



**Refiguring
Theological
Hermeneutics**

*Hermes,
Trickster,
Fool*

Marion Grau



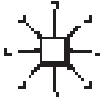
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Preface: On the Poetics of Christian Theological Hermeneutics

CIRCUMAMBULATING THE CROSSROADS; HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLES AND OTHER UN/AUTHORIZED MOVEMENTS

It is no accident—nor is it insignificant—that the discourse of hermeneutics takes its name from Hermes, the messenger of the Greek gods. Hermeneutics describes a variety of efforts to understand and interpret messages across time, space, and difference—of divining the meanings and intentions of others. Ancient Greeks and Romans imagined Hermes, messenger god and messenger to the gods, as haunting the crossroads where merchants, travelers, cultures and religions, empires, missionaries, natives, conquerors and conquered meet, and where a great deal of “hermeneutics” takes place. Hermeneutical movements are circumambulatory; they are made across various territories, looping in hermeneutical circles and sometimes in spirals. Tricksters are found at these crossroads, and Hermes is one of them. Hermes was a god of the boundary marker and the threshold, involved in translations and transitions. Trickster traders shape-shift; deities merge across borders; and crossroads blend stories, concepts, technologies, and traditions, trading spiritual and material energies together. The “zones of interaction”¹ generated around frontiers are populated by tricksters and coyotes passing through, shuttling goods, meaning, and people to and fro, converting spiritual and economic currencies. Divine messengers enter the fray, slip through the cracks of confinements, provoke, stimulate, announce.

William Doty remarks, “What comes as a message through Hermes always requires thoughtful interpretation (the word *hermeneutics* derives from Hermes) and the recipient is left to puzzle out the precise application of the message.”² This sensibility, others argue, is “not particularly new,” but instead “the mode of apprehension we call ‘post-modern’ was as recognizable to the ancient Greeks as it is to us, and was presented specifically in the myth of Hermes.”³ That is to say, the fragmentariness often ascribed to the “postmodern” could be considered a basic, and ultimately profoundly familiar, human experience of life and of meaning-making: that of meaning-making lost, misunderstood, added to, and fraught with many poetic injustices, meaning lost and gained in translation—divinity translated and mistranslated—sometimes amusingly, sometimes tragically, sometimes prosaically. Simply put, interpreting manifests as fragmentary. The trickster aspect of interpreting bodies and worlds seems familiar as the fragmentariness of our sense of reality, comprehension, ambivalence, and prevarication haunts our every utterance. What Jacques Derrida has named “deconstruction” describes the “wobble” involved in representation, an “auto-deconstructing tendency built right into things, [...] as old as the hills.”⁴ Hermes, messenger of the divine, thus circumambulates many crossroads, “tracing” the untraceable tracks of divinity in the universe.

Messengers and interpreters travel and inhabit spaces of transition, ambivalence, and a certain circularity. They move along trajectories, lines, curves, uphill and downhill, through the desert, over mountains. Stories travel along silken roads, runes are scratched, books are marked, bush telegraphs drum it out, blogs and tweets pass on the gist of the latest chatter.

Bodies that interpret are themselves an intersection of meaning and desire, of holy and unholy, clothed in skins that are permeable membranes. Bodies and minds get lost in the labyrinth of meaning, where they turn and turn and turn, in different directions, encountering alternate vistas, exposed to disruptive encounters. Intersections among meaning, desire, and power are frequented by travelers, messengers, angels, mediators, and merchants. At the crossroads, interpretation “brings you round in a circle,”⁵ connecting hermeneutical pathways—intercranial, international. At these cross-roads we circumambulate, bodies, spaces, texts, and presences, frustrated and yet unable to avoid the hermeneutical intersections that circle, cycle, and spiral our

embodied knowing. Traveling across territories we must often rely on cairns, scouts, boundary stones, traffic signs, and other way markers. Our pilgrimages across territories unknown scramble our sense of time, story, priorities, self, and other.

