The Asbury Journal 74/2: 299-322

DOI: 10.7252/Journal.02.2019F.04

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Epistemological Foundation for Contemporary Theology of Mission: Trajectories from a Conversation Between J. Andrew Kirk and John Hick

Abstract:
With the expansion of Christianity comes different ways of expressing the Christian faith. When new ways of conceiving Christian faith are presented, old models are challenged. Sometimes, tensions arise. During such transition, our epistemological convictions play an important role in the decision we make. J. Andrew Kirk and John Hick's positions are two examples. While both care deeply about Christianity and peoples of other faiths, the conclusions that they reach from their different epistemological stances are telling in their differences, indicating the crucial role that epistemology plays in mission. As representatives of a broader group, their positions remind us of the importance of assessing our epistemic positions in relation to mission, especially in thinking about our theology of mission. This article presents and evaluates their epistemological positions and uses them as catalysts for conversations in exploring the theology of mission. The aim of this article is to illustrate the need for critically assessing the epistemological assumptions behind our theological positions so that we can effectively navigate the terrain of shifting theological paradigms in mission.

Key Words: theology of mission, epistemology, mission, John Hick, J. Andrew Kirk, contextualization.

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Introduction

Beneath the disputes of the particular model of a mission or theology is the broader issue of epistemology—how we know what we know. Exploring the latter will help us develop a more informed grounding of the former. While those in the field of missiology are acutely aware of its importance, in the past, owing to their particular interest and desire, they have not paid enough attention to the interrelation between epistemology and theology. Jan A. B. Jongeneel once observed that the epistemological grounding of mission studies remains the most unexplored area of mission scholarship (1997:372). In 2004, J. Andrew Kirk wrote: "To my knowledge, the only published work which explicitly relates mission to epistemology is J. Andrew Kirk and Kevin Vanhoozer's *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Western Crisis of Knowledge*" (2004:131). In 2011, in *Mission as Dialogue: Engaging the Current Epistemological Predicament of the West*, Kirk reiterated that the tradition of epistemological engagement with missiology is a "relatively unexplored" area (2011:10).[1]

Kirk often contrasted his position with that of John Hick, a theologian and a philosopher. One reason why Kirk was unrelenting in engaging with Hick is because he (Kirk) thinks the latter's position encapsulates the epistemological dilemma that undercuts the unique claims of Christianity at its foundational level (Kirk 2011:18, 87, 95; 2002:23–36; 2000:27, 132). Both Hick and Kirk, in a way, are representatives of a broader group that attempt to articulate the epistemological predicament in the face of transition. While the second focuses on bridging the increasing disconnect between Christianity and Western secular culture, the first stresses resolving the conflicting claims of religions. Both articulated the contested claims about the ontological reality in ways consonant with their convictions. Although both genuinely care about people of other faiths and their truth claims, their epistemological convictions led them to different conclusions. As such, their positions are illustrative of the importance of epistemological posture in articulating our theology of mission. Hence, we use their positions as springboards for a more extensive discussion of the importance of epistemology in theology of mission.

The aim of this article is to illustrate the importance of critically assessing the epistemological assumptions behind our theological positions so that we can effectively navigate the terrain of shifting theological paradigms in mission. First, I will elaborate on how both Hick and Kirk postulate their epistemological position. Second, I will look into the context

from, in, and through which both theologians articulate their theological viewpoints, allowing us to evaluate their positions contextually. Third, based on our examination of the thoughts of both thinkers, I shall raise some questions and make some applications in the context of global Christianity, mainly from a theological angle. I shall then conclude by summarizing the key points.

Hick and Kirk's Epistemological Postulation

The Enlightenment period (ca. 1700–1850), as in the case of many other fields of study, brought a revolution in the area of epistemology. What is different in this modern theory from the pre-modern concepts (such as that of Plato's notion of Forms) and that which is relevant to our purpose, is that metaphysics—the questions of what is real—comes under the mercy of epistemology (Myron B. Penner 2005:22). R. Albert Mohler Jr. observes that the epistemological turn during the Enlightenment period led many from what Charles Taylor terms as, "impossible not to believe" to "possible not to believe" (2008:36). According to Hans Frei, there was a sort of Copernican revolution in biblical interpretation beginning from the early eighteenth century. During this revolution, the biblical stories that were taken for granted as literal were beginning to be questioned (1974:1-5). As a result, Frei avers, such reorientation in approach affected both the radical thinkers and the conservatives (1974:4).[2] Although we must not overemphasize the epistemological turn as others have rightly pointed out (Copleston 1994:435), we must also not overlook the difference from the earlier period, at least in emphasis (Copleston 1994:436–437; Penner 2009:22; Bevans 2008:103–104).

