation of the “revelation books” that have gathered the ancient traditions, exalted as God’s Word; 8) pre-modern interpretation of reality as split in contradictory natural and supernatural dimensions; 9) “interpretation of life and death as a test, judgment and reward/punishment by a God who is Universal Judge”¹⁵.

Even though the list appears to be only a little revealing (it seems to collect various observations and assumptions derived from both the cultural anthropology, the dialectic theology and the concept of religionless Christianity), it contributes to the creation of a methodological tool which helps to investigate the significance of the present crisis. Theologians from EATWOT express themselves too harshly and too uncritically, nevertheless it is worthwhile following their reflection since it is an interesting voice of theological “margins” that is increasingly relevant to the grassroots ecumenical organisation.

The present crisis should not be understood as being brought about by the loss of credibility of the religious institutions. Rather it reflects a transition to new structures of thinking, diverging from the traditional “Neolithic” religions. The Theological Commission of EATWOT expounded it in the following statement:

¹⁴ EATWOT’S INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Towards a Post-Religious Paradigm. EATWOT’s Latin American Consultation on Religion*, “Voices from the Third World” 35 (2012) 1, p. 269.

¹⁵ The whole list is presented in: *ibid.*, p. 269f.

“The present crisis is not due to secularisation processes, or to a loss of values, or to the dissemination of materialism or hedonism, (blaming interpretation usually held by religions’ officers), neither to the lack of testimony or to the moral scandals of religion, but to birth of a new cultural situation, that puts an end to the radical transformations of the knowledge, axiological and epistemological neolithic structures, transformation that started with the scientific revolution in the XVI century, the Enlightenment of the XVIII century and the various waves of industrialisation. The symptoms that this gradual transformation produces appear in ways such as certain diffuse agnosticism, loss of epistemological ingenuity, a more accentuated critical sense, a more utilitarian conceptualisation of religions as a service to the human being instead of receptors of full loyalty from their members, the disappearance of the idea of a «unique true religion» and a revealed moral”¹⁶.

This quotation highlights how EATWOT’s theologians interpret present socio-cultural trends, however the interpretation appears highly controversial on the one hand and too modest on the other. Nevertheless statistics reveal the spread of secularised attitudes. The post-religious paradigm mentioned above seems to have become an anthropological and social norm for younger generations in the Western countries and in some countries in Asia and Latin America. It is worthwhile to repeat that, in the opinion of the theological commission of EATWOT, the changes of religion and culture are rather of an epistemological nature. This thesis could be completed by two crucial factors influencing the present reality: that of disintegration of sources of human perception (beautifully represented in the famous illustration by Alasdair McIntyre of the fictional movement *Know-Nothing*)¹⁷ and that of increasing democratisation of social institutions and social relations (“intimacy as democracy” as has been explained by Anthony Giddens)¹⁸, even though the democratisation is often said to be only apparent.

According to EATWOT’s theologians, the present crisis of religions, particularly of these defined as “Neolithic”, occurs in the level of cognition. This situation compels churches and theologies to discover new paths of transition to a different epistemological order of the post-religious paradigm. Hence the theological commission of EATWOT, and the most important task for the theologians and religious institutions, is the search for new forms, models and ways to express human spirituality. The Christian churches are “between” a silent abandoning of millions of faithful (who nevertheless keep on seeking spirituality) and the

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

¹⁷ M. BROWN, *Tensions in Christian Ethics. An Introduction*, London 2010, p. 25.

¹⁸ A. GIDDENS, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Society*, Stanford 1992, p. 95.

attitude of “sacred loyalty”¹⁹ of many religious dignitaries, churchmen, and theologians. These circumstances have been described by theologians in poetic terms: “All seems to foretell that the Titanic of the agrarian religions will not float in the latitudes of the ocean of the society of knowledge. All seems to indicate it will not endure much and will sink. Its *kairós* is gone, although there is still a little *cronos*. But it is not the end of the world. It is only the end of one world, the end of the agrarian-Neolithic world and its epistemology, and with it the end of the religious configurations of spirituality, what we have called «agrarian-Neolithic religions»”²⁰.

The narration of EATWOT’s theologians seems to be converging with that of the Dead of God theology which undoubtedly confirms their antisystemic and revolutionary meaning. The words about the end of our world remind us of images from futurological books. On the other hand, EATWOT is not only concerned with theological deconstruction, but they also lay down new tasks for theologians and Churches: “It is the duty of theology to foresee the novelty, not only in its deconstructive aspect, but in its constructive one: not just what we cannot believe, but how we can develop our transcendental or spiritual dimension fully (...) Meanwhile, it is a brand new world that «post-religional», but today we do not know exactly how these models and paths will be, hence... we will have to invent them”²¹.

* * *

EATWOT’s reflection on religion and belief in the very special time (the *kairós*) we live in seems to be very distant from both the theological mainstream of the Christian churches and the mainstream of ecumenical dialogues. It is therefore not easy to find tangent points which enable us to absorb the theological interpretations of the association in activities of the ecumenical movement. Moreover, the theologians of the organisation too easily identify Christianity and other religions despite decades of theological reflection on the specificity of Christianity (headed by the Karl Barth’s dialectic theology). They uncritically accept various scenarios referring to the dereligionisation of contemporary society on a global scale drawn up by the cultural anthropology and sociology of religion and, finally, they too easily forget that every theological reflection which pretends to be Christian requires a pneumatological perspective.

¹⁹ *Towards a Post-Religional Paradigm*, p. 272.

²⁰ *Towards a Post-Religional Paradigm*, p. 272.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272f.

Despite these remarks, this reflection seems to be worthwhile to highlight because of several reasons. Firstly, it provides knowledge about theological tendencies in regions where the Western philosophical categories are not endemic and it reflects well the radical criticism of the present crisis of religion coined by the theological commission of EATWOT. Secondly, in its interpretation, one can distinguish some elements that might be applied to theological and socio-logical considerations on contemporary societies, cultures and Churches. This especially refers to the more detailed definition of the post-religious paradigm, which appears to be relevant for many younger generations and therefore useful for debates on the dechristianisation of contemporary societies. Finally, the theological interpretation of EATWOT is becoming a reference point for many grassroots ecumenical organisations, including those which are involved in striving for more just, and more peaceful, societies.

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