To some, the term “hermeneutics” might be forbidding. It may seem decidedly unsexy—and un-sexed—stodgy, stuffy, overly abstract, and theoretical. For those uninterested in “theory” or other seemingly “abstract” ventures, pushing for what seems to them “application,” theological hermeneutics seems to have little practical purpose—or at least not one that is immediately visible. This book sets out to challenge such stereotypes, where they may exist, by arguing that whether or not we choose to acknowledge the interpretive processes that are involved in our living and communicating, they are active and affecting our lives and bodies nonetheless. Hermeneutics is always already being applied in our lives, and our “practical” attempts at transforming thought and action are deeply involved with the decoding and encoding of bodies and their messages—chronically mis/understood and mis/applied.

Indeed, I suggest that three figures, the Greek god Hermes, the trickster, and the Fool illustrate these twists and turns of meaning-making, haunting the core of hermeneutics as well as the core of Christian theology. They are figures of indeterminacy, illustrating how peoples reflect on meaning-making and interpretation—within and between languages and cultures.

WHERE THIS BOOK FITS IN—OR STICKS OUT

This book continues an interpretive circumambulation begun in *Rethinking Mission in the Postcolony*, further circling the pathways of encounter, transition, interpretation, and translation of religious experience and ways of expressing human understandings of the divine.⁶ Interpretation and translation of the content of sacred narratives across cultural and religious frameworks emerged as a central preoccupation in many a missionary encounter, ancient or modern. The complexity of interpretive decisions that some “messengers of the divine” made, often with little preparation or skill, was often momentous. Language, culture, political organization and conflicts, economic structures, and ecology of life contributed to the often extremely complex layers of communication involved in mission and translation. The practice of

naming sacred relations of the cosmos, divinity, and humanity troubles, incites hopes, and inflames desires. The naming that stretches toward the infinite is heavily entangled in the finite, that which is both limited and liminal.

This text focuses on some of the figures that stand at these liminal places of exchange, interpretation, and translation. Biblical texts feature numerous references to messengers of the Lord, *angeli kyriou*, mysterious beings that carry the divine word to its recipients, be they kings or meek maidens. Other messengers bring news of battles, enemy camps, and losses. The Word of God in Hebrew biblical texts can have the characteristics of a message, sometimes that of a messenger itself: “As they were sitting at the table, the word of the Lord came to the prophet [...]” (1 Kings 13). The German term *Hiobsboten*—messengers to Job—describes the bearers of devastating news, relating profound losses that change lives forever. As mediators of the sacred, angels carry messages. Gabriel comes to the young Mary and tells one of the most outrageous tales in the gospels. Other angels stand at the empty grave, guarding.

As angelic messengers travel the borderlands, their bodies themselves can become part of any message they may be relaying—bridging languages, peoples, and purposes. The figures of Hermes and the trickster connect the seemingly unconnected, traveling the liminal spaces of the sacred. The trickster has accompanied my theological inquiry for some years, a cypher for ambiguity, polyvalence, and paradoxicality, as well as for the inscrutability of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁷ I have seen this ambiguity as central to the work of engaging hard questions about existence and the sacred, and to doing theology. Thus I have explored the aspects of tricksterdom that contribute to an understanding of the interpretive process of the hermeneutical task and practice that is so intricately and inescapably part of being an embodied human being. The wobble of constant ambiguity and negotiation in intimate relationships as well as in attempts to interpret the layers of global conflicts as they are presented to us permeates the fabric of our lives and daily existence. In a world that seems only to increase in complexity and heighten its focus on communication modes, new and old, the work of thinking through the processes of interpretation, especially that of religious meaning-making within the signal stream of our lives, manifests as crucial.

