

# Science of Religion and Missiology at the Faculty of Theology, University of Pretoria: Historical overview, theological discourses and future possibilities

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## ■ Introduction

Science of Religion has been taught at the FT since its inception 100 years ago. Together with Philosophy of Religion, it formed part of the original group of subjects that have been presented since 1917. The first lecturer was the Rev. E. Macmillan (Presbyterian).

When the Faculty divided into two ecclesiastical faculties in 1938 the NRCA and the NRC, the Department also split along these lines.

Science of Missiology has been taught since 1938 when D.J. Keet (NRC historian) included the history of mission in the curriculum of Church History. From 1949 onwards, he also taught the subject Science of Missiology on an unofficial basis to students with an interest in missions.

In 1953, the department was renamed 'Science of Religion and Missiology', and H.D.A. du Toit was appointed as professor and head of the Department of Science of Religion and Missiology at the then Dutch Reformed FT (Section B) (Meiring & Niemandt 2013:119).

The two ecclesiastical divisions were united in 2000. This brought into the equation the considerable knowledge of and insight into Science of Religion of P.J. van der Merwe, and it gave birth to a very unique situation where Mission Studies and Science of Religion are studied and taught in one department.<sup>45</sup>

This overview of the Department Science of Religion and Missiology will attend to both of these disciplines.

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45. See Meiring and Niemandt (2013:119–144) for a more comprehensive description of the history of the Department.

## ■ Science of Religion

In its most simplistic form, religion is an attempt at addressing brokenness and creating wholeness (Kobia 2005:1). What we deem as religion represents a journey to wholeness, healing and the mending of broken relationships. Religion is expressed in cultic and ritual praxis and communicates by means of symbols and metaphors. This is located within a social setting and directed towards adherents of religion as well as to society at large.

Religion is concerned with understanding reality (Beyers 2010:1). Although reality exists independently of human existence, humans engage in the process of interpreting reality. The Christian doctrine of 'general revelation' teaches that God revealed, and is still revealing, Himself in external reality (i.e. reality outside of human consciousness). Calvin, however, taught that no human being could truly discern God's revelation without looking through the lens of faith. Only after coming to faith in Jesus Christ is humanity able to discern the meaning of God's revelation in his creation. The direct object of Science of Religion is not faith but religion. When talking about faith, we as Christians assume that we are talking about the Christian faith, referring to that living relationship between God and the Christian believer that has been, and is being, mediated by Jesus Christ.

The dilemma is that, if the focus of Science of Religion is religion and the attempt is to engage with religion in as neutral and unbiased a way as possible, Theology ought not to play any role. In the FT of the UP, Science of Religion is part of the Department Science of Religion and Missiology, thus located within Theology. Being integrated into Theology means that the traditional neutral stance of Science of Religion can no longer be maintained. What we are presenting in this discipline may be termed 'Theological Science of Religion', implying the study of religion from a Christian theological interest and perspective. In this discipline, Theology considers the theological meaning of the common phenomenological structure of all religions as well as the encounter of the Church with other religions.

In the discipline 'Science of Religion', students are introduced to a selection of the beliefs and practices of other religions (e.g. Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Traditional African Religions). South African society has become increasingly plural with the implication that members of society are exposed to new and divergent ideas and cultural practices. Preparing for ministry within the Christian tradition requires knowledge about non-Christian traditions. However, what are the implications of gaining knowledge of other religions? Science of Religion wants to interpret religions through a theological lens.

## ■ Theological discourses in Science of Religion

Within the discipline of Science of Religion, several discourses are presented simultaneously. The approach to studying religions entails a sociological, anthropological as well as theological position. The main focus is, of course, an understanding of religions. Students are exposed to beliefs and practices of the world's main religions. During the first-year courses, the emphasis is on explaining the terminology and concepts utilised within the discipline. In the second-year modules, the focus is on the methodology utilised in studying religions. Phenomenology, comparative studies as well as cognitive approaches are investigated as methods. During the third year, students apply the knowledge gained so far by studying world religions and discerning a theology of religions.

As to research, the discipline of Science of Religion at the UP has two main areas of interest, namely, secularisation and theology of religions.

## ■ Secularisation

Secularisation can be categorised into three different groups, namely 'secularisation as differentiation of the secular spheres from religious institutions; secularisation as decline in religious

beliefs and practices; and secularisation as marginalization of religion to a privatized sphere' (Casanova 1994:211).

These categories do not imply the disappearance of religion but mainly refer to the change of location of religion in society – and a change in the status of religion.

The demise, and even disappearance, of religion has been predicted in the past (compare the work by Berger [1967] and Luckman [1967]). However, as time passed, new social developments required a revision. A revised theory by Berger (1999:13) predicts that religion will not only remain intact but will, in fact, grow. It has to be acknowledged that the process now known as secularisation has played havoc with Western civilisation. The effect of secularisation has had an impact on Europe, Northern America as well as the colonies of world powers.

Where Berger used to be negative about the persistence of religion, he became convinced that religion will not only persist but grow. 'The world today is massively religious, is anything but the secularized world that had been predicted' (Berger 1999:9). The old secularisation theory might be true in some instances, but in general, Berger finds the theory that 'secularity will triumph ... unpersuasive' (Berger 1999:12). The 'massively secular Euro-culture', Berger determines, exhibits what he would rather call the 'widespread alienation from the organized church' or 'a shift in the institutional location of religion' (Berger 1999:10). Religion has shifted from the public sphere to the personal sphere.

Currently, the debate has shifted to reflect an understanding of a post-secular situation or even a time of resacralisation. In this new context, Science of Religion can contribute to Theology by indicating the status and function of religion in society and by explaining the role the church can play under changed conditions in society. As religion is no longer located in the public sphere, individuals exercise their religion in a

private 'invisible' form (compare Luckmann 1967:86). Science of Religion provides theological insight into the role and function of religion in society and advises the church on how to organise itself and how to engage society with the gospel under changed conditions.

## ■ Theology of Religion and religions

The relationship between Christianity and other religions needs to be addressed by Theology. In this regard, Science of Religion can provide insight.

The world has become plural in more ways than one (Kärkkäinen 2003:18). This plurality applies to all levels of existence such as religious affiliation, race and culture, social and economic status, and even differences in world view. This diversity of societies has brought about exposure to a variety of other (and different) traditions. Plurality implies connectedness to the other. Globalisation has made communities aware of their differences. Any claim to universal truth or universal religious applicability must be prepared to be tested in this world-wide forum.

Religions are in contact with one another, and one can add to this the presence of those not subscribing to any religion. Kärkkäinen (2003:19) indicates those who do not believe and those who do engage differently in society. The South African context reflects a multicultural and multireligious environment. Values and religious viewpoints previously accepted without question must now be prepared to be questioned. The church and its members are moving into unknown territory. Theology is called upon to provide answers to questions now arising from interreligious encounters. These and many other points end up on the agenda of the discipline of Science of Religion in Theology.

## ■ Theology of Religion (*Theologia religionis*)

Science of Religion provides theological reflection on the technical debate about the phenomenon of religion, resulting in a theological theory of religion. Dupuis (1997:7) indicates that the theology of religion asks, from a Christian perspective, what religion is and seeks to interpret the universal religious experience of humankind. It further investigates the relationship between revelation and faith, faith and religion, and faith and salvation. The understanding of the nature of the own religion evidently leads to an understanding of the relationship with other religions.

Rudolf Otto (1932:5) provides a theological explanation of the origin of what he refers to as 'the Holy'. The Holy exists independently and autonomously from human existence. Humans merely become aware of the existence of the indescribable Holy. This feeling is described as a feeling of dependence (Otto 1932:10). In reaction to this becoming aware, humans construct an appropriate response which manifests in religion (Otto 1932:82). This is a theological explanation as to the origin of religion. This position is also clear from the theology of religion present in the opening section of the monumental work of Calvin's *Institutie*. In the opening section (Calvin 1931:8, para. 1), Calvin indicates that he is convinced that religion is a universal human phenomenon that must be explained as the effect of an innate *semen religionis* [seed of religion] and a *sensus divinitatis* [sense of divinity]. By this, Calvin indicates that humans have a natural knowledge of the Divine. Such innate ability is traced back to God's creation of humankind. God reignites this awareness of the divine in humans by 'adding droplets' to human existence from time to time. Religion is thus part of human nature. Ontologically, humans have been predetermined for religion.

The question about the origin, nature, and essence of religion remains one of the fundamental theological issues. Many modern

theologians claim that religion as phenomenon provides theology with an important theoretical challenge. A theological theory of religion is essential for the church's understanding of itself.

## ■ Theology of Religions (*Theologia religionum*)

Theology of Religions is concerned with the theological reflection on the meaning and value of other religions (Kärkkäinen 2003:20). This is where theology focuses on religions that are neighbours or challenging the message and/or mission of the church – with a view to evaluating such religions in terms of revelation, salvation and the challenge they pose (from a Christian perspective). The purpose is to reach a deeper level of understanding of the other. Theology of Religions also aims to formulate principles and guidelines with a view to the practical coexistence, witnessing toward and dialogue with members of other faiths.

Ever since Christianity had to consider its relationship with other religions, a debate, which is not done, has been raging. The debate started out as an intrareligious debate between Christians as to how to understand the relationship between Christians who are differing on interpretations of matters of faith. The apparent statement made by Origen that no salvation is possible outside the 'house' of the church was directed against sectarian groups within Christianity (Dupuis 1997:87). The church father Cyprian had the same intention when he formulated the principle '*extra ecclesiam nulla salus est*' [outside the church there is no salvation] (Dupuis 1997:88). This was done within the context of the struggle between the church and sectarian groups (Berkouwer 1965:231).

Only when Christianity became state religion (Dupuis 1997:89) did this principle become the official position of the church and was it applied far beyond its original scope in terms of intent and time (Berkouwer 1965:230), namely to all who found themselves outside of the church – all non-Christians. Even the most spiritual



and pious gentile should convert to the Christian faith and church in order to be saved. Piety as such offered no hope of salvation (Kärkkäinen 2003:64).

Over time, as the debate between Christianity and non-Christian religions raged on, three positions became apparent, namely exclusivism (referred to as the replacement model by Knitter 2005:19–43), inclusivism (referred to as the fulfilment model, Knitter 2005:63–108) and the pluralistic position (referred to as the mutuality model, Knitter 2005:109–172). Knitter (2005:175) indicates the inadequacy of these three models to comply with the requirements of postmodern thought, and he suggested a fourth model, namely the acceptance model. Based on the acceptance model, Knitter (2005:181) professes that religions will have to acknowledge that they differ too much from one another. Postmodern thought does not subscribe to only one truth – in fact, many truths exist. In light of this principle, Knitter suggests that religions make peace with the fact that they have nothing in common (neither a common origin, nor a common goal). This results in an impasse where religions have to accept that they have nothing to say to one another. Interaction between religions ought to be restricted to being polite neighbours (Knitter 2005:183).

After the groundbreaking insights provided by Knitter, it seemed that the end of a long-standing debate was approaching. However, new approaches surfaced in an attempt to bridge the impasse identified by Knitter. Kenneth Rose, Paul Hedges, David Cheetham and Jenny Dagers all indicate possible directions the debate may take in future.

Kenneth Rose (2013) suggests that pluralism will, in future, be the only coherent explanation of religious diversity. With pluralism, Rose (2013:9) refers to a theory ascribed to John Hick, suggesting a solution to exclusivism and inclusivism. All reflection on the relationship between Christianity and other religions will eventually have to agree to the pluralistic view, according to Rose (2013:2). Acknowledging pluralism is inevitable (Rose

2013:5). This is also the challenge in a multireligious South African context. Pluralism recognises the validity and the equality of all religions. No religion can be considered inferior to any other religion in terms of revelation or salvation. All religions must be viewed as having knowledge of the transcendental.

Paul Hedges (2010) suggests a scheme of polarisation between plurality and particularity when reflecting on the relationship between religions. There is a plurality of religions, each claiming particularity. This polarisation drives the interreligious debate. Hedges acknowledges the impasse reached in the debate. He now considers how religions can co-exist while acknowledging the reality of the plurality of religions and simultaneously, laying claim to uniqueness and particularity (Hedges 2010:9, 228). The most appropriate model addressing this problem is, according to Hedges (Hedges 2010:2), pluralism. Pluralism suggests radical openness to the religious other (Hedges 2010:111, 230). This openness is already present in the Christian tradition (Hedges 2010:2). Hedges (2010:3) argues from a post-liberal theology of religions. From this position, the plurality of religions needs to be acknowledged. Christianity has, over time, evolved into a position of 'radical openness' towards other religions (Hedges 2010:2). This does, however, not imply a subscription to the classical position of pluralism as presented by John Hick (Hedges 2010:113–115). With the pluralist position, Hedges (2010:229) suggests a need to respect the plurality as well as the particularity of religions. Hedges suggests that a radical openness towards other religions should acknowledge the existence of differences and not only ignore these differences. Such radical openness, Hedges suggests, is an effort to avoid the impasse of the pluralist-particularist deadlock.

Christianity depicted as being 'closed', as opposed to a radical open Christianity, focuses on set doctrines, beliefs and creeds, excluding all that differ and enforcing dominance by claiming the sole right to truth (Hedges 2010:230). This 'closed' position, Hedges (2010:230) suggests, grew not from a search and application of the truths found in the gospel but rather from

socio-political concerns which formed the Christian identity as the dominant power in society.

Radical openness, for Hedges (2010:247), entails the possibility of mutual fulfilment for all religions. He indicates that mutual fulfilment should imply the ‘... need for religions to overcome the building of barriers and embrace a radical openness to one another’ (Hedges (2010:249). In every context, ‘the voices that come to us from the margins’ ought to be accepted (Hedges 2010:251) for acceptance of the ‘Other’ implies critically questioning the ‘Own’. Hedges (2010:252) suggests that Christianity will need to consider whether the traditions, denominations and doctrines have not become the idols Christians worship? Openness towards other expressions of religiosity cannot deny, ignore or oppress other religions.

David Cheetham’s (2013:2) contribution to the interreligious debate is an attempt to create appropriate ‘spaces’, or rooms, where religions will feel comfortable to meet. He identifies four spaces of encounter, namely interspirituality, aesthetics, interreligious ethics and spiritual reasoning. With interspirituality, Cheetham (2013:6) refers to the interreligious sharing of spiritual activities such as prayer, meditation and spiritual experiences.

