

# Missiology as encounterology: Pentecostal considerations



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Encounterology is a missiological approach to the theology of religions that was developed by J.N.J. Kritzinger – a South African missiologist. The approach recognises the encounter between people of different faiths or religions such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism and others. Encounterology is a theology of a particular interfaith encounter that is relevant to the theology of religions. Encounterology is discussed here as a theology relevant to addressing the differences that exist between Christian denominations and their theological approaches. This article engages encounterology from a Pentecostal theological perspective to develop an authentic and transformative Pentecostal theology of encounters. This article builds from the Pentecostal theology of encounters with the Holy Spirit and fellow human beings into the development of the theology of interreligious encounters. In addition, encounterology is relevant in Pentecostalism in the encounters between the movement and other Christian traditions. Therefore, the theology of religions should consider not only exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches, but also encounterology as an authentic and transformative approach for both interreligious and ecumenical dialogue.

**Contribution:** This article used encounterology as an important framework for a Pentecostal theology of interreligious and ecumenical dialogue. This article has made a new contribution to the theology of religions in the methodological and theoretical field in proposing encounterology to existing approaches such as exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches.

**Keywords:** missiology; encounterology; Pentecostalism; theology; interreligious dialogue; ecumenical dialogue.

## Introduction

There are different approaches or schools of thought to the theology of religions, namely exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Religious exclusivism is an approach that views one religious group as one true religion. Weißer et al. (2014) explain that:

[E]xclusivism denotes the view that the truth, and consequently the way to salvation, is only one. It is furthermore limited to only one true religion and is the prerogative of one and only one faith community. (p. 202)

This means that any religion or religious practitioner that adopts this kind of approach will perceive their religion as the only way. Religious inclusivism is an idea that acknowledges the presence of God in all religions of the world, meaning God is not exclusively a deity of one religion but of all religions. This means that the Christians who embrace this approach would acknowledge the presence of God in other religions even if they uphold the position that salvation comes through Christ (Chetty 2022:8). Religious pluralism views all religions as being the same and should be respected by all. This approach is based on the view that God can be experienced by all; hence, there is no need for the discrimination against any religion. Cooper (2013:158) in Chetty (2022) explains:

Pluralism maintains that all major religions are legitimate expressions of humankind's response to the divine. When understood in this way, religious pluralism is the view that not only is it a verifiable fact that there are many religions in the world, but each of the major religions should be understood as an acceptable and sufficient systems of worship. (p. 158)

The 21st century is more of a pluralist world where almost all religions of the world are acknowledged and accepted in society.

J.N.J. Kritzinger, a South African missiologist of note, developed encounterology within missiological studies in arguing that the theology of religions should not be confined to the above-

mentioned approaches. In other words, the perception of an individual about other religions should not be confined to inclusivist, exclusivist and pluralist positions, but be based on an individual's encounter with the other. This article builds on the Pentecostal theology of encounter with the Holy Spirit and fellow human beings in the development of the Pentecostal encounterology. This article will introduce missiology as encounterology by reviewing Kritzinger's article 'Faith to Faith-Missiology as encounterology' (2008). It will also demonstrate that Pentecostalism is a movement relevant to the study of encounterology. There will be a discussion on Pentecostal considerations for interreligious encounters and interdenominational or ecumenical dialogue. This article aims to demonstrate that Pentecostalism is a relevant movement for the development of the authentic and transformative theology of encounters. This has implications for the theology of religions, as encounterology should be recognised in addition to religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism and religious pluralism. In the next section, missiology as encounterology as a theoretical framework for this study will be discussed.

## Missiology as encounterology: Theoretical framework

Encounterology was developed by Kritzinger (2008:770) from Koyama's neighbourology (1974), which is a concern for the religion of one's neighbour, particularly if it is a different religion. Kritzinger embraced neighbourology within a missiological perspective in the formulation of encounterology. The main argument of Kritzinger (2008:787) is the development of a theology that acknowledges encounters between religious communities and people rather than a mere theology of religions that is only based on exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist approaches. Thus, missiology as encounterology allows us to do, according to Kritzinger (2008):

... a critical and creative reflection on the encounters between the people of the Way and the people of other ways – arising out of encounters and nurturing ever more authentic and transformative encounters. (p. 788)

This means that encounterology is based on two important elements: firstly, the encounter is between people of different faiths and, secondly, it creates more authentic and transformative encounters based on genuine initial encounters. This means that the theology of religions should not be based on other people's assumptions, but religious people should be allowed to encounter other religions for authentic encounters.

