

Thomas G. Grenham, *The Unknown God – Religious and Theological Interculturation* (Religions and Discourse vol. 25, edited by James M. M. Francis), Bern: Peter Lang, 2005. 320 pages, select bibliography and index.

Thomas Grenham undertook in this book the ambitious project of tying together dominant approaches to missiological studies – inculturation, liberation and interreligious dialogue. In *The Unknown God* Grenham tries to demonstrate in seven chapters that interculturation enables first the missionary and then the local theologian to link up, accommodate, dialogue or converse with values as well as shrieve or liberate peoples from non-values of cultures, religions, political and economic systems in a globalized and interdependent world.

Interculturation is not presented in this book as a panacea for resolving all the aporia around missiology or evangelisation. First, I think it is a genuine and commendable attempt to draw from the age-old Patristic notion of “seeds of the word”, which Grenham enthusiastically and insistently refers to as seeds of the Gospel that must be acknowledged, discovered or uncovered as real Gospel values. Second point of interest, interculturation attempts to draw from the theological insight of accommodation championed by Matteo Ricci in China. Grenham appropriates these two missiological insights – Justin’s or the Patristic “seeds of the word” and Ricci’s accommodation. He projects and prolongs these insights into his own personal experience among the Turkana of Kenya. To sharpen his thinking and analysis, he employs the methodology of Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as well as the principles of religious education enunciated in many works of Thomas H. Groome. Our author appears also to be enamoured by the Chicago school of missiology as shown in the persistent recourse to works of Robert Schreiter and Anthony Gittins.

Grenham ranged adaptation, indigenisation, incarnation and inculturation as patterns of external imposition of evangelisation that does not respect mutuality, dialogue, religious and cultural difference. He adopts interculturation, possibly used for the first time by Bishop Joseph Blomjous in the 1980s. Interculturation is

argued to be better than inculturation because it overcomes the limitations of inculturation that the author negatively describes as merely transferring faith from one culture to another or “inserting the gospel” within a particular cultural and religious context. Interculturation, he claims, enables deeper conversation between diverse cultures and religions. Though Grenham does not raise the issue, his discussion resembles the old debate among African theologians about continuity and discontinuity between African traditional religious cultures and the biblical and historical Christian tradition.

In a subtle way Grenham illustrates from Jesus’ life the experience of what he claims to be interculturation: Jesus’ conversations with two women – the Samaritan woman and the Syrophenician woman. Subtle because this includes encounter with another culture, another image of God, and with women who are normally culturally, religiously, politically and economically oppressed. It illustrates dialogue, shifting of positions, mutual evangelisation, and mutual liberation. This enables Grenham to refer frequently throughout the book to the oppression of women in Turkana world; an oppression strengthened by Turkana worldview and myths. He contrasts this with the liberative paradigms of the Gospel or of the reign of God.

The focus of this book, its underlying inspiration and the claims of the author are daring. Reading through the seven chapters, agreeing and disagreeing with the author, one feels that the project moves beyond inculturation, beyond liberation, and beyond interreligious dialogue. It is about intercultural conversation or communication; and also it is about the liberation of Turkana womenfolk prevented from participating in an otherwise commendable Turkana boys’ initiation. Furthermore, it is about encounter with another religious tradition; and therefore the missionary must be firmly grounded in the Christian tradition while acknowledging God in other religions in order to discover the intercultural and transcultural face of the transcendent God. Finally, it is about re-imagining life in a globalized world where relationship must be based on the fundamental ethic of compassion to feel beyond one’s religious, economic, political and civil belonging etc.

It is not just one or the other, but all of the above wrapped together. Tall order! But nevertheless a captivating and challenging project!

As expected in such an ambitious project there are many gaps. The desire to engage many interlocutors creates difficulties in crafting the language to express interculturalism. Sometimes interculturalism should read acculturation (used perhaps interchangeably with interculturalism). At other times accommodation could best sum up what is being described. One feels the struggle by the author to digest sources being used in the book, sometimes successful but also at times befogged and lacking clarity almost bordering on the esoteric. For example, I paused to make sense of the following and similar statements: "The pluralism of religious world views and the diversity of cultures form constitutive components for Gospel evangelisation toward transcendent realities" (p. 264).