Cheetham (2013:7) suggests that the nature of interreligious encounters be changed from focusing on the religious to focusing on the aesthetic and ethical spaces. With ‘aesthetic attitude’, Cheetham (2013:123) suggests that other religions are viewed as one would view a work of art – emphasising ways of seeing (Cheetham 2013:127). The intention is to experience empathy with other religious traditions on an aesthetic level. This is reached by being an ‘imaginatively participating perceiver’ (Cheetham 2013:147) and not a participant. Viewing other religious traditions is a subjective activity. Mutual appreciation is attained by seeing the other for what it is and appreciating the uniqueness and beauty within each tradition.

The third space of encounter is ethical spaces (Cheetham 2013:149). Cheetham (2013:157) is sceptical of this space as

neutral global ethics will not necessarily be sensitive towards the particularities within cultures and traditions.

As a fourth space of meeting, Cheetham (2013:177) suggests the attitude exhibited by the Scriptural Reasoning movement. They see meeting not as a discussion forum of differences or similarities but emphasise 'understanding above agreement; collegiality above consensus' (Cheetham 2013:179). This particular space of meeting is not theologically defined and opens up the possibility of meeting within in-between spaces.

Cheetham's contribution is an attempt at seeking new ways of meeting. His approach focuses on ways of seeing and meeting the 'Other' and the spaces where meeting might be possible. He does not focus on the content of the meeting itself. He is suggesting the scene for the encounter, preparing conditions conducive to meaningful interreligious encounters.

A current contribution by Jenny Dagers (2013) attempts to establish a theology of religions, recognising the postcolonial context as paradigm within which interreligious deliberations take place. According to Dagers (2013:1), the traditional models of theology of religions consisted of 'Eurocentric imperialist attitudes'. Dagers (2013:1) suggests a postcolonial theology of religious differences to indicate the transition from a monologue in Eurocentric Christianity to acknowledging religious plurality. Dagers (2013:2) suggests that, within a postcolonial context, a revised particularist theology of religions is necessary. This will acknowledge the particularity of religious traditions while simultaneously respecting the integrity of all religions. A Christian particularity grounded in Trinitarian theology is suggested by Dagers (2013:2). This encourages Christianity to act with hospitality towards postcolonial theologies, recognising interreligious concerns.

The postcolonial environment is characterised by religious diversity. This is evident in a postcolonial SA. Dagers (2013:2) poses a revised pluralist model to turn '... theology of religions towards the dynamic process of constructing lived religion within each received tradition' (Dagers 2013:2). Theology of religions

became entangled (Daggers 2013:18) in a colonial understanding of Christianity as being superior to other religions. This caused Christianity to view other religions from a position of power and superiority.

Daggers reminds us that the context within which other religions are currently viewed is no longer a Eurocentric, Christian-pivotal perspective. Theology of religions must therefore engage in a process of disentanglement in order to recognise and acknowledge religious diversity and equality. Disentanglement refers to the process of acknowledging the value of local religious expressions as seen from their own point of view.

## ■ The future of Science of Religion

The discipline 'Science of Religion' will continue to make contributions to these three areas of concern (i.e. studying religions, secularisation, theology of religion and religions).

Science of Religion at the UP is currently collaborating in an international research project investigating Christian-Muslim relations. The Christian-Muslim Relations 1900 (CMR 1900) project, chaired by David Thomas (University of Birmingham), is investigating all literary references to Christian-Muslim encounters from 700 to 1900 AD. The results of this project are disseminated in a Brill publication, now at volume 11 already. This will provide an outline of Christian and Muslim interactions over the centuries. The Southern African contribution to this project comes from the Department of Science of Religion and Missiology. In this way, the department is addressing the challenge of interreligious encounters.

A second project associated with Science of Religion is the *Timbuktu project*. In this project, headed by Maniraj Sukdaven, a translation of the Timbuktu manuscripts is attempted. Research on the content of the documents will provide insights into Christian-Muslim encounters.

The theological reflection on the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions remains at the centre of the discipline of Science of Religion at the UP. Students are encouraged to contribute to the debate by way of research essays and minidissertations. Knowledge of religion and religions will always be an integral part of theological thought. Science of Religion ought to remain within theology as theological discipline (Sundermeier 1999:245). For Sundermeier (1999:247), the connection between Science of Religion and Missiology is so close that one cannot be described without referring to the other. Science of Religion constantly reminds Missiology of the challenge that the presence of other religions poses.

## ■ Missiology

Missiology deals comprehensively with mission. Missiology at the UP finds itself conceptualised according to the description of Michael Goheen (2014:loc.1854-1856), following the broad outlines of the Lausanne Movement in describing mission as the participation of God's people in God's mission to renew the whole of creation and the lives of all its peoples and cultures in their totality. Stanley Skreslet (2012:loc.388-389) focuses more on the issue of systematic research and defines Missiology as the systematic study of all aspects of mission. Verster (2014:882) adds the focus on the comprehensive fullness of life from the perspective of salvation in Christ.