An appreciation of indeterminacy will help to identify how trickster figures as messengers function in multiple cultural locations. Trickster figures have many different manifestations, and we will not recognize them if the set of characteristics is too narrowly managed.⁸ The strategies employed by the figures of trickster, (holy) fool, and shaman embody and represent the functions the discipline of theological hermeneutics aims to describe. These figures appear with a “shifting cluster of attributes,”⁹ expressive of the experience that any interpretive act, and thus any hermeneutics, involves a fundamental indeterminacy. Hermes is a type of trickster, and hermeneutical actions can be detected across cultural difference by looking at other trickster figures. This book thus explores the relevance of a trickster hermeneutics for theology, engaging in particular the figure of Hermes, trickster, and fool. The investigation of these figures is followed by a chapter tracing what has been and is at stake in marking theology as a discourse that involves both of the classical categories of *mythos* and *logos*, and hence remains awkwardly between multiple genres—irreducibly a *mytho-logy*.

Circumambulating the territories of our planet, travelers meet—lives, worlds, and words—and we struggle to find common ground and conversation. Our ways of making meaning of the world around us are expressed through conceptual universes. Travelers across religions and cultures especially experience this confusing, often dangerous, territory as full of (literal as well as metaphorical) land mines, tripping stones, and so many things lost in translation. Writing black magic on white spaces, meaning hides between lines and letters. It is an economy of representation, but always also a counterfeit; something is always lost in translation and trade. And yet, those who struggle to express the poetics of the divine continue to circumambulate mysterious territories, themselves engaged in the work of tricking the divine into words, onto pages, struggling with the tremendous effects of that responsibility, and needing ever to be reminded of the futility of such efforts.

DEDICATIONS

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On the feast of a messenger of the Divine Word
Sankthansaften/Feast of John the Baptizer 2014, Stavanger and Oslo

NOTES

1. Peter S. Wells, *The Barbarians Speak: How the Conquered Peoples Shaped Roman Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 126.
2. William G. Doty, "Hermes Guide of Souls," *Journal of Analytic Psychology* 23, no. 4 (October 1978): 359.
3. Bernie Neville, "The Charm of Hermes: Hillman, Lyotard and the Postmodern Condition," *Journal of Analytical Psychology* (July 1992): 339.
4. John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 74.

5. David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 31.
6. Marion Grau, *Rethinking Mission in the Postcolony: Salvation, Society, and Subversion* (London/New York: T&T Clark/Continuum, 2011), 2.
7. See Otto's classical rendering of the aspects of experiencing divine mystery that both attracts and disturbs. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 6th ed., trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 12ff.
8. This relates, for example, to the attempt to define the characteristics of tricksters across cultures. Thus, even the question of the tricksters' characteristic fickle mobility is at stake. Many interpreters of tricksters will list boundary crossing and travel as their main characteristics, and that they are predominantly male. If it is the case that in many societies men have been more mobile than women, female tricksters would remain unrecognized. But what if, for example, one saw the characteristics of movement as not exclusively one of physical, traveling mobility, but also as mobility across boundaries of ethnicity, differences in status and gender, epistemological status, transgressive in terms of gendered characteristics, and so forth? Then a host of female tricksters come into view, including Pandora, Esther, Rachel, Rahab, Tamar, and Scheherazade.
9. Smith has suggested taking this approach to reading texts of different religious provenance. Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1978), x.

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1. Unsealing Hermeneutics

THE “NOT IMMEDIATELY INTELLIGIBLE”

“Hermeneutics operates whenever something is not immediately intelligible.”¹

With this basic, if broad, definition offered by Hans-Georg Gadamer, we might consider hermeneutics—that is, interpretation of that which is given and which we encounter in the world around us—as something that is pertinent whenever we engage with what seems unintelligible or what we need to make sense of through a conscious or unconscious process.² This process concerns the spoken word and text as much as nonverbal and other sensual data, bodies of flesh as well as bodies of water, weather, and landscapes. Theological hermeneutics in particular concerns itself with the experience of the unintelligible and the infinitely untranslatable, stretching the bounds of translatability with each apparently impossible utterance about the Divine. Its economy of expression falls notoriously short of the ability to grasp the Divine and is prone to inflicting damage when we claim to understand and thus control the verbal and ritual expression of the Divine.

