

## CONSTRUCTING LOCAL THEOLOGIES

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Great Christian Tradition consists of a series of local theologies.

We are now alert to context, procedure and history.

Terms: Indigenous theology, ethnotheology, inculturation, ecclesia particularis.

### **Translation models:**

Free Biblical truth from its cultural image for which local term is sought.

A kernel and husk theory of bible. (Are bread and wine kernel or husk?)

### **Adaptation models:**

The christian philosophical system is translated into new cultural guise

### **Contextual models:**

Ethnographic theology – identity and continuity

Liberation approaches – social change & salvation. (sometimes miss grace)

Who does it? – the communal group. But it depends on the larger Church

“Both prophets and poets are essential to the theological process, but that process cannot be reduced to either one of them.” p19

## **MAPPING A LOCAL THEOLOGY**

*“Theology is the work of God through a human graced community”* p24

Doing it creates a spirituality among the believers.

Favours the *sapientia* (wisdom) over *scientia* (sure knowledge)

*“Liberation Theologies are wisdom theologies turned outward to social conditions”*.p25

### **Beginning points can be:**

1. **previous theologies,**
2. **the culture** (its values, symbols, media, etc),
3. **church tradition** (but this is usually a translation model – imperialist readings). Remember that parts of tradition are fallible.

David Tracy: addressee are academy, church and society.

## **Chapter 3. The Study of Culture**

### **Listening to a Culture**

Who should we listen to since paternalistic cultures dominate the reading even when they have long gone and we are now listening to the remaining natives? How do we listen to the Christ already present? The theologian therefore has to be selective.

1. Listening for the Christ in the culture: ask questions re  
Creation - how does a culture see its organisation and behaviour?  
Redemption - what's wrong and what remedies proposed?  
Community - What quality of life together?
2. How do we read another culture?
3. Can I see my own culture? i.e. will the natives themselves know?  
So we need tools for analysis,
4. How thereafter to communicate the theology of the culture?

### **Tools for Listening to a Culture**

1. Must be holistic (look at both high and popular culture)  
Sometimes, when specifically looking at religious culture, it is in folk religion or even in 'non-religious' loci that key lies. (cf. Liberation theology, American football stadium, etc)  
Integration.
2. Address questions of identity. What makes us who we are? How do we get that way?  
Group-boundary formation and world-view formation.  
Maintenance.
3. Social change. Must be a pliable science. Aware that stability is not inevitable.  
Transformation.

#### **1. Functionalist Approaches.**

Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Durkheim. Attends to empirical detail.  
Very Anglo-Saxon though and does not deal well with social change nor symbolic universes

#### **2. Ecological and Materialist approaches.**

Relationship of a society and its physical environment. Roy Rappaport.  
Deal well with social change but lose on expanse and determinism.

#### **3. Structuralist Approaches to Culture**

Claude Levi-Strauss & Jean Piaget  
Seeing culture as binary protagonists. Culture throws up ways of dealing with fundamental oppositions in society (nature vs. culture, male vs. female) Uncovering the unconscious structures Ways of resolving and transforming especially using insights of language analysis.  
Myth and ritual in culture. Trajectories of change. But the method is complex and perhaps based on hunch!

#### **4. Semiotic Study of Culture**

Sees culture as a vast communications network of signs. The bearer of the message is seen to stand for the message as sign. Seeing language as the sign par excellence.

Signs have syntax or codes by which to operate.

Signs have semantic meaning codes

Signs have pragmatics. Rules that govern the communication.

a. multi-disciplinary approach offers a holism. High and popular culture considered. Not reductionist.

b. Studies the signs and their relationship.

c. Concern for pattern of change. (helpful theologically)

Roland Barthes in France.

Clifford Geertz in USA stressing wealth and randomness of human behaviour. Concern for metaphor in a cultural flow of ideas.

Victor Turner on 'Liminality' - a mediating device between two sign systems.

"The Text" is the basic unit of investigation - a single sign or series bearing a message.

Culture is then the sum total of these 'texts' shared by a given people.

Culture is also memory - stored information.

#### **Towards a Semiotic Analysis of Culture.**

##### Description and Perspective in Culture:

'emic' = the view from inside a culture. 'etic' = the view from outside a culture.

cf. Paulo Friere's conscientization programmes.

'Emic' (inside) perspectives usually result in narrative. It affirms realities rather than dissects them.

