ECUMENICAL STUDIES AND MISSIOLOGY ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

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Ecumenical studies and Missiology can be compared with the World Wide Web. Everything is connected with everything. That makes a travel guide urgent. In this contribution we create such a guide, combining the knowledge of libraries and documentation and searching on the Internet (Marian Papavoine) with factual ecumenical and missiological knowledge (Martien Brinkman). Since the shift of the centres of global Christianity has made revision of the more or less classical descriptions of these disciplines necessary, we shall first touch upon these shifts. Next we shall fearlessly take to the digital highway.

From ecumenical studies and missiology to ecumenical intercultural theology

The discipline of ecumenical studies has been described as: “the study of the interaction between the confessional traditions in Christianity as a historical and contemporary process in the perspective of the unity and the joint actions of the churches in the world” and missiology as “the study of the basis, history and practice of the mission of Christianity in various social, economic, cultural, political and religious contexts”. For both disciplines, however, these descriptions are already somewhat dated. The increasing role of non-western Christianity in the whole of global Christianity has made the difference between missiology and ecumenical studies more and more blurred and has also made interreligious dialogue a constitutive aspect of this field of study. After all, Christians in Asia and in large parts of Africa have to define their position in contexts of different religions. Nowadays the terms contextual theology and others are often used to characterise the distinct character of the many forms of Asian and African theology.

Western missiology used to describe the historical development of the so-called ‘young’ churches in the non-western world and dilate upon the various theologies of the Catholic and Protestant missions respectively, but it is now mainly a field of study of the new theologies from Africa, Asia and Latin America. These theologies are developing in an intensive interaction with their cultural and religious surroundings. Without a knowledge of Islam, the

1 For the Dutch debate on this terminology see Exchange 23 (1994), 183-184.
traditional African religions and, as far as Asia is concerned, without a sound knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism, Taoism, and other religions it is impossible to understand an important and rapidly growing part of the practice of Christian theology.

Ecumenical studies used to focus mainly on the official religious dialogue between the various church traditions, but nowadays it sees itself increasingly as the discipline that describes the content and the rules of the religious communication between North and South in Christendom. The World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and the other world communions of the various church traditions such as World Association of Reformed Churches (WARC), the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), the Anglican Communion and its Lambeth Conferences are increasingly becoming 'ports of transshipment' where the religious knowledge from one part of the world is exchanged with that of another. In this way totally different religious worlds are brought into contact with each other in these international organisations. It might therefore be better to speak of ecumenical intercultural theology instead of ecumenical studies and missiology. This might be understood to mean: “the study of the interaction of the various Christian church traditions with each other and with their religious, social and cultural context with a view to mutual recognition”.

In this field of study the Internet has become an indispensable source of information. After all, it is this medium that makes it possible to get a picture of what is being written on certain subjects in the theological periodicals worldwide, what the reactions to ecumenical documents are, what the themes of major international conferences are, what the backgrounds of the participants are, where bibliographies can be found and so on.

However, the euphoria about this new medium should not be exaggerated either. The Internet is to a large extent an English-language or at least western medium and consequently the gathering of the information largely takes place through the West. The material that is not accessible in a western language (in case English), is usually wanting or is at any rate hard to find. This means that in the search for sources of non-western theology, a strong reduction takes place right away. Knowledge of the local situation as evidenced in knowledge of the language and culture, is certainly not made superfluous by the Internet. ‘Internet-knowledge’ may easily become very superficial knowledge.

In spite of this reservation, some familiarity with this medium may save a lot of superfluous work and prevent unnecessary gaps. That is why we shall describe a few searches. Our goal is twofold: we want to find websites relevant to our field and in doing so clarify a number of peculiarities with regard to searching on the Internet. To that end we have selected five examples. We are going to search for: