

Missiological Methods

Missiological Methods

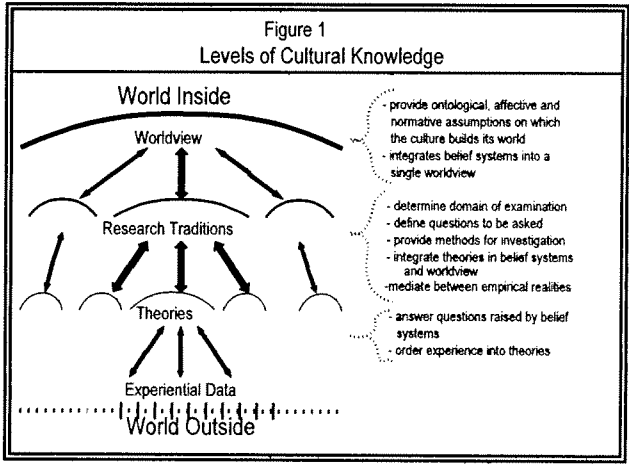
Paul G. Hiebert

In recent years, missiologists have increasingly drawn on the insights history and the social sciences provide for their work. One key question keeps arising: how can missions keep from becoming captive to the human sciences, and how can their findings be integrated into missions while keeping solid theological foundations? This problem of relating theology to science is not unique to missions. It underlies much of the discussion surrounding the inclusion of psychology in training ministers and Christian counselors, the integration of medical sciences and Christian healing, and the use of modern business sciences in the administration of churches and church institutions. Despite these discussions, a big chasm often exists between theology and the sciences.

At a deep level, the problem of integrating theology and sciences is a worldview issue (Hiebert 1994). It is due, in part, to our definitions and perceptions of what constitutes 'theology' and the 'sciences.' This article examines these and suggests avenues for a rapprochement between these two critical bodies of knowledge.

Larry Laudan classifies the sciences as 'research traditions'--bodies of knowledge shared by communities of scholars seeking to understand the truth in their fields. Each research tradition is determined by: 1) the critical questions it seeks to answer, 2) the assumptions it makes about reality, 3) the body of data it examines, and 4) the methods it accepts as valid means of discovering answers (figure 1). Different answers or 'theories' are offered to the key questions, and competing ones are debated until one or the other emerges as accepted doctrine until it is further questioned. For example, physics, as a research tradition, is the study of the building blocks of the material world, which it assumes to be real. It examines material objects using experiments, electron microscopes, ion chambers and other means to find answers to questions such as what are the basic components of matter, what are the major physical forces, and how do these interact.

Theology, too, is a research tradition. It is a body of knowledge debated by a community of scholars seeking to answer certain critical questions. On the level of theories in Evangelical theology, there is debate between Calvinism and Arminianism; pre-millennial, post-millennial and amillennial eschatologies. There are also debates about seven day versus seven eras of

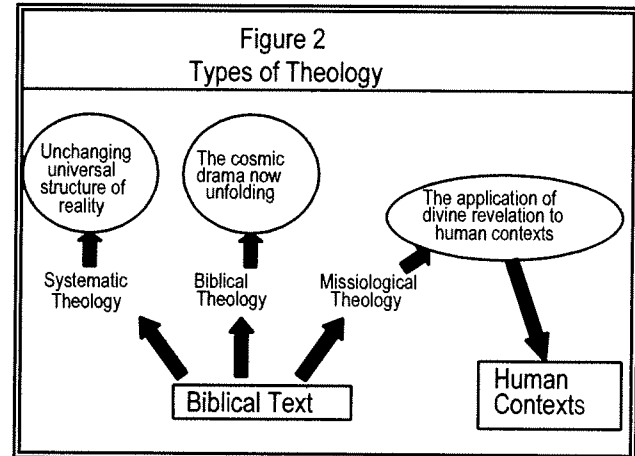


creation; Protestant orthodoxy, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy. [RC and EO traditions] These are true arguments because the different proponents are seeking to answer the same question using accepted methods. In other words, theology is a research tradition not because it has arrived at one universally agreed upon answer, but because those in the field are seeking to answer the same questions by using accepted methods of inquiry and examining the same data.

If theology is, indeed, a research tradition, how does this change our perception of it as a discipline?

Ways of Doing Theology

An examination of literature shows that theology, like the sciences, is divided into different research traditions, each seeking to answer specific questions, making certain assumptions, and using different methods of research. We will define 'theology,' in general, as seeking to understand the message of divine revelation as this is definitively recorded in the Bible. In this definition we distinguish between the Scriptures, which we take as divine revelation, and theology which is our human understanding of them.¹ To understand the nature of theology and its relation to the sciences, it helps us to examine some of the different types of 'theology' (figure 2).



Philosophical Theology

One approach to the study of Scripture is to use the assumptions, questions and methods of philosophy. Warfield, for instance, made systematic theology and scientific theology synonymous. For him there can be but one theology ('9##, 128, 129,130). It is important here to note that different cultures have developed different philosophical traditions. We need to examine some of these by way of illustration.

Western Systematic Theology One important research tradition in the west is systematic theology. This emerged in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Greek thought from the

¹ In a general sense, Christian theology is our human efforts to understand the Bible. In that sense, theology is a second level activity (Erickson 1986). Evangelical theology takes it to be divine revelation, and, therefore, the final authority on ontological truth.

Arabic and Spanish universities (Finger 1985, 28-21).² The central question it poses is: “What are the unchanging universals of reality?” It assumes a foundationalist stance that there are basic, unchanging elements, and if these are known, we can, by putting them together, understand the structure of reality.³ It also assumes that ultimate truth is ahistorical and acultural, and can be known. It uses the methods of Greek philosophy, namely algorithmic logic, which is propositional in nature and rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.⁴ Its goal is to construct a single systematic understanding of ultimate truth [in modern terms a Grand Unified Theory] that is comprehensive, logically consistent and conceptually coherent.⁵ In order arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cognition from feelings and values to keep the latter from introducing subjectivity to the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental elements and categories in Scripture. It gives us a standard against which to compare our own understandings, and helps us understand the biblical worldview. We need to understand the ultimate nature of reality as God sees it in order to test our own human understandings of reality.

Systematic theology also has its limitations. Because it foundationalist in nature and sees ultimate reality in structural, synchronic terms, it cannot adequately deal with change, flux and

² It is based on the resurgence of Platonic realism that gave rise to scholasticism and later the humanistic school of Erasmus and culminating in the Enlightenment school. For a historical summary of its emergence see Fuller 1997). See also G. R. Evans, A.E. McGrath and A.D. Gallway (1986, particularly pp. 62-173).

³ This is rooted in the Newtonian assumption that everything is composed of basic building blocks and put together as a machine. This view leads to determinism and a engineering approach to reality based on technological solutions. It also leads to the division of the sciences into disconnected disciplines which creates a division of labor and absolutizes the gap between experts and laity.

⁴ An algorithm is a formal logical process which, if carried out correctly, produces the right answer. Algorithmic logic is sometimes called ‘machine’ logic because it is the basis on which calculators and computers work, and can be done faster and more accurately by these than by humans. For an introduction to fuzzy categories and fuzzy logic see Hiebert 1994, 107-136).

⁵ Peter Lombard founded systematic theology when he sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent and synthetically consistent account of all the major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate the rational credibility of Christian faith (Finger 1985, 19) . Lombard’s Scentences, written in the 1140’s, provided the form of much of later Medieval and Reformation Theology (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 71, 132).

the particularity of human contexts and history. It must deal with changes in God's attitudes as surface phenomena, not intrinsic to God's ultimate nature. Moreover, in the ahistorical Platonic ascent to knowledge through contemplation divorced from everyday life, the overall cosmic drama or plot in Scripture, and the place of history and historical events in that drama, are out of focus. Systematic theology tends to be ahistorical in nature.

The focus on rational coherence and consistency can turn systematic theology into an intellectual exercise remote from life's real issues. At times this has led it to equate knowledge with virtue, the Platonic fallacy. At other times, in the search for objectivity, it has led to a separation of cognition from affectivity and valuation, which makes systematic theology a mental exercise divorced from feelings and morals. This also leads to the modern enlightenment distinction between 'pure' and 'applied' theology, and the relegation of the latter to a position of lesser importance because it deals with the subjective and changing messiness of human lives. This divorce of theology from ethics can be seen in most seminary curricula and graduation criteria, which are strong in the emphasis on truth and weak in their emphasis on moral character for graduation.⁶

The search for a comprehensive system based on algorithmic logic implies that humans can grasp the fullness of truth with clarity. It leaves little room for the ambiguities of life, the mysteries that transcend human comprehension, and wisdom that can deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of a rapidly changing world.⁷ It is built on linear logic acting on well formed categories and on the law of the excluded middle, and cannot deal with the 'fuzzy' sets and 'fuzzy logic' of human experiences (Zadeh 1965). It also tends to be deterministic and reductionist in nature.

⁶ This disappearance of moral curriculum is most evident in modern American universities. In 1896 Maine Agricultural College, which became the University of Maine the next year, defined its task as "It shall be the duty of Trustees, Directors and Teachers of the College to impress upon the minds of the students, the principles of morality and justice, and a sacred regard for truth; love of their country; humanity and universal benevolence; sobriety, frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and all other virtues that are ornaments of human society." Today this sounds archaic. Universities are no longer known for teaching "sobriety, frugality, chastity, and temperance."

⁷ Larry Laudan (1996) argues that positivism sought to build comprehensive systems of certain knowledge on the basis of algorithmic logic, but that current studies show, on the basis of this logic, that these systems are all under substantiated. The instrumentalism that is currently replacing positivism has no new logic to offer, and, therefore, ends up in relativism. Laudan argues that we need to return to a broader concept of 'wisdom' which enables us to make valid decisions regarding truth on the basis of partial and oftentimes conflicting findings.

Systematic theology often has a weak sense of mission. “Systematic theology arose as a branch of academic study pursued in universities and not primarily as a task of the church involved in the world at large (Finger 1985, 20-21).” Missiology is not a division in systematic theology, and systematic theology is not the driving force behind missions.⁸ Missiology tends, in fact, to be relegated to the category of practical disciplines.

Finally, systematic theology was itself a product and reflection of western intellectual history. Calvin, Luther and their successors appealed not only to *sole scriptura*, but logic, rhetoric and other methods available to them to shape their theologies. In so doing, they allowed scholasticism in at the back door. G. Ebling notes,

What was the relation of the systematic method here [in the post-Reformation] to the exegetical method? Ultimately it was the same as in the medieval scholasticism. There, too, exegesis of holy scripture went on not only within systematic theology, but also separately alongside of it, yet so that the possibility of a tension between exegesis and systematic theology was *a priori* excluded. Exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology (1963, 82-83).

Systematic theologians need to examine the cultural and historical contexts in which they formulate their theologies to discern the biases that these might introduce in their understanding of Scripture. All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in worldviews that shape the way they see things. There are no culture-free and history-free theologies. We all read Scripture from the perspectives of our particular context. This does not mean we can know no truth. It does mean that we must never equate our theology with Scripture, and we need to work in hermeneutical communities to check our personal and cultural biases.⁹

Nonwestern Philosophical Theologies Today, theologians in nonwestern churches are formulating theologies. Many of these are philosophical theologies based on assumptions and methods different from western philosophy. For example, in Africa one central theological question is: “What are the ultimate relationships in the cosmos?” This question is reflected in African worldviews and philosophies: “things stand in relation to one another by a *unio* and *ofica* (Sundermeier 1973).” Equilibrium must be maintained. Meaning in many African philosophies

⁸ Few trained as theologians go into missions, and many schools with strong departments of theology have no spirit of missions. On the other hand, all missionaries, of necessity, must become theologians.

⁹ Scholasticism is a particular methodological and philosophical development in the West. Its attractiveness lies in the possibility of constructing a scientific theology resting on well-defined presuppositions and methods, whose logical coherence would commend respect and attention. The influence of Scholasticism on Reformed theology “effectively destroyed the delicate balance of Calvin’s theology through [the] desire for systematization and internal consistency (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 155).”

is not gained by understanding for a logical progression, but by grasping the relation of the parts to the whole.