Although there is a decline in mission studies at universities (Kim 2015:82; Verster 2014:883) and Missiology is integrated with disciplines such as Practical Theology<sup>46</sup> at some universities (such as Stellenbosch), a strong case can be made for the continuation of Missiology as a distinct discipline within Theology. David Bosch (1991:9) argues convincingly for Missiology as a branch of the discipline of Christian Theology. Verster describes it as the 'ambivalent situation' of mission and missiology, '[w]hile many

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46. Kim (2015:94) argues that the shift of interest in mission to the local church has tended to benefit the study of PT rather than mission studies.

institutions in the West are inclined to regard mission as obsolete, there are those pursuing its radical value for church and society' (Verster 2014:884). Recent insights include the emphasis on mission as participation in the life-giving mission of the Triune God (WCC) as well as all the attention paid to mission at nearly all the important ecumenical events early in the new millennium (see Niemandt & Pillay 2015). Kim (2015) argues for the relevance of mission studies because of the following:

[W]orld Christianity is not just the result of recent missionary expansion but is a phenomenon that goes back into the New Testament which brings together documents – such as the four Gospels – from a wide geographical area. (p. 82)

She also mentions the fact that mission has never been entirely a colonial phenomenon and that mission from the global South is now well established. Verster (2014:889) argues that Missiology is an intrinsic part of theology and that it has to be acknowledged as part of the university. As theological subject, it needs to be discussed and evaluated. He states that theology would be the poorer if missiology was not taught as part of the theological disciplines.

Missiology has been taught as a discipline at the UP in the Department since 1938. The content broadly covered the following areas: Theology of Mission, History of Missions, Theory and Praxis of Mission, and Theology of Religions.

The consolidation of the curriculum since 2007 as well as the momentum of a more multidisciplinary approach, have led to the integration of History of Missions with Church History. The growth of Christianity in the so-called Global South has caused a sharper focus on theologies of the Third World as well as attention to African religions and African Initiated Churches. The explosion of interest in the concept of 'missional church' led to the introduction of Missional Ecclesiology (why is the church missional by its very nature?), complemented by Missional Leadership (how can a congregation be guided to take ownership of the missional calling) as well as Missional Practice (what are meaningful and effective ways to be missional in our context?)

(see Meiring & Niemandt 2013:128–129). Theology of Mission and Theory and Praxis of Mission are still part of the curriculum.

## ■ Theological discourses in Missiology

Current theological discourses in Missiology have been deeply influenced by important ecumenical events in the new millennium, affirming Bosch's (1991:369) remark on the importance of world (ecumenical) missionary conferences in the understanding of mission. This is enhanced by the foci of the International Association of Mission Studies (IAMS) and other regional academic organisations.

*Together towards Life* (=TTL; Keum 2013), the 2013 mission affirmation by the WCC (the first in more than 30 years), continues to play a defining role in recent mission studies. Much has been published on TTL since the first drafts appeared, and the major discourses can be summarised as follows:

- **Ecological justice:** Niemandt and Pillay (2015:35) researched trends in ecumenism and mission in four significant ecumenical events of the new millennium, and concluded that the most important issues '... that perhaps typify the most important missional and ecumenical trend, is the unequivocal commitment to ecological justice issues'. Eco-justice is a comprehensive term and always includes ecology, economy and equity (Faramelli 2015:151). In this regard, TTL (Keum 2013:5) states, 'rather the gospel is the good news for every part of creation and every aspect of our life and society. It is, therefore, vital to recognize God's mission in a cosmic sense, and to affirm all life, the whole *oikoumene*, as being interconnected in God's web of life. This focus relates to the research theme of the FT at Pretoria, namely '*Oikodome*: Life in its fullness'. Ecodomy in mission refers to the growing attention to earth-keeping and life in fullness in missiology (Niemandt 2015:1).
- **The role of the Holy Spirit in the missio Dei:** A whole section of TTL focuses on 'The Mission of the Spirit' (para. 12–18),



discussing themes such as the role of the Spirit in creation, the role of the Spirit in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, the Spirit and ecclesiology, the particularity of the Spirit's work in redemption and the Spirit in mission praxis. Keum (2012:3) draws attention to the fact that TTL focuses on the *missio Spiritus* within the Trinitarian understanding of mission. Kim (2015:89) ascribes the interest in the Holy Spirit and pneumatological perspectives in mission studies to the wide-ranging interest in spiritual experience and spirituality. Another reason is the rise of Pentecostal and charismatic perspectives, a phenomenon that is also changing the face of Christianity in Africa.

- ***A reiteration of the importance of contextualisation and indigenisation, and the crucial role of discernment as the first act of mission (Kim 2009:34):*** Theology must serve context, and context informs theology. Missiology has a particular sensitivity towards contextualisation (Niemandt 2014b:42). Kim (2015:86) also notes the continued interest in the relationship between mission and culture in the United Kingdom. TTL recognises the importance of discernment and affirms (Keum 2013:11), '[t]he churches are called to discern the work of the life-giving Spirit sent into the world and to join with the Holy Spirit in bringing about God's reign of justice (Ac 1:6–8). When we have discerned the Holy Spirit's presence, we are called to respond.'
- ***Mission from the margins:*** Goheen (2014:loc. 2550–2551) calls this mission in weakness and suffering a response to mission from strength. Mission is no more a movement from the centre to the periphery and from the privileged to the marginalised. Marginalised people are playing an equally important part in God's mission, and TTL (Keum 2013:5) even speaks of a 'reversal of roles' and 'shift of the mission concept from "mission to the margins" to "mission from the margins"'. Globalisation enhances marginalisation. It represents a shift from rural to urban, from poor countries to rich cities and from one nation to another – a present-day global diaspora (Niemandt 2013:23).