The encounters between various religions make sense in the context of the rest of society and how various members of such society benefit from the encounters. In other words, given that many societies of the world are already multi-religious, it is the right thing to learn from other religions. Apart from a few, a single religion is no longer practised in major cities of the world, including cities in Africa, but a multitude of religions. Therefore, an encounterology becomes

the relevant approach in the construction of the theology of religions. Kritzinger (2008) reiterates:

Interreligious encounters will always be deeply affected by the broader structures of society. Partners in interfaith encounters need to acknowledge the macro-structures of society – and how this affects their relationship. (p. 777)

This means that, instead of insisting on one religion domineering other religions, Christians should rather insist on the encounters between religions without losing the essence of their faith. This means that even faith workers in communities need to be sensitive to the next person and their faith rather than always strive for the conversion of people from other faiths. Encounterology does not end with one person's faith but encounters with others without the subtle aim of conversion.

Kritzinger (2008:786) proposes 'a theology for a particular interfaith encounter'. According to him (Kritzinger 2008:786), this helps to avoid preconceived ideas about other religions because of previous experiences or other people's assumptions. This means that people of one faith must allow themselves to experience the other religions to give an authentic account of them. In this way, encounterology is a theology relevant to interreligious dialogue (Kritzinger 2011; 2022; cf. Mashau 2018; Van Schalkwyk 2013). Kritzinger (2008:787) explains further that 'credible and in-depth theological reflection in this field will therefore manifest itself as a theology of Christian-African encounter, Christian-Buddhist encounter, Christian-Muslim encounter'. These encounters will be able to produce genuine reflections on how people of one faith understand the people of the other faith. Christians or even Muslims or any other religion should not be judgmental of each other based on a few incidences or experiences of others but should rather endeavour to have their own experience through encounterology. The point made by Kritzinger (2008) is that one might have a different experience given an encounter with other religions that might be different to the popular opinion of others. This makes encounterology a game changer in the construction of the theology of religions, particularly regarding interreligious encounters.

Encounterology is also proposed as the theology that will assist in mitigating the challenges of 'Christians differing among themselves' (Kritzinger 2008:788). Encounterology is relevant for the dialogue between Christians of different theological approaches, because the perception that all Christians are the same is false. Therefore, encounterology is relevant in creating encounters between various Christian denominations. Encounterology is applicable to not only interreligious encounters, but also ecumenical encounters. In this way, encounterology is a theology relevant to the ecumenical dialogue. Here encounterology is important to avoid preconceived ideas about other Christian traditions such as the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, Protestant denominations, and so forth. This means that, for a Catholic to be able to understand a Pentecostal, for

example, there should be an encounter between the two, otherwise one will always have his or her own perceptions about the other. Encounterology should start with ecumenical dialogue where Christians encounter each other and have a better understanding of one another's theological positions before understanding other religions; as the saying goes, 'charity begins at home'. When Christians have an encounter with one another, they will be able to have encounters with other people of other religions such as Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and so forth.

In summary, encounterology is a missiological approach that encourages an encounter between one religion and another. Encounterology advocates for the encounter between people of different faiths; it is thus relevant for interreligious dialogue. Encounterology also encourages the interaction between Christians of different theological orientations. These two elements of encounterology are important points of discussion in this article, that is, encounterology as a theory for interreligious dialogue and encounterology as a theory for ecumenical dialogue. However, before these two aspects of encounterology are explored, it is important to discuss Pentecostalism as a movement relevant to the implementation of encounterology.

## Pentecostalism: A movement of encounters

Pentecostalism is a movement of encounters. Since its inception, the Pentecostal movement has been known as the movement where encounters between human beings and God become possible through the Holy Spirit (Anderson 1991; cf. Kgatle 2022; Nel 2015). The Pentecost narrative in Luke-Acts is also relevant to the Pentecostal theology of encounterology. In the first place, the Pentecost narrative marks the encounter between human beings and the Holy Spirit. As promised to all believers, the Holy Spirit came upon all believers as they all waited for the fullness of Pentecost. Acts 2 states very well that:

<sup>1</sup>When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.

<sup>2</sup>Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (vv. 1-4)

It can be deduced from this text that the Pentecost narrative is known for the encounter between human beings and the Holy Spirit as the believers in the early church encountered the same.

The contemporary Pentecostals, particularly in the historical Azusa Street Revival in Los Angeles, also received the Holy Spirit. It is from these experiences in Azusa Street combined with the biblical narrative that Pentecostals around the world began to emphasise the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Wilkinson and Althouse (2010:33) call the Azusa Street Revival the

modern-day Jerusalem, because believers there waited for an encounter with the Holy Spirit in the same way the early church did. This baptism is an encounter with the Holy Spirit. The Azusa Street Revival gave birth to many other revivals across the world with the same emphasis on the encounter with God through the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Pentecostals in Africa also emphasise an encounter with the Holy Spirit; hence, the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Anderson 1991; Kgatle 2020; Onyiah 2013). In Africa, the people have embraced Pentecostalism, as they also seek the same encounter that changes their lives for the better. Pentecostals in this region of the world do not pray to fulfil a liturgical obligation but make prayers in pursuit of the divine encounter which is an important aspect of encounterology. However, the Holy Spirit remains a relevant agent through which this encounter with God becomes possible among African Pentecostals.

