

BOOK REVIEWS

SCHRIETER, Robert J., *Constructing Local Theologies*, London UK: SCM Press, 1985, ISBN 0334019559, pp. 158, paperback, £6.50.

In *Constructing Local Theologies*, Robert Schreiter ranges over a wide range of topics in the short space of 158 pages. He discusses different models for local theology (a term he prefers to indigenous theology, or any of the other phrases at present in use), and says why he regards the contextual model as the most satisfactory. He outlines the stages by which a local theology is likely to develop. He analyses the different tools used to study culture, with particular emphasis on the semiotic study of culture. He employs insights from the sociology of knowledge to show how, in the course of the church's history, different approaches to theology have been related to different cultural conditions. He examines the whole prickly question of norms and criteria for Christian identity. He looks at the often-neglected phenomenon of popular religion; and he concludes by facing the problem of syncretism, and the dual religious system.

Although he covers a great deal of ground, Schreiter is basically concerned with two important questions that, together, constitute the subject of the book: "How is a community to go about bringing to expression its own experience of Christ in a concrete situation? And how is this to be related to a tradition that is often expressed in language and concepts vastly different from the present situation?" (p. xi). He emphasises that what he has to say is provisional and incomplete, and that many of the issues he raises demand further analysis. The approach is inter-disciplinary, with much made of the social sciences, and ecumenical (the author is a Roman Catholic priest).

Schreiter shed new light on almost every issue he discusses. In analysing popular religion, he makes use of the approach of the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci, who saw popular religion as the way in which the subaltern class maintains its identity over and against the ruling class.

Schreiter suggests that every class produces its own characteristic religious expression, but that, since the popular religion of the upper and middle classes coincides with the religiosity of the clergy, it has not been recognised for what it is. He gives us a subtle analysis of syncretism from the point of view of the receiving culture rather than the incoming church, which should be required reading for any missionaries still talking about “Christo-paganism”.

On two particular issues, Schreiter has something of great importance to say. The first is his attempt to describe the ways in which different cultural contexts have stimulated different kinds of theological response. Four styles of theology are outlined: theology as variation on the sacred text, theology as wisdom, theology as sure knowledge, and theology as praxis. It is the third of these which has its home in the West, but it is the second which Schreiter predicts will develop in Africa, South-East Asia, and the Pacific.

The other is Schreiter’s attempt to discuss the role played in theology by traditional criteria for orthodoxy (scripture, creed, councils) with the aid of an analogy from linguistics. Linguistics scholar, Noam Chomsky, sees grammar, not as creating language, but as describing it. Grammar does not lay down normative rules for language performance, rather it tries to explain how people, competent in a language, actually generate speech. In other words, rules emerge from language performance: they do not dictate what the basic structures of language performance should be.

Schreiter sees the faith into which we are baptised as being like basic competence in a language. Theology, and other expressions of the Christian tradition, are analogous to speech or language performance. Traditional criteria for orthodoxy operate rather like rules for grammar. Grammar helps us to see what is not a well-formed phrase, and in the same way, scripture, creeds, and the decisions of the councils, set the boundaries for belief, but do not attempt to describe all the conceivable possibilities for theological expression within those boundaries.

A major theme of Schreiter’s study is that local theology should be contextual. He glances at translation and adaptation models of theology,

but he comes down in favour of the contextual models, and, for most of his book, concentrates on them. Contextual theology begins by analysing the situation in which the church finds itself, and attempting to see how Christ is presently speaking through that situation. Local theology flows from the dynamic interaction of gospel, church, and culture. Clearly, the method actually used to analyse the cultural situation is of crucial importance, and I must confess to doubts about the one Schreiter advocates. This is the semiotic approach, which concentrates on the sign system of a culture, and on trying to discover the relationship between signs. Schreiter acknowledges that some critics have alleged that semiotics is too-Western a mode of explanation, but quickly brushes these objections aside without adequate discussion. Certainly, it is not immediately apparent that a semiotic approach would be helpful to liberation theologians, who are concerned to examine their particular context in terms of socio-economic exploitation and oppression.

Some non-European readers may well feel that Schreiter, sitting in his study in Chicago, is too prescriptive in his approach. A way to have avoided giving this impression would have been to have looked at the actual writings of some local theologians in more detail, and to have seen how they handle the topics under discussion. Instead of giving us his ideal map of how local theology should be constructed, Schreiter could have shown us the process at work in selected examples.

Having made this criticism, it must be said that this is a book which deserves to be widely read and carefully studied. It is not always easy to read, partly because the argument is fairly condensed, but I would readily concur with Fr Edward Schillebeeckx, when he comments in the foreword, that this work is important, not only for the missiologist, but for all who are engaged in the serious study of theology.

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