The theme for IAMS 2016 was ‘Missiological approaches to religious change’. In his important book on mission studies, Skreslet (2012:loc.405–414) also focuses on the processes of religious change. He refers to the importance of, and changes in, religious boundaries and conversion into and out of Christianity. This crossing of boundaries is inherent to missiology, and Wickeri, Wickeri and Niles (2000:4–11) point out that Christianity is called to renegotiate its boundaries. For Christians, the love of God and the love of our neighbour make the renegotiation of boundaries an especially important issue. Skreslet (2012) adds the vast demographic changes in Christianity to this theme of religious change and argues the following about missiology:

*[It must]... understand better what these demographic changes might mean, how factors of culture have shaped patterns of religious affiliation, and the various means by which Christians have sought to engage people outside the church with the claims of the gospel. (loc. 405–414)*

Skreslet (2012:loc.414–415) also refers to the reality of faith as an ‘enduring characteristic of missiology’. The WCC (2011) tabled a document – ‘Christian witness in a multi-religious world: Recommendations for conduct’. The document states that Christian witness in a pluralistic world includes engaging in dialogue with people from different religions and cultures (WCC 2011:3). Much of this issue of the missionary encounter with other world religions has been discussed in the section on Science of Religion (see section A, especially on Theology of Religions).

The Centennial World Missionary Conference celebrated the famous 1910 conference in Edinburgh. In the Edinburgh 2010 Common Call, the issues of justice and unity were again emphasised (Niemandt & Pillay 2015):

Trusting in the Triune God and with a renewed sense of urgency, we are called to incarnate and proclaim the good news of salvation, of forgiveness of sin, of life in abundance, and of liberation for all poor

and oppressed. We are challenged to witness and evangelise in such a way that we are a living demonstration of the love, righteousness and justice that God intends for the whole world. (pp. 40-41)

This issue is of particular importance in the African context, and the 10th General Assembly of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC 2013) reflects this priority in the congress theme, 'God of life, lead Africa to peace, justice and dignity'. The AACC decided to work towards a just global economic system that appreciates the God-given gift of dignity among all his people (AACC 2013:12). Justice issues will probably focus more and more on economic justice, especially in the light of the worldwide economic crisis since 2008 and the continued and increasing divide between rich and poor. This theme relates closely to the issue of eco-justice mentioned earlier.

One of the important and lively discourses in Missiology is on the theme of missional church. Kim (2015:85) describes this discourse as the widest and most intense discussion around mission. Literally hundreds of books and publications have appeared on this issue (see Van Gelder & Zscheile 2011 for a comprehensive overview). Together toward Life (TTL) (Keum 2013:26) recognises the importance of new initiatives in the revitalisation of the church. A significant number of denominations added affirmations concerning the missional nature of the church to their church polity or formulated policy documents (see also Nyomi 2013:76; Skreslet 2012:loc. 1729-1730). Together toward Life (Keum 2013:7) poses the following important question, '[h]ow can the church renew herself to be missional and move forward together towards life in its fullness?' It answers later in the document, stating that it 'is not the church that has a mission but rather the mission that has a church' (Keum 2013:63). The discourse on missional church is especially relevant in the South African context where a number of denominations prioritise the aspect of missional church. In terms of church partners of the FT at the UP, the NRC the PC and the NRCA all have lively discourses and have made policy decisions concerning missional church (see also Niemandt 2014a:7-9).

Conflict, especially in Africa, underscores the importance of reconciliation and peace building. The AACC (2013:10) paid particular attention to peace building, stating that justice, peace and dignity should be seen in the living situation of people, especially the marginalised (AACC 2013:15).

Challenges particular to the African context continue to stimulate discourse in Missiology. These include the explosive growth of the Christian faith in Africa, postcolonial and African theology, the rise of Pentecostalism in the world and Africa (see Tennent 2010:loc.4749) and the emergence of African Initiated Churches as an expression of Christian faith.

All of these discourses form the background against which research and teaching in the Department plays out.

## ■ **Current theological contributions of the Department**

The current theological contributions of the Department reflect most of the missiological discourses mentioned, and research is done in the following areas:

1. ***Mission as justice, reconciliation and peace building:*** In 1996, Piet Meiring was appointed by President Nelson Mandela to serve, alongside Archbishop Desmond Tutu, on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC 1996–1998) where he was primarily involved in reparation and rehabilitation issues as well as coordinating the TRC Faith Community Hearings. He also published extensively on the issue of reconciliation. A new *Chronicle of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (American edition with a new foreword and epilogue) appeared in 2014. He published three chapters on reconciliation and peace-building in international peer-reviewed publications (Meiring 2013, 2015a, 2015b) as well as numerous articles in South African academic journals. Thias Kgatla also contributed research to the issue of justice and reconciliation and published on the issue of mission and conflict in SA.