In this article, we trace the "epistemological revolution" in reference to Immanuel Kant's construal of reality partly because of his important influence in epistemological discussion[3] and because both Hick and Kirk invoke him in their discussions to either support their case (in Hick's case) or deconstruct the other's position (in Kirk's case). Kant's epistemological construal, in some ways, epitomized the shift in the condition of belief. He is skeptical that metaphysics as a science that transcends sense experience is possible (Kant 1965 [1781]:485ff). For him, humans do not have the intuition to perceive supersensible realities (say God). This is so, he argues, because we do not have access to the *noumena*—reality-in-itself—but only phenomena—things as they appear to us. While we can validate the claims about phenomena through our *a priori* intuitions, we cannot

perceive *noumena*, especially God, because we do not have the intuition to perceive them (Kant 1965 [1781]:89–90, 648ff). Kant thus challenged the commonly accepted notion that humans have direct access to reality. The result, as David Clark puts it, is, "knowledge results when the mind actively apprehends the world, shaping knowledge according to its own subjective categories" (2003:55). In Kant's paradigm, human minds no longer conform to reality, but reality conforms to the mind. While Kirk is skeptical of the overall approach of Kant, Hick is sympathetic.[4]

In his autobiography, Hick wrote of Kant's work thus:

> Kant's 'Copernican revolution', making the mind central to the process of cognition, seemed to me so significant that I devoted almost all of my final year at Edinburgh to a detailed study of the first Critique. I have retained from Kant what today I identify as 'critical realism'—the view that there is a world, indeed a universe, out there existing independently of us, but that we can only know it in the forms provided by our human perceptual apparatus and conceptual systems (Hick 2005:69).

Hick was only eighteen or nineteen at this time, i.e., during 1941-1942. He attempts to locate his position between what he calls a naïve realism and idealism. According to him, the idealist holds "that the perceived world exists only as a series of modifications of our own consciousness" and the naïve realist believes "that the world is just as we perceive it to be." He opts for what he terms "critical realism" (Hick 1993:4). However, the critical realism he subscribes to has a nuanced Kantian flavor. He articulates critical realism as the belief that "there is an important subjective contribution to our perceiving it, so that the world as we experience it is a distinctively human construction arising from the impacts of real environment upon our sense organs, but conceptualized in consciousness and language in culturally developed forms" (Hick 1993:4). Regarding the material world, Hick, like Kant, claims to be a realist; but regarding immaterial things—God, ethics, etc.—he is a relativist if not an agnostic (Hick 1993:3–6). Where Hick diverges from Kant is in his emphasis that our understanding of reality, especially God, is the projection of our experience (Hick 1993:159) whereas for Kant it is the postulation of the mind.

However, Hick suggests our experience does not exhaust the fullness of the transcendent, for we always experience the transcendent through our particular religious framework. Therefore, the transcendent cannot be confined to our particular experience. This means that no

experience of one religious group has more epistemic currency than others since different people experience the Real differently. Besides, were God to be immediately present to our experience, his power and mercy would overwhelm us (Quoted from Heim 1999:17). Therefore, the "epistemic distance" between God and humans, a logical necessity for humans to be autonomous persons (Hick 2010 [1966]:281), can be bridged only through faith (1966:68). It is here that he makes room for faith, an experience-based faith. The idea of the objectification of subjective epistemic experience in answering the question of the Real is what Hick developed from Kant. Although there are differences in their epistemological postulation (Heim 1999:18; Hick 1966:57–68; Kirk 2002:23–36), what we focus on here is on the commonality. For Hick, one does not perceive *the* table; one always perceives it *as* the table.

Kirk contends that in using Kantian epistemology, "Hick has made himself a hostage to fortune, for . . . [ultimately Hick's framework] ends up with linguistic signs without any signification" (Kirk 2002:29). Although Hick attempts to differentiate from Kant, ultimately he succumbs to the fallacy of objectifying epistemology construed through one's experience. This is problematic, Kirk argues, because the end result is implicit atheism (Kirk 2002:31). Like Kant, Hick's hypothesis has shifted from the mind conforming to the objective reality to the reality conforming to the mind (in Hick's case, religious experience).