Biblical theology:

A second theological tradition to emerge in the West was Biblical Theology. Reacting to the scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Philip Spener and Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. Spener and the Pietists emphasized theology as a practical science, with a stress on experience and the illumination of the Spirit (Evans, McGrath and Gallway 1986, 170-71). In so doing they advocated a return to the Bible. This gave rise to Biblical theology. Their central question was: "What did the biblical passages mean at the time and to those writing them?" In other words, they sought to understand Scripture in its historical context. This led to an emphasis on the unfolding of cosmic history. It assumed that revelation is historical in character--that there is a real world with a real history of change over time which is 'going somewhere', and which has meaning because it has a plot and culminates in God's eternal reign.¹⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us that God is not only the ground of all existence, but all of history is a revelation of his existence and reign (1968). This view of theology was fundamental to the Hebrew worldview. To describe ultimate reality, the Jews told and reenacted in rituals the acts of God in their lives.

Biblical theology is based on the questions, methods and assumptions of history.¹¹ It uses the temporal logic of antecedent and consequent causality, and accepts teleological explanations. In other words, it views God and humans as acting on the basis of intentions. It is important because it helps us see the big cosmic story in which human history and our biographies are embedded. In doing so it helps us see God's acts in the confusion of our lives.

Biblical theology also has its limits. Because it focuses on diachronic meaning, the fundamental structure of reality remains out of focus--in our peripheral vision. Moreover, if we are not careful, it can become a study unto itself with little application to us today. We focus on the cosmic story, but need to remember that God speaks to us in the concrete settings of human and personal history. Moreover, biblical theology does not always help us discern what in

¹⁰ We use the term 'plot' here in the way Paul speaks of the 'mystery' now revealed to us (Rom. 16:25, Eph. 1:9, 3:3, 6:19, Col. 1:26). This is to say that there is real history, that it is moving in a direction and not changing randomly, and that behind it is a 'plot' or drama--a cosmic story that gives it meaning because it is 'going somewhere.' For us it is the story of God creating a perfect world, redeeming the lost who turn in faith to him, and restoring creation to perfection in which all will bow before Christ the Lord.

¹¹ For G. Vos, Biblical Theology is the "History of Special Revelation (1948, 23). Biblical Theology is Historical, Systematic Theology is logical.

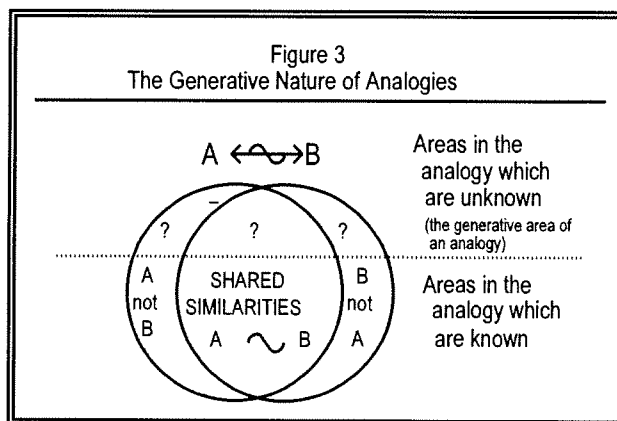
Scripture is historically bound, and what are divine principles that need to be applied today.

Tropological Theology:

As Western Christians, particularly those of us in academic pursuits, we have been deeply influenced by Greek and Hebrew thought. We find it harder to understand Eastern Orthodox theology, which is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental and iconic nature of truth. The key question Eastern Orthodox addresses is: "How can we comprehend complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic and human reason?" Theologies of this nature are based on tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966). They use tropes such as metaphors, types, parables and icons to communicate transcendent truth, and are able to deal with the fuzziness and ambiguities of concrete human life. In this way Eastern Orthodox may be closer to some of the concerns formulated by contemporary nonwestern theologians.