'Etic' (outside) perspectives use narrative as examples. It looks for explanation. It essentially seeks to translate the sign system of the culture into another sign system of the observing culture. This is in order to manage change or to demarcate identity. But it can be imperialist in intention. Hearer and Listener are in a power relationship.

##### Semiotic Description of Culture Texts:

A textual domain (eg economics) will be sum of many texts. Communal celebrations often use texts of personal and group identity. Art texts can be the most difficult to analyse. Boundaries are the markers of identity - so territorial African boundaries. Those boundaries are potent because they have not yet been marshalled into signs and symbols. They are in creative space and usually it is the shaman, artist or priest who deals with them. The hero of the tale has to cross boundaries - leaves home, visits the underworld, etc. take away the boundary between people and sanctuary (altar rail) and it goes somewhere else (the Church walls?)

Usually most important *signs* in a culture carry many meanings. *Codes* answer the question: how are things to be done? E.g. How the bread and wine are to be offered.

*Messages* are the basic meanings portrayed. Cultures have more than one message esp. in times of change.

*Metaphors* link signs across boundaries. The whole constellation is the *semiotic domain*.

#### **Social Change in Semiotic Description**

Modern living and technologies speed up change. Also theology is interested in transformation. When basic system of signs remains in control then assimilation can occur of other sign systems or signs. Or there may be conflict of sign systems- Assyria and Egypt; liberation theology.

1. Boundary may be transgressed requiring reorganisation of systems.
2. A sign may reverse its meaning - because most signs are binary by nature. What was good becomes bad.
3. Two irreconcilable signs can be mediated by a third. Common principle of dialectics.
4. Change the metaphors, spatial or temporal.

### **Cultural Analysis and Local Theology**

No culture is this simple nor so static! Yet this concentration on cultural texts can help our understanding. We then select the cultural texts significant for our purposes. Especially liminal texts.

### **[ here is Chapter 3. The Study of Culture again in shorter note form ]**

#### **Listening to a Culture**

Can we hear real local culture when colonists have infected it?

#### **Tools for Listening to a Culture**

1. Must be holistic (look at both elite and popular culture)  
Folk religion or 'non-religious' loci may hold key (cf. Liberation theology, American football stadium, etc)

2. Address questions of identity.  
What makes us who we are? How do we get that way?

3. Social change.  
Stability is not inevitable.

#### **1. Functionalist Approaches.**

Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Durkheim. Attends to empirical detail.  
Very Anglo-Saxon model ~ what of social change & symbols?

#### **2. Ecological and Materialist approaches.**

Relationship of a society and its physical environment. Roy Rappaport.  
Deal well with social change but lose on expanse and determinism.

#### **3. Structuralist Approaches to Culture**

Claude Levi-Strauss & Jean Piaget  
Seeing culture as binary protagonists. (nature vs. culture, male vs. female) Uncovering unconscious structures thro language analysis, myth and ritual in culture. Trajectories of change. But the method is complex and perhaps based on hunch!

#### **4. Semiotic Study of Culture**

Sees culture as a vast communications network of signs. (esp Language).  
Signs have own grammar and pragmatics. Metaphors in cultural flow of ideas.  
Clifford Geertz in USA stressing wealth and randomness of human behaviour.  
Culture is then the sum total of these 'texts' shared by a given people.  
Culture is also memory - stored information.

#### **Towards a Semiotic Analysis of Culture.**

Description and Perspective in Culture: the ‘them (b) and us (a)’ dynamic!

(a) ‘*emic*’ = the view from inside a culture.

Often uses narrative in self-affirming way.

(b) ‘*etic*’ = the view from outside a culture.

Looks for explanation. Translates signs into observer’s language.

Power danger here so cf. Paulo Friere’s conscientization programmes.

Semiotic Description of Culture Texts:

A textual domain (eg economics) will be sum of many texts.

Boundaries are the markers of identity – hero of the tale has to cross boundaries.

*Codes* answer the question: how are things to be done?

*Messages* are the basic meanings portrayed. (often plural)

*Metaphors* link signs across boundaries.

The whole constellation is the *semiotic domain*.

**Social Change in Semiotic Description**

Modern living speeds up change. Theology concerned with transformation.

Strong societies can assimilate other sign systems.

Conflict of sign systems – Israel in Assyria and Egypt

1. Boundary may be transgressed requiring reorganisation of systems.
2. Sign may reverse its meaning (most signs are binary) ‘Good’ becomes ‘bad’.
3. Two irreconcilable signs can be mediated by a third.