Alternately, Kirk argues for an epistemology that he thinks is capable of preventing the "disintegration of a unified field of knowledge that encompasses an understanding of both the external world of material objects . . . and internal world [of human values, purpose, relations, etc.]" (2011:14, 103–108). He acknowledges that regarding the first world, there is unanimity; the ambiguity is about the second world. The solution lays in incorporating the source of knowledge from the Word of God and the world of God (Kirk 2011:17). He suggests a heuristic device called "Inference to the Best Explanation" (IBE) that he thinks might serve as a useful missiological tool (Kirk 2011:20). IBE, in its simplest term "is the procedure of choosing the hypothesis or theory that best explains the available data."[5] Kirk means that since humans are created in the image of God and endowed with reason, Christians are (should be) able to have a meaningful dialogue with non-Christians by taking into account the "universally-available evidence and proven categories of rational argument. The truth claims that are made are related to self-awareness, human experience of the world, the

universal concourse of alternative traditions, ideas and explanation and are open to a critical exchange of views" (Kirk 2011:21). Unlike Hick, Kirk believes that "Christian faith . . . is the best of all possible explanations of our unique experience of the universe as human beings: one which offers the most coherent, consistent, and complete account" (Kirk 2011:21). Such an approach is both dialogical and dogmatic and is conducive to the postmodern context as opposed to ignoring the religious differences, Kirk contends.

Reflection Through the Historical Lens

Putting others' works in the historical context is a helpful way to understand them. Whether it is Kant or Kirk or Hick, they were all attempting to articulate their "theistic" convictions in the face of challenges amidst transition. The case of Kant is not a pressing concern here, and hence we will focus on the other two.

Hick and Kirk have more things in common that they may or may not realize. They sincerely care about Christian mission, albeit in their own understanding. Both left their respective careers- Kirk, his military service, and Hick, his law education- in pursuit of the study of Christian ministry and service. The two are interested in interreligious dialogue. Both see the growing secularist culture as a threat to religious ethos and values. They are philosophically oriented in their approach. Although Hick was slightly the older (1922-2012), they share many experiences including their experience in military service—Kirk (1937–) as an active soldier and Hick as a medical assistant since he was a conscientious objector. In the light of all those shared experiences, it is unsurprising to see the intersection in their articulation of Christianity in their respective contexts.[6]

However, the most common experience between the two, and one that is of more significant interest to our immediate context is their intercultural and interreligious experiences. It is of interest to observe that life-changing experience for both came about as a result of their cross-cultural interaction particularly in the late1960s, a period that will become relevant again in our discussion later. Hick moved to Birmingham, UK, in 1967, "where he encountered another set of experiences that dramatically affected his life and work" (IEP).[7] The Birmingham experience was a second life-transforming experience, the first of which was his personal conversion at the age of eighteen. Of his conversion, he recounts rather dramatically:

> I was kneeling at a chair when Jeffreys, coming round the circle, laid his hands on my head. I immediately felt a strong physical effect, like an electric shock except that it was not a sharp jolt but a pervasive sensation spreading down through my body. I was in floods of tears—not of sadness or fright but, I suppose, a tremendous emotional impact. Although people who have never experienced such things pooh-pooh them I am in no doubt that there are individuals through whom a real psychic force of some kind flows (Hick 2005:27–28).

In Birmingham, he was exposed to people of different cultures, religions, and races. He reflects of his life experience thus: "As I spent time in the mosques, synagogues, gurudwaras and temples as well as churches something very important dawned on me. On the one hand all the externals were different . . . But at a deeper level it seemed evident to me that essentially the same thing was going on in all these different places of worship. . ." (Hick 2005:160). He was also working on civil rights issues. Although he had read Kant with great fascination in his early years (Hick 2005:68–69), these real, on-the-ground life experiences prompted him to critically assess his theological convictions relying largely on Kant's macro paradigm of phenomenal/noumenal hypothesis. The result was a pluralistic hypothesis as many of his writings that emerged from his time from Birmingham show: *Christianity at the Centre* (1968), *Arguments for the Existence of God* (1970), *God and the Universe of Faiths* (1973), *The Myth of God Incarnate* (1977), *God Has Many Names* (1980), *The Second Christianity* (1983), *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (1985), among others.

Kirk had similar life-changing experiences in the 1960s. He traveled to Argentina in 1967 and witnessed the social, political, and religious unrest as they related to civil rights (Kirk 2004a:71). There he observed the seductive power of the secularist agenda and the danger of the church uncritically aligning with the dominant ideological forces (in this particular case, the military dictatorship). Kirk sighed, "[Although the Church] came to regret its cultural captivity to the forces of the extreme political right . . . the church found it virtually impossible to express officially real repentance for the errors it made" (Kirk 2004a:71–72). His experience in, and reflection of, the inter-cultural context led him to reassess his theological position, the result of which was his dissertation published later as *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (1979). In it, he was both sympathetic and critical of the methodology

of liberation theology. He was sympathetic with the conviction that all theologies should take account of the experiential realities of the ordinary people in theologizing; he was critical of letting the experience become normative in interpreting the Scripture (Kirk 2011:207). In retrospect, Kirk may not seem to have offered much in terms of his theological and hermeneutical proposal; however, taking his work in context, it holds more value than it appears today. Later, through his interaction with evangelical scholars like John Stott and particularly Leslie Newbigin—with the latter being especially formative, which Kirk acknowledges (Kirk 2004a:73)—he began to articulate his philosophical grounding of Christianity more acutely. The result was a book that he co-edited with Kevin Vanhoozer and also contributed a chapter to: *To Stake a Claim: Mission and the Crisis of Knowledge* (1999).