The second instance is an encounter between the believers and fellow human beings including those who speak strange languages. However, in this encounter, people who spoke different languages were able to understand each other. Acts 2 states very well that:

<sup>5</sup>Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. <sup>6</sup>When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their language being spoken. <sup>7</sup>Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans?' <sup>8</sup>Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome<sup>11</sup> (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our tongues! (vv. 5-11)

It can be deduced from this text that the Pentecost narrative was an encounter between people of different nations and possibly different religions. This makes the Pentecostal movement a relevant one for the discussions on interreligious encounters as proposed by Kritzinger.

Similarly, at Azusa Street, people came from different parts of the world to encounter one another at the revival. This is basically what makes the Azusa Street Revival unique among other Pentecostal revivals and movements over the years: it united the people (Afolayan, Yacob-Haliso & Falola 2018). In addition, it influenced other historical revivals such as the one that happened in Johannesburg, South Africa (Kgatla 2016). It is for the same reason that the Azusa Street Revival is acknowledged as the revival that united the people of God (Liardon 2006). Menzies and Menzies (2000) state clearly that:

Blacks and whites worshiped together, united by the power of the Holy Spirit. Because of the strategic location of Los Angeles for international travel and because of publication in the local papers about the sensational happenings at Azusa Street, travellers from various nations gravitated there. Some of the visitors were missionaries attached to various sending agencies. (p. 11)

Once again, we can see the power of Pentecost for encounters between human beings of different backgrounds. This means that the Pentecostal movement is relevant to the encounters between people of different faiths. It should also be a relevant movement for the discussions on the encounters between Christians of different denominations.

## Pentecostal considerations for interreligious dialogue

Contemporary Pentecostals, unlike the early church and Azusa Street Revival, are more sceptical about people of other faiths. Pentecostals in Africa are more conservative when it comes to their relationship with people of other faiths. Some of the Pentecostals would rather view other religions negatively (Anderson 2005). One of the challenges of some Pentecostals in Africa, as raised by Iwuchukwu (2018), is religious fundamentalism where fundamental beliefs in Pentecostalism make it difficult to interact with people of other religions. Therefore, encounterology, as proposed by Kritzing (2008), is also a call for Pentecostals in the 21st century to abandon the conservative approach to encountering people of other faiths. Pentecostals need to learn that encountering others will not interfere with their faith. In other words, learning from other religions does not mean that Pentecostals will lose their faith. On the contrary, learning from others will enhance the faith and the teachings of Pentecostalism. According to Santiago-Vendrell (2013:127), 'this interaction – prompted by the Spirit – allows for a mutual enrichment between the dialogue partners in which each experiences a deeper self-understanding'. Therefore, encounterology is relevant as a call for Pentecostals to engage other religions in a meaningful way.

Encounterology, as proposed by Kritzing (2008), is a call for Pentecostals to return to their roots where the early church encountered people coming from different religious backgrounds. As discussed in the preceding section, people from different religious backgrounds came together to experience Pentecost to the extent that they could even understand one another. Yong (2007) puts it this way:

Pentecost motif of the Spirit poured out on all flesh provides a theological - more explicitly, pneumatological -rationale for interreligious dialogue made possible when Christians find themselves as guests who are hosted by members of other faiths. (p. 65)

In the same vein, Pentecostals in the 21st century are called upon to learn from the Pentecost motif in embracing people from different religious backgrounds through having encounters with the same. This can be done by instilling the consciousness of the interreligious dialogue among Pentecostals in Africa and in the diaspora (Atabongwoung, Lütz & Austin 2023:1). Moreover, this can be achieved by encouraging Pentecostals who are Spirit-filled to pursue fellowship with people of different religious orientation.

Encounterology is a call that can be helpful in many African states where there is too much religious conflict in countries such as Nigeria. Van Gorder (2012) points out that:

Nigeria, Africa's most populous state, is a nation where interreligious conflict has claimed the lives of between seventy thousand and one hundred thousand Muslims and Christians within the past 30 years in more than forty separate interfaith riots. Countless people have been crippled, maimed, raped, left homeless, or have seen their churches, masjids, businesses, and homes burned to the ground in the name of a vengeful God. (p. 43)

Pentecostals in Nigeria, for example, can be instrumental in creating a Christian-Muslim encounter given their influence in the country. With so many Pentecostal churches and influential pastors, Pentecostalism has a role to play in encouraging peace and harmony in countries such as Nigeria. Pentecostalism in Nigeria is important in creating an atmosphere wherein different religions can coexist (Wariboko 2014:479). Atabongwoung et al. (2023:8) point out that 'the emphasis should be, among other things, on fostering genuine interreligious tolerance and respect while at the same time upholding the principles of religious plurality'. However, this cannot happen if the idea of the Pentecostal pastors in the country is that Pentecostalism should dominate other religious groups. In the next section, the article discusses the possibility of using encounterology as a framework for ecumenical dialogue as driven by the Pentecostal movement.