The method in tropological theology is the use of nondiscursive symbols--words, pictures and other symbols which point to transcendent realities by way of analogy, allegory, type, narrative, and ritual. It recognizes that to know transcendent realities, even in part, ordinary words are not enough. Words are discursive and cannot capture the nature of ultimate reality. Humans need to use nondiscursive symbols, which can only point in the direction of transcendent realities by way of analogy and ritual. Origen and other early Church Fathers made wide use of allegory in their theologies, seeking to understand the Scriptures and apply it to human realities. During the middle ages, stained glass portals of biblical stories served as theological lessons to oral laity, and in many parts of the world theology is done in song in what John Carman calls 'lyric theology.' This is the theology of the Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Solomon.

One value of tropological theologies is their generative nature (figure 3). They recognize that there is great mystery in seeking to understand God and his infinite nature. Consequently, there is room in them for the unknown. Underlying most of these is the use of analogy between a known reality [A] and one that is being explored [B]. In any such analogy it is clear that: 1) there are certain similarities which give rise to the analogy, 2) there are certain areas that clearly do not hold and force a fit is to distort the analogy, and 3) area in which it is not clear whether the analogy fits or not. It is this third area that generates a great deal of creative exploration and thought.



A second value of tropological theologies is their integration of ideas, feelings and response into a single whole. They assume that we must use all our senses--sight, touch, hearing and smell--to experience truth. They call for emotional and moral involvement with truth that leads to godly character in the theologian. For example, among the Russian Orthodox, the spiritual leader must be “knowledgeable in the Holy Scriptures, just, capable of teaching his - pupils, full of truly unhypocritical love for all, meek, humble, patient and free from anger and all other passions--greed, vainglory, glutton . . . (Oleksa 1987,14). Theology here is not a cognitive exercise.

Tropological theology is also doxological.¹² It is not an abstract reflection on the nature of truth for the sake of truth itself. It sees theological reflection as an essential element of worship. Thinking of God must lead to worship, and reflection on life to a daily offering of one’s self in worship and service to God.

One of the limits of tropological theologies is their application to human settings. Christians can learn to see all their lives as worship to God, but how does the Gospel relate to the secular world that rejects God in its daily existence?

Missiological Theology

Missionaries, by the very nature of their task, must become theologians. Mission, Martin Kähler wrote almost a century ago, “is the mother of theology.” It began as “an accompanying manifestation of the Christian missions, ” and not as “a luxury of the world-dominating church” (1971, 189-190). David Bosch notes, “Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary (1991, 124).”

The question arises, how do mission theologians do theology, and how is this different from other ways of doing theology? Their central question is: “What is God’s Word to humans in their particular situations?” Mission theologians assume that mission is the central theme in God’s acts on earth, and that all Christians are to be a part of this mission. They also assume that all humans live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the Gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. Eugene Peterson writes,

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it’s always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it’s always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you’ve done; whom I am and what I’ve done (1997, ##).

¹² Doxology is not absent from Western systematic theology. G. Wain Wright authored a textbook entitled Doxology (1980) with the purpose of seeking a “liturgical way of doing theology.” The doxological dimension of theology is not, however, a major concern in much of systematic theology.

The task of the mission theologian is to translate and communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularity of their lives, so that it may transform them and their cultures into what God intends for them to be. Missiological theology seeks to build the bridge between Biblical revelation and human context. Missiological theology, or, according to David Bosch, missionary theology (1995, 36) constantly deals with matters of death and life, God and idols. Missionary theology also seeks to bridge the gap between orthodoxy and orthoparxis, the Christian intellectual elite and the people.

Because missiological theology is based on whole systems, not linear logic, the missiological theologian begins either with questions emerging out of scripture, or out of human contexts. Each leads to the other in a hermeneutical spiral of translation and transformation.

Often missiological theologians are faced with human dilemmas and must discern what God's word is for these. They begin by examining the specific problem at hand in its particular historical/sociocultural context using empirical analysis and reason to organize their findings. This provides them with an emic understanding of the problem in which they seek to understand the world as the people whom they serve understand it. In the process, the theologians must discover the categories and logic the people use to construct their world.