Before we take the views of Hick and Kirk in conversation with the broader context of world Christianity, I would like to draw our attention to an important missiological and theological point from the discussion thus far. The aim of this article, as stated earlier, is to illustrate the importance of critically assessing the epistemological assumptions behind our theological positions so that we can effectively navigate the terrain of shifting theological paradigms. Thomas Kuhn, writing from the context of scientific development (1996 [1962]), observed that when new discoveries can no longer neatly fit into the old ways of conceiving reality, a new interpretive model or paradigm emerges. Tension arises, and usually, the old models fade away. The application of a Kuhnian sense of paradigm shift to theology and mission is an important discussion, but we cannot enter into a detailed conversation here, except for one particular clarification.[8]

While not completely transporting the Kuhnian sense of the paradigm shift to theology, Hans Küng, in *Paradigm Change in Theology*, applied the framework to theology (1989a:3–33 [1980]). Because of the ambiguity related to the term "paradigm" Küng suggests terms such as "interpretive models, explanatory models, and models of understanding" (Küng 1989a:7). While he admits that there "is never an absolute break with the past" in theology even in the change of paradigm (Küng 1989a:30), he argues that macro changes (not just micro) take place in theology just like in science (Küng 1989a:214). By it, he means, "fixed and familiar concepts are changed; laws and criteria controlling the admissibility of certain problems and solutions are shifted; theories and methods are upset" (Küng 1989a:21). Just "as in the change from geocentric to the heliocentric

theory," one theological model can replace the other (1989a:21, 23). Küng seems to have arrived very close to Kuhn's use of paradigm. What is of pressing importance here, however, is the historical context on which Küng articulated his thoughts.

In the mid-twentieth century, as Christians around the globe came into close juxtaposition and as they gained greater exposure to the cultures of other peoples and religions, they were once again reminded of the urgency of taking the experiences, worldviews, and claims of others seriously. Although such interaction with other cultures, religions, and fellow Christians was the very atmosphere upon which Christian mission found its origin and theological foundation in the early centuries, the church and the world were divided due to geographical, political, and ecclesiastical reasons for too long. This division was breaking down, and now Christians had to relearn to navigate this new terrain. The documents of Vatican II show that in the 1960s there was an intentional theological reorientation (within the Roman Catholic Church at least) with a much more optimistic approach to other religions and cultures (Abbott 1966:580–633, 665–668). Whether the Council came to affirm that non-Christian religions could be salvific or not is a matter of debate (Roukanen 1990:56). What is clear is that at least some notable Catholic theologians like Karl Rahner and Küng were more optimistic than others. In 1964, the 31st International Eucharistic Congress was held in Mumbai, India. There, Küng delivered a message that captures the sentiments of at least some Roman Catholic thinkers. His message was entitled, "The World Religions in God's Plan of Salvation." In it, he argued that world religions should be regarded as an ordinary means of human salvation and the Roman Catholic Church as an extraordinary way (Küng 1967 [1965]:51–52). Küng calls for moving away from an ecclesio-centric approach to a more theo-centric understanding of religions.

Hick finds Küng's theological posture optimistic and welcoming, but not revolutionary (1973:120–132). Hick saw that although Küng was generous in his attempt to accommodate non-Christian religions, he still operates on the old, to use Hick's terminology, "Ptolemaic" conception with Christianity at the center (Hick 1973:131). He insisted that to bring about a Copernican revolution would require "a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is *God* who is at the centre.." (Hick 1973:131). For him, to be dogmatic of the uniqueness of Christianity in the light of the many truth claims is to ignore its historical relativity (Hick 1973:132). Hick wants to operate on what I would call an

"interpretive view"—a concept that I will revisit later—in which each one is allowed to interpret reality through his or her experience.