Nevertheless, the challenge that Grenham persistently poses for the missionary is what to do with the Gospel values already present within each living cultural matrix. In my view, Grenham's contribution is weighted more on the side of missionary methodology of evangelisation and less on the side of the development of local theology. Following Ricci's insight he insists that the missionary should through friendship, lifestyle, translation of ideas, identifying common ground, and accepting rites approach the host community. But Grenham insists that accommodation should go beyond Ricci to embrace all popular culture. Consequently one adopts the wisdom properties embedded in the Turkana tradition: the notion of a relational God, high value placed on animals, their dance, sacrifices, rituals of initiation, naming of God (Akuj), dominant image of personalities like the *emuron* (diviner-healer.) These and more constitute the fundamental pretext for proclamation that ensures mutuality in the encounter of the Christian Gospel of Jesus Christ. This ensures that a particular historical experience (or Western Christianity) would not be allowed to set itself up as judge of further revelation of this Gospel. From this dialogical encounter one discovers a new reality, new Gospel, God's reign, and the new image of God. Grenham speaks

frequently of “the intercultural face of God” (p. 69) or “the transcendent face of an intercultural God.” (p. 260 et passim)

There are many interesting and illuminating flashes and comments drawn from the Turkana, like the dimension of reconciliation and especially the boys’ initiation rites. No aspects of these or other wisdom and cultural experiences are presented in any great detail to enable the reader assess how far accommodation should go to qualify as interculturalisation. The interaction or intercommunication between “diverse cultures with plural religious perspectives” for “the betterment of humankind locally and globally”, has to be shown in one way or the other as realised or realisable in Turkana Christian practice. Suggestions about animal sacrifices scattered all over the work is not treated in a systematic way. The author is aware of the sensitivity of blood sacrifices and cleverly leaves the final decision to Turkana Christians.

Grenham is passionate about the value of interculturalisation. He raises many questions that I am sure will enable him to write many more books. For example, he warned right at the beginning of his work that he was not engaging issues of systematic theology. Nevertheless, the title of his book “the Unknown God” challenges systematics. Times without number he talked about the intercultural, transcultural and interreligious face of the transcendent God. Defining systematically this emerging face of God could require another book; I am sure Grenham will take it up in the near future.

Second, Grenham is dissatisfied with inculturation – the theological model popularly used in addressing issues of the encounter between Gospel and religious cultures of a given people. He has very good arguments to support the neologism interculturalisation. However, I fear that he limits the description of inculturation to the negative perception of “insertion” of the Gospel within a culture. If inculturation is limited to such negative perception, Grenham will have many disciples. However, I dare to point out that when Grenham embarks on the actual task of interculturalisation the scenario described and the conclusions drawn appear not to go beyond adaptation or accommodation. Sometimes one gets the impression of juxtaposition. For example, the term

*emuron* (diviner/healer) is employed not only as pastoral explanation of healing and miracles of Jesus but also as christological title – a christological title that is not systematically argued. Is that supposed to be intercultural, accommodation, adaptation, dynamic equivalence of symbols or inculturation? Juxtapositions that abound in the area of liturgy appear to be simple adaptations ('concordism'). This includes, connecting the Eucharist and bloody sacrifice; the *asapam* symbolic ritual of breaking the bone in initiation as passage into adulthood is said to accord with the "sacrament of confirmation"; Turkana birthing ritual of lighting a fire to celebrate new life accords with the Easter fire symbolising new life of resurrection, the list continues. These symbols could be indicators of where energy should be directed for deeper intercultural conversation. One could begin with hesitant adaptations before adoption into Christian practice.