Emic analyses help us see the world as others see it, but they do not provide us a comprehensive understanding of human realities, nor a bridge for intercultural communication. Missiological theologians must take a second step and compare different cultures in order to provide a metacultural 'etic' grid that enables them to translate between cultures. Here the methods of the human sciences and history, among others, enable missiological theologians to develop broader generalizations and theories about humans, and their cultures and histories based on careful comparisons.

In the third step, missiological theologians turn to Scripture to throw light on the problems they face in specific human settings. They do so by examining Scriptures using the questions, categories, assumptions and logic they bring with them. In the process, they must take another critical step, namely, they must examine and change their questions, categories, assumptions and logic in the light of biblical revelation.

The fourth step is to evaluate the human situation in the light of biblical truth as it is now understood through the process of critical contextualization.

The final step is missiological--to help people move from where they are to where God wants them to be. This is a process of transformation that includes individuals, and corporate social and cultural systems. We cannot expect people simply to abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. They can only move from where they are by an ongoing process of transformation.

One strength of missiological theology is its focus on mission. It takes humans seriously, in the particularity of their histories, societies and cultures. It integrates cognition, affectivity, evaluation in their response to biblical truth, and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, nor as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs and feelings that lead to response and, obedience to the call of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology, and sees ministry as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

This approach also recognizes that as human we all live in and are shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts, and we can only begin with our existing systems of thought. Recognizing this, missiological theologians consciously reflect on and alter their questions, assumptions, methods and theories in the light of revelation. This reflection needs to be done by the community of theologians--including systematic, biblical and tropological theologians, because they can help correct one another's biases. Similarly, this hermeneutical community should involve theologians from different cultures to correct cultural biases.

Complementarily

How do these theologies relate to one another? The Enlightenment project sought to build one Grand Unified Theory (GUT) which integrated all knowledge into one comprehensive system. Today we know that that is not possible. Our human minds are finite and cannot comprehend the full measure of even all truth about nature, let alone of an infinite God.

Moreover, Gödel pointed out the limits of human knowledge systems: they can be two but not all of the following: 1) powerful [able to explain many things]; 2) logically consistent [have no internal contradictions], and 3) self-contained [needing no explanations external to the system].

Today, there is a growing awareness of 'complimentarily' as a way of relating different but overlapping understandings of reality. Just as an architect makes different blueprints for the same building--structural, electrical, plumbing and so on, and as planners use different maps to map a city--roads, population density, zoning and so on, so we as humans need to look at reality from different perspectives and through different lenses. Different theologies throw different light on the nature of God, and his works and revelation.

We need systematic theology to help us understand the questions, assumptions, categories and logic found in Scripture regarding the structure of reality, knowing that we bring to the task the methods of Greek thought. We need biblical theology to help us understand the cosmic story unfolding in Scripture, the 'mystery' now revealed to us. We need iconic theology in order to transform our theologizing into worship. We need missiological theology to communicate the transforming Gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves. We need to make theological reflection central to mission. We also need to view mission as integral to theology (W. Andersen 1955, 59-61).

References Cited

- Anderson, W. 1955.
- Bosch, David J. 1991. Transforming Mission: Paradigm 'Shifts in Theology of Mission. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Ebling, G. 1963. The meaning of biblical theology. Word and Faith. London: SCM. ##-##.
- Evans, G. R., A. E. McGrath and A. D. Gallway. 1986. The Science of Theology. #####
- Finger, Thomas N. 1985. Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach. Vol. 1. Scottdale, PN: Herald Press.
- Fuller, Daniel P. 1997. Biblical theology and the analogy of faith. International Journal of Frontier Missions. 14:65-74.
- Hiebert, Paul G. 1994. Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Oleksa, Michael, ed. 1987. Alaskan Missionary Spirituality. New York: Paulist Press.
- Osborne, Grant R. 1991. The Hermeneutical Spiral. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart, ed. 1968. Revelation as History. New York: The Macmillian Company.
- Peterson, Eugene. 1997. Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco.
- Polanyi, Michael. 1966. the Tacit Dimension. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Voss, G.
- Zadeh, Lofti Asker. 1965 Fuzzy sets. Information and Control. 8:338-353.