We have seen how, beginning from the 1960s, Hick's pluralistic outlook was emerging as he spent time in the city of Birmingham "outside of class with multi-faith groups working on race issues in and around the city" (IEP). Kirk's theological conviction was also refined in the city of Birmingham as he spent time with people of other faiths, especially the "Muslims who he met monthly for the discussion of both important social issues and the essential questions of… faiths" (Kirk 2004a: 74). Like Hick, those experiences "prompted [Kirk] to consider seriously matters relating to the reality of diverse religions as an aspect of Christian mission" (Kirk 2004a:74–75). He saw that at the bottom of the different truth claims—be it religious, generational, or cultural—are the contested claims of epistemology. Hence, Kirk affirmed, the crisis in mission, at least in the West, is first and foremost, the crisis of epistemology (Kirk 2011:46–59). Necessarily, therefore, Christians must begin with an epistemological stance that is both able to authenticate their claims and dismantle the antithetical views.

For Kirk, a Christian epistemology must begin with a realist framework that can accommodate propositional truth claims (Kirk 2011:49). This means, among other things, a provision to claim a true and objective knowledge of God, by which he means, "knowledge of God in-Godself can be true without having to be exhaustive" (Kirk 2002:n22). In this sense, Kirk operates on what I designate as a "dogmatic view" (see below). There is, and should be, certain core values and beliefs in our missional posture, and these principles are "distinguishable from the cultural formulations of them" (Kirk 2002:49). Nonetheless, he recognizes that there is no such thing as biblical epistemology if by the term it means a single theory of knowledge supported by the biblical text. Therefore, he believes that it is more helpful to talk about rethinking mission rather than "reinventing the wheel *de novo*" (Kirk 2011:47). Whereas in the former project, we readjust our theological views in the light of new evidence without necessarily surrendering our core convictions, in the latter, we demand that others abandon their whole theological framework (Kirk 2011:47).

Our main point in this section has been to look at the works of Hick and Kirk through the lens of their respective historical context. In doing so, we were able to get a more refined picture of how their epistemological postures influenced their theological articulation. Without

denying the possibility of other forces shaping their views, we could argue that since both had similar intercultural and interreligious experiences but developed different theological outlooks, it is more reasonable to say that their epistemology shaped their theology rather than that their life circumstances and educational upbringing determined their epistemology. David K. Clark's dictum, although uttered in different context, seems to reflect what I am trying to say: "What people start with determines what people will end up with" (Clark 2000:283). Even if we may argue that for some their theological decisions do not correlate with their epistemological convictions, it remains true that it does for people like Kirk and Hick. We shall now turn to a more global conversation by using Hick's and Kirk's positions as trajectories to investigate a contemporary theology of mission.

Lessons, Challenges, and Propositions

In this section, using the thought frame of Hick and Kirk, I would like to explore how our epistemological inclination tends to direct the choices we make, particularly in the context of our theology and mission. I shall do this by looking at the way global Christianity responded during the transition in the mid-twentieth century and probing further questions for more clarity on the matter.

Let us recall the labels "interpretive" and "dogmatic" referring to Hick and Kirk's positions with one important exception. Unlike Hick, most Christians affirm the ontological existence of God. Hence, we take that for granted while keeping the rest of Hick's idea, i.e., our knowledge of the Real is always mediated through our contextual lens, be it language, mental scheme, culture, etc. Let the word "dogmatism" not appall you. By it, I am referring to the realist position, as Kirk held, i.e., there is an objective truth, and we can know it as such. We may not know truth exhaustively, but we may know it truthfully. Although labels and generalizations have the tendency for simplification and often risk misrepresentation, they can be helpful in demarcating and clarifying an underlying ideological premise. We need not necessarily see them in terms of polarity but as two different emphases in a spectrum with various positions in between them. These different epistemological postures have missional and theological implications.

Resonant of the Enlightenment period, there was a sort of epistemological re-orientation in the field of global theology in the mid-twentieth century. Although Christians have been missionaries, done mission work, and thought about mission throughout the centuries, it was in the mid-twentieth century that missiology as a specialized field of study gained greater traction (or at least, missiology as we understand it today). The first missiology chair, established in 1896 in Germany (Küster 2014:170), anticipated a wider recognition and reproduction. The 1910 World Missionary Conference held at Edinburgh was instrumental in paving the way, yet a more robust missional repercussion of Edinburgh arose only after two or three decades. The development and study of world Christianity in the mid-1940s (Pachuau 2018:5), the shifting focus from "church-centered mission to a mission-centered church" following the Conference of World Mission and Evangelism in Willingen in 1952[9] (Bosch 1995:370), the re-orientation of Roman Catholic attitudes toward non-Christian religions following the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s (Bosch 1995:265; Küster 2014:172), the independence of national churches from their Western "mother" churches following the rise of post-colonial nations giving birth to "postcolonial" readings of the scriptures (R.S. Sugirtharajah 2003:1–3), and the increase in reverse migration beginning from 1960s (from the rest of the world to the West) leading to a more informed knowledge of the Majority World Christianity (Bryant Myers 2017:115–116) brought about a more decisive epistemological paradigm shift in mission. For instance, in reaction and as an alternative to what they perceived as a Western-dominated theology, a group of majority theologians (twenty-two, to be precise) gathered together in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976 to map out their own path. Together they were able to affirm, "We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engage in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World" (Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella 1976:269). While Christians have always critiqued the dominant and unjust paradigm of discourse, what is particular about this period is the emphasis on the "epistemologically decolonizing" critique from the Majority World (Erinque Dussel 2018:562).