In his introductory text on theological hermeneutics, Werner Jeanrond makes the following observation:

It is thus evident that any consideration of the various forms of belonging as well as of ultimate belonging requires hermeneutic decisions, that is, strategies of interpreting authentic forms of Christian life and developing criteria of authenticity for Christian life. No form of human belonging can escape this hermeneutical predicament.³

Acknowledging the apophatic strands in the engagement with the Divine, many theologians, past and present, have stated that theology and other forms of religious discourse are not a precise science. In fact a closer look reveals that most sciences are far from precise; rather, they are constantly shifting discourses and practices. As we fumble in the dark of what we cannot know, we feel strangely compelled to explore and express what we experience. Exploring the double entendre of un/sealing would mean unsealing the discourse of theological hermeneutics and exploring the patterns of sealing involved in Hermes's tricky art of interpretation.

Throughout the early use of the term in Greek, *hermeneia* referred to the interpretation of various kinds of messages, an ambivalent act of attempting to understand and translate utterances of all kinds, including messages from divine agents. This movement to interpretation has been intimately tied to the theology and the poetry of conceptualizing the sacred nature of the world and the relationships therein, sometimes affirming (kataphatic), sometimes denying (apophatic). Aristotle opens his treatise *Peri Hermeneias* (*On Interpretation*) with just that first basic distinction:

Let us, first of all, define noun and verb, then explain what is meant by denial [apophasis], affirmation [kataphasis], proposition [apophasis], and sentence [logos].⁴

Here, these terms are simple grammatical distinctions. Denial/apophasis states something by stating that it is not the case. We might consider a biblical example to illustrate this. In Matthew 12:30, the phrase “whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” mixes and matches apophasis/denial “not with” and affirmation “is against me.” The presumable meaning is that a person who is not explicitly working with Jesus is in fact against him, which eradicates space for neutrality. Mark 9:40, on the other hand, states that “whoever is not against us is for us,” shifting denial to “not against” and affirmation to “is for.” Jesus here seems to be saying the opposite, opening up a space for neutrality, since even those not explicitly with him are not counted as against him. A rather slight grammatical difference describes in fact a very different sense of what relating to Jesus looks like, at least in these two statements. An easy-to-overlook variation offers a powerful hermeneutical alternative. The composite

picture of Jesus refracted by just these two phrases from two different gospels renders Jesus hermeneutically complex, and his attitude toward those taking a stance toward him seems to fluctuate.

Christians adapted and reinterpreted a variety of existing interpretive patterns and techniques for their own hermeneutics. The apostolic letters and gospels represent a particular hermeneutic aiming to engage and transform known oral and written traditions. Much of Christian theology lives in the dynamic tension between the apophatic and the kataphatic, saying and unsaying, affirming and denying what we can and cannot know about God. The sense of God as being beyond understanding is a sentiment widespread within Platonic traditions, and it became a vital aspect of Christian theological expression.⁵ A future theological hermeneutics might employ the categories of kataphatic and apophatic to realize interpretive silences and point to gaps in the practices of poetic, intercultural, interdisciplinary, and interreligious interpretation.

Translation as a hermeneutic act of decoding the Other is woven throughout the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Indeed, the “emergence of Christianity is intimately tied with translation” and expresses a powerful “translational impulse.”⁶ Christian attempts to translate the claims of the faith from and into the idiom of other languages and cultures aimed to render the message of the gospel compelling across cultural, geographic, and temporal distances.

Christian theology at its best articulates faith from the deep context of our lives, in an increasingly global and comparative space. Theology must make sense of ordinary people’s lives and inform our wrestling with how we can live together well. While it ought to inspire us to live more in touch with the values of our faith so they can inform our day to day practices, how this should exactly happen presents an ongoing challenge: What factors should inform and determine our reading of biblical and theological heritage? How should political, economic, ecological, and social and personal context factor in? Living according to the values of one’s faith continues to be grounds for negotiation, and such deliberations highlight the importance of conscious engagement with interpretive processes.