**Cultural Analysis and Local Theology**

No culture is simple nor static! Careful in selecting cultural text for theology.

**Church Tradition as Local Theologies**

‘Sociology of Knowledge’: *Faith seeking understanding* – when ‘understanding’ is contextual it can be very selective or surface (eg. ideal Early Church approach) Great dogmas can be accepted paternalistically as ‘supra-cultural’. So check theologies against other cultures.

From Sacred Texts come: sermons, Hadith, Talmud, Vedanta, writings of Apocraphae Saints & Sufis, the Stories of Saints. Ong says stories expand in non-linear fashion in oral cultures so they become theology not treatises.

**Theology as Wisdom**

Patristic period, Augustine, Eastern Theological tradition, western spiritual trads. Often centre on interior human psychology as prism of the Divine. Strong use of analogy – triads, paths, (*In Orthodox Christianity, the title “theologian” has been reserved for those mystics who go most deeply into the wisdom of God.*<sup>86</sup>)

**Wisdom thrives in cultures where there is a strong sense of interiority as path to perfection – also indulge esoteric.**

### **Theology as sure Knowledge**

Strong in Protestant and Catholic culture. Aristotle makes Aquinas.

Bureaucracy needed to sustain city culture – so firm law, process & division of labour (development of university & professionalism – an intellectual rather than spiritual discipline holding its place alongside others). It allows us to hold cross-cultural dialogue but is top-down.

### **Theology as Praxis**

Disentangles false (ideology) from true consciousness. Works well in oppressed cultures, but not sure about egalitarian ones. Liberation is close relative of Wisdom theologies – *“one could argue that liberation theologies are wisdom theologies turned outward.”*<sup>93</sup>.

### **TRADITION AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY**

Tradition provides identity – us or not-us.

Provides cohesion and continuity, resources for new struggles.

Tradition provides myths, symbols and language to create meaning.

Grave cultural differences between cultures and across history means that theology from one era can often be misunderstood or prove irrelevant to another whilst purporting to be so – sometimes paternalistically. Therefore some ‘new’ theology comes into play without reference to the ‘old’ theology! Local syncretism may result. Also, in Africa the OT can become more important than Jesus’ critique of it. How is local tested?

How can diversity be maintained without loss of unity/identity?

Tradition is like a complete language system

So how to maintain authority of tradition? Who judges?

Heresy is when one belief/practice obscures the rest.

Practice will tell if the thing is viable/credible.

Other churches will judge.

### **POPULAR & OFFICIAL RELIGION**

Popular = of the people; Folk = affirmation of ethnicity; Common = general.

Often contrasted with Institutional, elitist, intellectual. All post-medieval.

Urban forms transmute rural. Schreiter gives eight pointers to rural folk relig.

1. God as provident – immediate rewards
2. Mediators – usually Jesus and Mary
3. Social activities – feasts, passage, seasons
4. Devotional activities – seeking favours
5. additional mediations – saints and relics and trinkets
6. Associations & fraternities
7. Concerns concrete plus afterlife and global order
8. Shrines but not too concerned with official religion.

Marxists see this as elitist imposition, Elitists as crude.

Romantics see it as genuine religion of the people giving insight into locals.

Some see it as a remnant of pure religion

Gramscians see folk borrowing and transforming from elite as subalterns – sometimes harbouring esoteric ‘freedom’ cry.

Middle class religion is just as much ‘common’ but coincides with clergy.

**Escape: we are Elect, have Gifts, & see 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming** – although in this world we are not elected, have little possession and don’t have place at table.

1. direct access to Power in times of crisis through image or gift.
2. correlates with social patterns of the folk
3. if a true experience of God it may not be reconcilable with elite religion.

We must listen to Common Religion to know what moves in their lives.

## **DUALISM & SYNCRETISM**

### **So local that unity with major Church is lost?**

In Africa some therefore follow dual systems of Christianity and Animism.

Some syncretise as in Rastafarianism.

So: Gospel has to come to terms with culture (often through absorption) but also culture has to come to terms with Gospel! Sometimes similarities help, or epistemological gaps are filled from one side or the other, some just mix the two, often one dominates.

Syncretism is not just theological – it is social, ecological, economic etc – does this doctrine fit the whole bill?

Ideas from reading:

Semeiotics:

Messages = values

Codes = rules for doing

Signs = carriers of value – together give meaning.