During every transition, Christians have had to negotiate the principles of universality and particularity. The formulation of the Ancient Creeds, the Protestant Reformation, and the Roman Catholic Councils are examples of such negotiations. What is unique to theological proposals

in the twentieth century is the rise of global theologies. The independent nations perceived the vigorous exertion of the Western global market, values, and imperialistic posture as a threat to their pre-existent cultures and local autonomy. This triggered a reactive force in the form of what Scholte call "micro-nations" or "region-nations" that sought to build national identities and protect local values (Scholte 2005:231–237). The exogenous force of globalization thus created endogenous challenges that the existing theology was not equipped to tackle. Perhaps the neatly defined epistemological categories that have a long pedigree in the Western philosophy and often communicated with Western forms did not immediately resonate with the experience of the global Christians, many of who were beginning to discover and experience the richness of the newfound faith. Whether the transition *caused* the "epistemological break" or whether it provided an *occasion* for the break is a topic of its own. What is relevant here is the recently "freed" independent colonies began to recontextualize the gospel in ways that bear more relevance to their daily lives. This transition led to the emergence of many forms of local theologies such as Liberation theology, *Minjung* theology, *Dalit* theology, Tribal theology, etc.

A subtle form of the interpretive view of reality found a welcoming home in some Third-World theologies. Per Frostin argues that amidst the differences of many contextual theologies resides a common characteristic: "a fresh epistemological approach which implies a new theological methodology" (Frostin 1985: 127). Bosch observed how various contextual theologies arose from the epistemological break from the commonly held belief that the world is a *static* object that human minds can understand. In the new paradigm, he continues, "the world is [seen as] an *unfinished* project being built" (Bosch 1995: 424). Our understanding then becomes a *process*, not the finished product or photograph of the original. Such a view affects the way mission is conceived and executed.

While each emphasis has its own place, misplacing them may be problematic. It seems obvious that when the subjectivity or situatedness is pushed to the extreme, the overarching interpretive lens comes to be identified with language, tradition, culture, gender, religion, etc. Depending on one's epistemological leniency, we would shift towards either an "interpretive" or "dogmatic" view. There is place and time to be "dogmatic" and "interpretive." Our challenge is to delineate when, where, and why.

Given the challenges that our epistemology influences, if not determines, our theology and mission, what are some steps we can take so

that we make a responsible decision? While there may be many answers to this question, I would like to consider one area: revisiting the concept of critical realism. The term "critical realism" is now an acceptable term in theology and mission but needs further discussion through interdisciplinary and intercultural lenses if it is to remain an effective tool for constructing a theology of mission.

Although our first reaction may be to label Hick's position as non-realist, he might disagree with such categorization. After all, he claims to be a critical realist and strongly contends against the view of non-realist (1993:1–10). Granted his position is not consistent or that there are contradictions with his positions, yet he is more of a relativist than a non-realist. Nonetheless, appealing to or using critical realism, as he did, does not automatically settle the epistemological complexity because while most agree on the "realism," many differ on the "critical" part. This principle applies to others as much as it does to Hick.

Some have challenged the way N.T. Wright and Paul Hiebert use critical realism.[10] Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts stress the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the version of Wright's predecessors' from which he (Wright) builds his case (Porter and Pitts 2015:276–306). Quoting Lonergan's own words, Porter and Pitts sum up their view on Lonergan's position: "What is grasped in insight, is neither an actually given datum of sense nor a creation of the imagination but an intelligible organization that may or may not be relevant to data" (Porter and Pitts 2015:289). They contend that the "internalist theory" upon which their (Wright et al.) critical realism is built is not without its challenge. They assert, "Wright's epistemology, following Meyer, who follows Lonergan, picks up on this same self-reflective feature of internalism…" (Porter and Pitts 2015:292). Hence, Porter and Pitts call for return to a form of externalism or a reworking of internalism, which they think is more philosophically sustainable, chimes better with the current epistemological studies, and fulfills one of Wright's original purposes for developing critical realist account, i.e., the historical study of Jesus (Porter and Pitts 2015:301–302). They reasoned that what many call naïve realism is not so naïve or else why would philosophers maintain a position that they think is naïve (Porter and Pitts 2015:286)?