Christian theology is also in deep conversation with the many ethnic, cultural and religious traditions that have fed and continue to feed into its river of thought. Theological hermeneutics—interpretation of the

Divine and the sacred elements of the universe—happens within and between religio-cultural traditions. And, in this connected, blended, endlessly related world, interpreting across difference continues to increase in complexity and importance.

Theology involves many modes of thinking and genres of expression. As its role in society shifts, theologians must seek new, and reinvent old, ways of naming the unnameable and unsealing the sealed. In order to become more flexible to undertake such a task, it is crucial that some Christian voices formulate hermeneutical approaches that take into account the complexity of both their own and other cultures and traditions. There is space for a constructive theological hermeneutics to work from the historical archives while remaining fully open and engaged with deepening forms of transreligious and transcultural encounters. Such theological hermeneutics resists simple oppositions and clear definitions and confronts reductionist reasoning. It challenges ingrained injustices in the political system or discourse while articulating a resolute polydox theopoetics,⁷ both grounded and flexible and seeking to embody such creative, interpretive acts.

The present time and context call for a radical rethinking of theological hermeneutics. Theology, written in deep conversation with other religious and cultural narratives, drawing deeply from the wells of time and place, between parochial and universal, is located, yet radically alert to the dynamic of the story just as the local weather and climate patterns are always already shaped and affected by events and places both far and near.

It is the claim of this book that figures like Hermes, trickster, and fool reveal, perform, and challenge human interpretive processes. Narratives that feature these figures have much to teach us about meaning making. Stories of tricksters and fools make visible the status quo of a society and its structures of power, knowledge, and belief. Remembering that hermeneutical acts are notoriously polyvalent, these figures can help reframe theological hermeneutics as a vibrant reminder of the need for both humility and resolute courage in reinterpreting the divine through mythos and logos anew each day. The key aim of this project is to point interpretive communities facing situations of economic and ecological crisis toward a radical rethinking of theological hermeneutics as a prelude to reconstructing Christian theology for the contextual eventualities that confront it.

REFRAMING HERMENEUTICS AS PATTERN
RECOGNITION

Understood as pattern recognition, hermeneutics is a common human activity that involves the reading and interpreting of bodies, ecological systems, economic exchanges, societies, and situations. The term “pattern recognition” employed here for certain kinds of correlation hopes to capture something between globalizing universalisms and singular, particularistic “incomparable” uniquenesses, a place where we may observe, recognize, and link patterns in life and narrative not to insist unhelpfully on some kind of nonexistent uniformity, but rather to make enough connection for various lifeworlds to come into a better view of one another. I propose a form of pattern recognition that has a number of similarities to the work of any historian, ethnographer, or anthropologist: the available data are fragmented, perhaps more readily displaying gaps rather than offering solid evidence, and often engaged in a narrative ideology that seeks to provide explanatory and potentially legitimizing force.⁸

Given the problematic history of comparison as an instrument for colonial denigration of the ethnic and religious other in particular, there is a great deal of ethical responsibility inherent in such imaginative construction. The work of comparison is fraught with the danger of self-referentiality, of self-interest, and the projection of one’s denied shadow onto another; there is also the danger of sheer ignorance and the improper linking of texts, patterns, and circumstances across differences of culture, time, and place. One way to remain humble in any undertaking in theological meaning making may be to understand it as an *exercise in pattern recognition*, open to constant disruption and reframing. Thus, such comparisons do not seek “demonstrable proofs, offering secure shelter, but rather tenuous spaces, both for the builder of the comparison and for the audience who temporarily passes under its roof.”⁹