- 2. *The emergence of Missional Ecclesiology:*** ecclesial interest in the research theme and the worldwide interest in the issue of missional church ignited considerable research in the Department. Meiring and Niemandt made a significant contribution to a new policy document of the DRC, namely the 'Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church'. Niemandt published a number of articles on emerging missional churches, missional leadership and missional spirituality, and he also supervised six PhD and 16 Master's dissertations that have contributed to research on this theme. Van Niekerk also contributed to research on missional ecclesiology with an article on missional congregations in the South African context.
- 3. *Ecological justice and sustainable life:*** Attie van Niekerk leads a team of researchers working on sustainable life practices. They have published extensively on improving the quality of life of households and communities and co-operate closely with the Nova Institute. Nova has more than 20 years of grass-roots level experience in the research and development of solutions to improve the quality of life of low-income households in Southern Africa. Two Master's students in Social and Cultural Anthropology from the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam did practical research regarding vulnerable children in different locations in SA. In 2016, Laetitia Simorangkir, from the same department, did fieldwork for her research on care arrangements in South African communities in Hammanskraal. There are plans to continue the research of the three students in order to guide a movement for Early Childhood Development that was started in the Dutch Reformed Family of Churches. 'Kerk in Actie' of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands provided financial support for the Nova Institute to take part in this movement, and the research will be done in close interaction with Nova. Two students completed Master's research on sustainable lifestyle under Van Niekerk's supervision. Nico Gronüm did research as post-doctoral fellow on sustainable life from the perspective of changing world views, virtue ethics and epistemological structures and published these findings in peer-reviewed journals. Niemandt published research from an ecumenical and ecclesiastical perspective on the theme of flourishing life, focussing on TTL, the mission affirmation of the WCC.

4. **Missiological interest:** In the role of the Holy Spirit in mission, and especially the spectacular rise of Pentecostalism in Africa (see Kõhrsen 2015:61) has led to research in this particular form of the Christian faith in Africa. Peter White from Ghana did research as post-doctoral fellow on Ghanaian Pentecostal Churches and published extensively on the issue.
5. **Christianity in Africa and African religion:** Thias Kgatla and Attie van Niekerk published various books and research articles related to the theme of Christianity in Africa and African religious practises. Kgatla also published on the issues of mission and globalisation and African religiosity. Three PhD students completed research under the supervision of Kgatla on this important research theme.
6. **Religious change and the reality of faith:** See the section on Science of Religion.

## ■ The future vision or focus for the Department

One of the most important issues in terms of the future of the Department is the conversion of the Department of Science of Religion and Missiology to a Department of Religion Studies. This is part of the broader transformation of the FT where the name of the faculty is to change to the Faculty of Theology and Religion (Afrikaans: *Fakulteit Teologie en Religie*; Sepedi: *Lekala la Thutatumelo le Bodumedi*) in 2017. The current programme on Religion Studies will move from the Faculty of Humanities to the FT and will become part of the newly named department.

The change in the name of the Department reflects the reality of a number of European and American mission departments where the name has been changed from Missiology (or derivatives) to a more inclusive and general name. Kim reflects on the situation in the United Kingdom (Kim 2015; see also Goheen 2014:loc. 459):

University departments of theology continued the trend toward diversifying into 'theology and religious studies'. Where there had been integration between the two disciplines, the Christian input

developed into Christian studies and theology was no longer only Christian theology. (p. 80)

There is a long and fruitful relationship between Missiology and Religion Studies, and the new dispensation will certainly broaden the scope of research. The challenge will be to keep the interest focused on the missionary dimension of the Christian faith in the midst of the wide-ranging transformation of the UP and the FT along with the political pressure to identify common ground among world religions. Verster's (2014) argument comes to mind:

Mission should be an essential part of the discussion of the church's role in society. Missiology, as discipline, can guide the evaluation of mission's task in the world. Missiology remains essential as theological subject and should be regarded as irreplaceable. (p. 891)

The research theme of the FT, '*Oikodome: Life in its fullness*', represents a fascinating opportunity in the light of the intersection with TTL, the WCC's mission affirmation. It also relates to the theme of the AACC, 'God of life, lead Africa to peace, justice and dignity'. This focus on life allows the opportunity to investigate two closely related topics: What is life in fullness from a missiological perspective? What is the relation between life and the theology of mission?