While many missiologists have found Hiebert's proposal of critical realism ingenious and embraced it, Normal Geisler, a theologian and philosopher, has pointed out the ambiguity, and consequently challenged the weakness, in Hiebert's position (Geisler 2010:133–153). Geisler points

out, and I think rightly so, that although Hiebert repeatedly uses the term "critical realism" and warns of the danger of total skepticism and complete dogmatism, he does not clearly spell out how our talk about God and his Word could be analogically true (Geisler 2010:134).

The criticism against Wright's and Hiebert's use of critical realism reminds us of the seriousness of assessing one's philosophical rationality in making epistemic claims. By "philosophical rationality," I mean ways of reasoning that are coherent, consistent, and non-contradictory, reasoning that must undergird any culture and religion to have meaningful discourse. While it is true that the debate between different epistemological theories is complex and ongoing and the veracity of our truth claims may not always depend on our ability to make a comprehensive case for the theory we espouse, it also remains true that we need to give careful attention to the theory we espouse. Some form of critical realism is not without shortcoming.[11]

Brian Lee Goard, after surveying the different uses of critical realism in various disciplines reaffirms the argument of Paul Allen thus: "Critical realists do share a few common assumptions and a general definition, yet they draw different conclusions in their applications of critical realism" (Goard 2011:69; Allen 2006:49). Goard counsels that while critical realism has many potential elements for developing a robust theology, it can also become problematic if and when combined with ambiguous definitions of revelation, religious experience, God's Word, etc. (Goard 2011:171–206). The issue is not so much that our understanding of reality is contextually mediated, but how exactly it is mediated is not always clarified just as was the case even among the earliest critical realists (Porter and Pitts 2015:281).[12]

My intention here is neither to make Hick appear more "conservative" than he really was, nor to portray that Wright and Hiebert are like Hick. Rather, it is to point out that ambiguity lurks behind the use of the term and when applied to missiology it could become problematic. Hiebert's critical contextualization, developed from the notion of critical realism, was timely and provided a smoother and more acceptable path (for example, than that of Charles Kraft) to navigate the changing paradigm in the 1970s (Eunhye Chang et al. 2009:199–201). And now, we must continue to wrestle with what exactly critical realism looks like in developing a contemporary theology of mission. This is one area that deserves further investigations through a missiological lens as others have

attempted it through their respective vantage points (for example, McGrath 2002:195–244 and Goard 2011).

Kirk recognizes that accepting critical realism as a judicious position between naïve realism and skepticism does not solve the problem because critical realism gives the impression that we can comprehend reality only fallibly but never certainly (Kirk 2007: 173). Hence, he wants to avoid using the adjective "critical." He asserts, "I wish to defend a position that equates my perception of reality with reality, per se, but always allowing for error on my part" (Kirk 2007:173 n. 19). He calls this position a correspondence theory of truth. After discussing various theories of knowledge, he wrote thus, "Understood as means for distinguishing between truth and error, some of these theories have merit. However, the correspondence theory is the only one that deals with the nature of truth as such" (Kirk 2007:167). Kirk's explanation, however, has left us wondering how his theory of correspondence could be reconciled with the different epistemological stances that Christians bring into interpreting reality and the Word of God. Kirk, who has paid close attention to this aspect of missiology, has left the job for us to continue.

Conclusion

I only hope to have raised the importance of epistemology in relation to mission. Perhaps I have raised more questions than is necessary or will be able to provide answers even in this regard. Even then, I would have accomplished something, i.e., to bring to awareness the importance of the epistemological posture in our mission. Some other questions need critical attention as well: epistemology and Bible, epistemology and hermeneutics, epistemology and theology, all of which are inter-related and relevant to mission.

However, in this article, we have focused on the importance of epistemology in the theology of mission. I have used Hick and Kirk to illustrate and emphasize the significance of our epistemology as it relates to mission. I have accentuated the importance of critically assessing the epistemological assumptions behind our theological positions so that we can effectively navigate the terrain of shifting theological paradigms in mission. In emphasizing my thesis, I have pointed to the need for ongoing

study in this area since there are some important questions and ambiguities related to this topic.

If the choice for me were to leave with you only one application, then it would be the importance of epistemology in the theology of mission. Our epistemological posture influences our theology of mission more than we realize or acknowledge. Hence, we ought to give more serious attention to that aspect. This does not mean that we have to know all the philosophical languages associated with epistemology or that we have to be aware of all the epistemological debates. Although such knowledge and awareness are desirable, they are not mandatory. After all, as D. C. Schindler rightly puts it, "epistemology need not be explicit to be operative in any given case…" (Schindler 2007: 183). However, it means that we have to be able to critically evaluate why we believe what we believe and whether we have reasonable grounds to hold our beliefs. Regardless of our knowledge of epistemological theory, we are already exercising our epistemic conviction, and it would benefit us to assess where we stand critically.