I suggest that hermeneutic complexity is best approached with a flexible but resolute epistemology. Holding patterns we think we have recognized in an open palm, lightly and not in a stranglehold, is crucial in such situations. Remaining open to the touch of transcendence in immanence in each moment precludes holding too tightly what cannot be held anywhere other than in a wide space.¹⁰ The purpose of tracing

some patterns of interpretation here is not to assume any kind of grasp on the situations or occurrences, not to provide answers, but rather to sketch certain cross-cultural, cross-temporal, and cross-geographic similarities in difference. Not unlike what we find in chaos theory, where fractals are repeated at different scales and with different repetition rates, a number of patterns of meaning making can be recognized. As in chaos theory, what we find often hovers between solidly defined forms of chaos and order, often teetering on the edge of chaos, as repetition in difference.¹¹ In these unruly patterns, we might discern certain rhythms, certainly not harmonies, that allow movement in and around the flow and friction of patterns, rather than simply being subsumed into them, or fighting a losing battle against polyvalence or ambivalence.

I would like to propose a definition of hermeneutics as the quest of forming, articulating, and communicating an understanding of the world in which humans live and the events and agents experienced therein. Theological hermeneutics, then, has aspects of *the art and skill of negotiating exchanges, connections, and differences (and presences/absences) between and among Gods and humans, between cultures, times, places, ecosystems, and so forth*. Thus, I propose that *hermeneutics describes polymorphic acts of interpretation. It is art that is practiced far beyond the Western cultural context and modern Western academic discourse. Aspects of this kind of hermeneutics can be explored by looking at its connections to trickster and fool figures and their interpretive functions. This theological hermeneutics highlights the trickster Hermes hidden in hermeneutics, and observes hermeneutical functions in other trickster figures in order to expand the repertoire and understanding of interpretive patterns*.

Jesus of Nazareth is perhaps one of the more unexpected trickster figures. He, too, can be seen as always already liminal, that divine messenger and mediator who connects the seemingly unconnected, tells parables that confound and fascinate, challenge and transform. He engages in disappearing acts and metamorphoses and acts the holy fool for us to imitate as we try to confound the death-dealing logic that rules over our lives. The human-divine body of Christ, a trickster figure who embodies and thereby holds together in powerful ways the paradoxes of human flesh and divine substance, is central to the particular crossroads of Christian theological hermeneutics. But like other messages shuttled through crossroads, he can become overshadowed, sidelined,

and sandwiched between the goods, the muskets, the textiles, the technologies, and monies that titillate attendant economic exchanges.¹²

One of my driving theological questions has been what salvation is and what it looks like. From my previous writing projects on the questions and relevance of redemption, divine economy, and the articulation of a postcolonial missiology, making a foray into theological hermeneutics felt like a logical progression. The exploration of the connections between divinity and economy in soteriological discourse as undertaken in *Of Divine Economy* is itself a matter of deep hermeneutical implications: Where do we look for and how do we perceive and interpret God's saving action in the world? And what are the implications of using economic terminology to describe and express it? When doing research on how the soteriological concerns of missionary churches and societies translated their understanding of the divine economy of salvation in previously unknown territories, languages, and therefore lifeworlds, I found that questions of communication, interpretation, and translation moved further into the center of the inquiry. How were the many layers of intercultural communication refracted with the imperial and economic concerns that were the context of much of missionary work? How did the personal and communal aspects of interaction affect the theological content and the biblical narratives that were transmitted in a particular place and time? What were the connections between metropolitan theological discourses and colonial missionary encounters? How did the interactions between missionaries and locals repeat or shift the way in which biblical texts and concepts were refracted?

This book represents my attempt to respond to issues and questions that had remained open from previous inquiries: What can we learn from the entanglement between Christian faith and economic and colonial relationality for an intercultural theological hermeneutics that helps articulate Christian theology in not only post-Christendom, but also in postsecular societies shaped by those same global economic, ecological, and migratory forces? What concepts, figures, narratives, and complexes may be useful toward the formulation of such a hermeneutic? How might one address through theological hermeneutics both the increasing religious illiteracy and the erosion of the ability to access certain forms of discourse?