In terms of the first topic, the global interest in research on flourishing and joyful life represents a wonderful opportunity to compliment the discourse from a missiological perspective. Joy stands at the very core of the Christian faith, life, and practice. Jürgen Moltmann (2015:loc. 296) says that 'Christianity is a unique religion of joy', 'expressed in its liturgical feasts, its depiction of God, and its treatment of theodicy'. Evangelism can be described as an invitation to joyful and flourishing life. A number of recent theological studies focussed on joy and human flourishing. The project of Miroslav Volf at Yale has already produced two important books on joy and human flourishing (Volf 2015; Volf & Blair 2015). It is significant that the first encyclical issued by Pope Francis (2013) was *Evangelii Gadium*. Volf's (Volf & Blair 2015:2)

conviction that a vision of flourishing life, found in Christianity as well as other world religions, is essential to individual thriving and global common good applies to Africa as well. The AACC decided that all life must be protected and stated the following, '[w]e need to promote and enhance life to ensure holistic growth for everyone' (AACC 2013:15). This focus on life includes the idea of economic justice.<sup>47</sup> Volf (2015:63–64) states that world religions provide people with a sense of life, a way to cope with the crises of life and direction on the relationship between individuals, communities and creation. Religions guide people as to how they should relate to others and what good they should strive to achieve. He argues that all the world religions share the broad idea of flourishing life and that this constitutes a point of convergence and unity that makes more sense than the mere pursuit of life that goes well.

The work done on sustainable life and poverty intervention and the network with various research and church partners places the Department in an ideal position to continue with a unique African contribution to participate in God's mission to allow life to flourish.

In terms of the second topic related to life in fullness, the theological discourse on 'deep incarnation' enriches Missiology. The concept of deep incarnation broadens the wellknown idea of incarnation to include all of created reality (see Gregersen 2015). Theology is familiar with the concept of incarnation that signifies the coming-into-flesh of God's eternal Logos. Pears (2009:118) argues that the incarnation of God in Christ is at the centre of the Christian faith. Deep incarnation extends this idea and states that, in and through the process of incarnation,

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47. The importance of ecological justice issues is evident in the following affirmations in TTL (WCC 2013:73–76), (1) '[w]e affirm that mission begins with God's act of creation and continues in re-creation', (2) '[w]e affirm that the mission of God's Spirit is to renew the whole creation', and (3) '[m]ission, then, is to denounce the economy of greed and to participate in and practice the divine economy of love, sharing and justice.'



God the creator and the world of the flesh are conjoined in such depth that God links up with all vulnerable creatures. In Christ, God enters into the biological tissue of creation in order to share the fate of biological existence. In the incarnate One, God becomes Jesus, and in him, God becomes human. The Most High and the very lowest are united in the process of incarnation. Deep incarnation connects the *missio Dei* to life in the broadest sense. Koama (2015:282–283) even argues that the *missio Creatoris Dei* precedes the church and thus the *mission ecclesia*. The church exists only to participate in the mission of the Creator.

The concept of deep incarnation supports this argument and allows the combination of reflection on mission from the margins, holistic mission that includes participating in the totality of God's mission and creation and contextualisation.

The lively discourse on missional ecclesiology invites further discussion on missional transformation and especially the role of missional leadership. This includes closely related themes such as the nature and praxis of missional spirituality, the relationship between the *missio Creatoris Dei* and the *mission ecclesia*, leadership in complexity and transformational strategies. The theme generated considerable interest amongst researchers, and a number of postgraduate students will continue research on these issues.

The focus of mission in the missionary era was primarily on the preaching of the Gospel and on the planting of churches. In the missional approach, the focus is broadened to include the healing of all relationships as a way of serving God and the *missio Dei*. The whole congregation is called to become involved in the local communities and the local context. To get involved in very complex issues (e.g. the eradication of poverty, a more sustainable lifestyle, caring for vulnerable children) in a meaningful and effective way requires research that engages communities and other role players.

All of these challenges must take root in and flourish on African soil. The AACC (2013:149) called for theological reflection on ecumenism, theology of religions, theology and development, gender, African political theology, justice, peace and reconciliation, and dialogue and communication.

The particular circumstances in SA, combined with the promising prospects for theological reflection from an African perspective, create an ideal situation to cultivate flourishing life. The 'new' Department of Religion Studies is ideally positioned to contribute and serve God's mission in Africa.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 7

The history and contributions of the Department Science of Religion and Missiology at the UP have been described with a particular focus on a discussion of the understanding of both disciplines. In the case of Science of Religion, the research covers theological discourses in the discipline, attending to issues such as secularisation as well as Theology of Religions. It is argued that, in future, Science of Religion will continue to contribute to three areas of concern, namely studying religions, secularisation and theology of religion and religions. The section concludes with a brief overview of future contributions by the Department. Missiology is defined in terms of current insights in the discipline against the background of the decline in mission studies at many universities. The research argues for Missiology to be an intrinsic part of Theology. The following discourses in Missiology are noted, namely flourishing life, ecological justice, the role of the Holy Spirit in the *missio Dei*, missional church, contextualisation and indigenisation, and mission from the margins. Past and future contributions from the Department are described. This includes an argument for the change of the name of the Department to the Department of Religion Studies. In terms of future developments, research into flourishing life as well as deep incarnation are noted as exciting new possibilities.

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## Chapter 4

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