End Notes

[1] This is not to claim that missiologists were unaware of the importance of epistemological grounding. As early as 1985, Paul Hiebert began to articulate the importance of epistemology in theology and mission (1985a and 1985b). Hendrick Kraemer shows deep awareness of the issue in discussing the interreligious relationships (Kraemer 1963 [1938]:61–100). Beginning from 1950's Leslie Newbigin wrote and reflected on various issues with keen epistemological, theological, and philosophical awareness and grounding. However, it may be true that missiologists and mission practitioners were more focused on adopting a particular mission strategy than in resolving the underpinning epistemological tensions.

[2] Kevin Vanhoozer interestingly notes that recent understanding of biblical theology, as articulated by James M. Hamilton (and others) as an attempt to understand the Bible on its own term before it could be meaningfully communicated, reverses Frei's "great reversal" (2014:24, n 23).

[3] Kant's postulation, according to Frederick Copleston, was not merely a synthesis of the opposing and irreconcilable views of the continental rationalism and British empiricism; rather it was, in important ways, superseding over the two by critically incorporating some elements from both (Copleston 1994:428–430). Although Copleston does not consider such stance as necessarily positive, he believes, "Kant in particular

exercised a most powerful influence in this respect [i.e., epistemology]" and this influence continued to be felt in the diverging schools of thoughts that were to come later (Copleston 1994:438–439).

[4] There is a danger in overstating Kant's polarization of the phenomena and *noumena*; however, it is to the aspect of Kant's epistemic uncertainty of the *noumena* that both are invoking.

[5] Jonathan Vogel, "Inferences to the Best Explanation." https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/inference-to-the-best-explanation/v-1 (accessed September 30, 2018).

[6] J Andrew Kirk, "My Pilgrimage in Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no. 2 (April 2004):70–74. John Hick: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, https://www.iep.utm.edu/hick/#H1 (accessed September 30, 2018).

[7] Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (IEP).

[8] For a discussion of Kuhnian paradigm in relation to theology, see Alasdair MacIntyre (1997:138–150), David Bosch (1995:181–189), Hans Küng (1989a:3–33).

[9] It was in the Willingen conference that the concept of *Missio Dei*—an idea that is to become key in theology of mission—was charted out in more detail, although the term was not used in the conference (Bosch 1995:390). The spread of the global Charismatic movements in the twentieth century and influence of the anthological insights in the mission studies are two other vital factors that contributed to the epistemological reorientation.

[10] Wright and Hiebert's definitions are not very different from that of Hick's. Consider Hick's definition of critical realism as it relates to religious claims: "a critical religious realism affirms the transcendent divine reality which the theistic religions refer to as God; but is conscious that this reality *is always thought of and experienced by us in ways which are shaped and coloured by human concepts and images* [italics inserted]" (1993:7). Now compare Wright's definition: "[Critical realism] is a way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the *reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower* (hence 'realism'), while we also fully acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of *appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known* (hence 'critical') . . . Knowledge, in other words, although in principle concerning realities independent of the knower, is never itself independent of the knower [italics original]" (Wright 1992:35). Hiebert's definition of critical realism in 1985 (this is before Ben Meyer and Wright's incorporation into their respective fields) is very close to Hick's. Hiebert writes, "Critical realists hold to objective truth, but recognize that it is understood by humans in their contexts. There is, therefore, an element of faith, a personal commitment in the knowledge of truth" (Hiebert 1985b:16–17). Hick's argument is that the epistemic distance between God and human is to be bridged by faith (Hick 1966:66–68). All of them admit

the existence of the Real, yet they acknowledge that the *only access* to the Real is mediated either through our experience or conceptual schema.

[11] Roy Bhasker, who is commonly associated with the term "critical realism," was himself not a Christian and was more comfortable with an epistemological relativism (Bhasker 2008: 240–241).

[12] For example, in his widely accepted book, *Models of Contextual Theology* (2008), Bevans assumes a form of critical realism similar to Lonergan's (Bevans 2008:4, 4n. 11). He explains that reality is mediated by meaning, "a meaning that we give it in the context of our historical period, interpreted from our own particular horizon and in our own particular thought forms" (Bevans 2008:4). While I agree with Bevans in some ways, I would add that we must also emphasize the shared commonality of human experience, rationality, God's Word, Holy Spirit, and the possibility of bridging our differences through conversations.

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