In addressing these questions, what follows does not try to formulate some kind of full, final, or complete version of theological hermeneutics.

I see it more as a kind of manifesto, trying to imagine a recombination of tradition and innovation, exploring some of the more interesting construction sites within that discourse. A greater consideration of how the reality of embodiment impacts interpretation points to alternate possibilities for retelling religio-cultural narratives of the sacred that appear to be hermetically sealed to many of our contemporaries. Each new generation and context requires a certain degree of *reimagination of a hermeneutics of the sacred*, of the sacred in and beyond where we are and what we know. Each generation must learn to see and touch the divine in everything; it must consider the divine as embodied and in its embodiment.

The comparison of different human experiences is as common as it is problematic, especially at the intersection of culture and religion. When expected patterns or meanings are not found or recognized, the seeming absence of a practice, concept, or structure can lead to erroneous claims about their absence or meaning. Missionaries and anthropologists, intercultural interpreters who tend to produce readings that feature “false parallels,”¹³ can foster “easy illusions” of similarities that become hardened and resistant to revision past the first impressions upon which they were founded. The overdetermination by patterns from one’s home culture and familiar theological concepts can affect the representation of ideas of others in such a way as to deeply obscure them.¹⁴ Ethnographers and missionaries can plant quasi-equivalents of Christian concepts in the host culture. At times it becomes impossible to try to untangle layers of reading that have become entangled. Is the fact that some readings were, possibly, inadvertently, “planted” grounds enough to dismiss them as problematic, because they do not fit a sense of historic originality? Even if the first articulation of a creative adaptation was a strategy of legitimation within a changing cultural scheme, and thus potentially polemic and apologetic, other versions of these shifts articulate the constant changes and developments of theological expressions and their creative, integrative shape. The present study is interested in the dynamics of interpretation rather than in the establishment of some fail-safe method, even if there were such a thing.

Storytellers and theologians improvise upon their themes engaging questions of sacred ethnogenesis: the narratives show concern with what constitutes the group, what allows life to flourish, and what phases of transition and learning have been passed through. They recount the

deeds of ancestors and how they inform the present, and the ambivalent acts that occur on the path of a community's travels to finding, losing, and keeping its place of life and way of life. We hear about arrangements made with difficult neighbors, wars being fought, the management of gender relations, and how divine agency moves people through space and is involved in negotiating space. Sometimes divinity features as central to space negotiations; sometimes divinity is marginal to the narrative. Many biblical narratives articulate the tension between the tribal focus of the divine-human relationship and care for creation beyond one region or people.

Like any other form of discourse, theology represents an economy of power and is expressed through certain forms of power, including multiple forms of self-fashioning technology. It includes the integration of previous practices and concepts into a regularly transformed relationship with the divine. Interpretive moves include the continuation of a narrative tradition and attempts to name and rename a narrative of connection to the divine in the incarnate bodies of persons and communities. Transforming meaning making necessitates an awareness of all forms of baggage carried over: theological, intercultural, personal.

As we consider these forms of meaning making across difference, it helps to consider theological hermeneutics as *diatopical when*

the distance to be overcome is not merely temporal, within one broad tradition, but the gap existing between two human topoi, "places" of human understanding and self-understanding between two—or more—cultures that have not developed their patterns of intelligibility or their basic assumptions out of a common historical tradition or through mutual influence. *To cross the boundaries of one's own culture without realizing that another culture may have a radically different approach to reality is today no longer admissible.*¹⁵

Even as we are unable to eradicate errors in crossing the boundaries and circumambulating sacred sites and texts, we continue to aim for a humble, if curious and wise, hermeneutics. The quest is then to gain greater consciousness about patterns of thinking, reading, interpreting, seeing, and feeling the Divine in ourselves and others. To put it another way, diatopical hermeneutics involves all the possibilities and all of the problems of translation. As a deeply incarnate practice, *re-ligare*, the relation making that characterizes religion is expressed through interpretation and hermeneutics as meaning making. All religious reasoning

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