Whatever gaps one may identify in *The Unknown God*, there are great merits in this work. Every missionary should be very attentive to the pedagogical principles enunciated by Grenham that enables authentic exchange between Christian symbols (Jesus Christ, the sacraments, the cross) and, for example, Turkana symbols (divination, initiation rites, animal sacrifices, cult of ancestors) so as to maintain "the integrity of the Gospel". Thus, conviction within Christian tradition, mutual respect and collaborative partnerships, listening and providing compassionate advocacy, kenosis or emptying out prejudice, dealing with or managing conflict appropriately, and learning to understand diversity are capital for evangelisation anywhere. Equally important is the curriculum of interculturalism that evolves in six phases for developing local theology. The six phases of evolution revolve around the base Christian community that will ultimately make decision through critical reflection for lived Gospel faith inside and outside community.

My comments instead of taking away from a valuable work only highlight further questions that arise from the work. I felt challenged reading through Grenham's book. I think it is a major contribution to missiological studies; and it provides a major argument to reconsider the theological models being used in missiological studies. I recommend the book for both those in the mission field and the classroom.

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Teresa Mee – *Church Alive! A pilgrimage from Africa to Brazil* (Glasgow: Dudu Nsomba Publications, 2005)

Church alive draws a sharp contrast between a church of the People of God and a church preoccupied with structures; a church that found its life around base Christian communities where the People have a voice and a church that is highly clericalised where women in particular and laypeople in general have no voice. The subtitle, “pilgrimage”, captures the missionary journey of Teresa Mee documented in profuse notes. It is a missionary journey of an Irish nun, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, which shifted from teaching science and mathematics to running renewal centres and finally living in and loving the experience of shantytowns in Brazil.

Teresa Mee started her missionary story as a young science teacher in Ogoja Nigeria; a country that was later plunged into civil war. During the war the detached foreign missionary was quickly saved from the dilemma of taking sides by the quick overrun of Ogoja and environs by the federal forces. But the foreign missionary did not escape the contradictions of the security problems occasioned by the war. Early in her narrative it became clear that doubt over church structures and revolt against such structures were uppermost in the mind of Teresa. The narrative is flowing, interesting, passionate and also detached; taking note of details like the colour of dress and varieties of vegetables and colourful characters. There is strong focus on women, whether market women in Nigeria or women in shantytowns of Brazil.

Teresa’s memoirs reveal a committed and questioning missionary who would not allow doubts to linger without searching for solutions. A sabbatical leave enabled her to sort things out or to sort herself out in a male dominated and clerical church that revolted her. During the time of preparation (San Antonio USA) when she was already gravitating towards the type of church developing in Latin America, we encounter a restless Teresa searching for her place; her heart/person filled up to bursting point word/speech that must be uttered (the image of Jeremiah).

Her apprenticeship in Brazil is full of enthusiasm despite the normal frustrations of the learner. In Brazil laypeople in general and women in particular are part of the church despite intrusive clericalism. Here the encounter and discipling in the company of lay, religious and clerical missionaries, with volunteers and lawyers involved in land rights issues and street children are narrated in simple but breathtaking fashion. Here listening and simple bishops, there lay missionaries and volunteers, priests and nuns in shantytowns! Then base community meetings or congresses reveal Brazil of many colours. The highpoint in the initiation experience appears to be narrated in chapter 9 with title “inspired missionaries”. The development and pastoral projects of a diocese are scored high. Listen to Teresa “I had been able to contribute to the church’s ministry as a sounding board for pastoral agents, but above all, I had been through an enlightening and intensive learning experience of church, of education, of community and of mission”. [p.195] At the end of her initiation experience her options are foreclosed: “my whole being longed to return to Brazil, where I had acquired a new perspective on life, on human development, on Church and on mission, and had begun to opt for a new set of values, freed from the shackles of structures in which I no longer believed”. [p.196] She finally got the consent of her congregation to live and work among the poorest of the poor in Brazil. Joining other missionaries, like those who follow the “suffering servant”, she was glad to labour among those who scavenge from dumps with vultures, those who live in shantytowns. But she was not to leave Brazil until some African members of her congregation joined her. They not only bridged the gap between her experiences in Nigeria and Brazil, but also between Africans and Afro-Brazilians. The memoirs of Teresa are a must for any missionary.

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