## Pentecostal considerations for ecumenical dialogue

There is a need for encountering between one Christian and another. Richie (2011:158) explains that 'Christian theology has the potential to contribute moral and spiritual resources where religious strife is spilling over into the civil realm'. However, the strength of Christian theology in the 21st century is dependent on the ecumenical dialogue. In other words, a fragmented Christianity cannot make an impact on the theology of religions. This makes ecumenical dialogue the central factor for the impact of Christianity on the broader theology of religions. Some Pentecostals are sceptical about relating with the Christians in other traditions other than Pentecostal churches (Adeboye 2018). Pentecostals, even with the tremendous growth over the years, still need encounter with the Christians of other traditions. In other words, as much as the Pentecostal movement is growing, it still needs other traditions. Pentecostals should not continue to view others as worldly but rather seek to engage with them in a manner that will enrich the Christian movement as a whole. In addition, a call for the ecumenical dialogue extends beyond the interaction between Pentecostals and those who are aligned with their theology such as evangelicals (Kärkkäinen 2018). Pentecostals should be able to rate Christians of different theological orientations through encounterology.

A call for encounterology is made to Pentecostals for an attitude change toward the Christians of other denominations

(Richie 2011:161). Although some Pentecostals have begun to acknowledge and appreciate other denominations, some are still conservative and trapped in 'othering'. This is the challenge of classical Pentecostals, because some neo-Pentecostals and charismatics have become tolerant of other denominations. Thus, encounterology is a good starting point to encourage Pentecostals to interact with other Christian traditions in the quest for ecumenical dialogue. This calls for Pentecostals to come out of their comfort zone to encounter other Christians. This is not a simple matter, but it also involves some practical steps of attending other people's meetings to learn from their theology and practice rather than always being confined to Pentecostal settings. This means that Pentecostals should be engaged in interdenominational gatherings to learn from others. In an African context, this is important for enhancing the theology and practice of the Pentecostal tradition. Encounterology, as proposed by Kritzinger (2008), challenges Pentecostals to be concerned about others even if it means people with whom they differ in terms of theology and practice.

## Towards an authentic and transformative Pentecostal encounterology

A Pentecostal pneumatology, which is the theology of the Spirit, encourages the theology of encounters. Richie (2011:156) explains 'Pentecostal pneumatology provides space appropriate for interreligious dialogue – inspires and empowers it – and that testimony specifically provides paradigmatic structure and substance to the same'. This means that being filled with the Holy Spirit should be a starting point for further engagement with other people rather than making Pentecostals conservative. As they were filled with the Holy Spirit, the believers in the early church began to have encounters with people of other religions. This demonstrates that the infilling of the Holy Spirit is not an alienation of the Pentecostals from the rest of society, but rather an agency of being with other people. This means that engagement with other people is proper and consistent to the Pentecostal pneumatology as was the case in the early church. After all, the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of diversity that can embrace people not only from different cultural backgrounds, but also from different religious backgrounds (Santiago-Vendrell 2013). This alone should be enough to encourage Pentecostals around the world to have encounters with people coming from diverse religious backgrounds. Encountering people of other faiths and encountering Christians of other traditions makes a Pentecostal encounterology a meaningful and transformative one. The Pentecostal encounterology in the 21st century is expected to produce authentic and transformational encounters in the same way the early church did. In other words, there is no way that Pentecostals can be able to win people of other faiths without the encounters.

The Pentecost narrative also demonstrates that, each time there is an encounter with people of different religions, transformation takes place. In addition, in Acts 8:26–40 there

is also an encounter between Phillip and an Ethiopian Eunuch which also brought transformation in the life of the Ethiopian Eunuch. This further demonstrates that, when those who are spirit-filled engage with others, there will be a meaningful transformation. Therefore, being filled with the Holy Spirit should be an encouragement to lead other people into baptism with the same. This has the potential to encourage people who are outside the Pentecostal movement to have similar experiences of being filled with the Spirit and speaking in other tongues. However, this cannot happen if Pentecostals are withdrawn from other religions or even other Christian denominations. Richie (2011) says that this is:

... a way of helping others outside the Pentecostal tradition experience something of its heart and soul, a measure of its spiritual appeal and potency. When Pentecostal testifiers are inspired and anointed by the Holy Spirit, they become personal instruments or vessels of the Spirit's presence and power to those who are willing to be alike inspired and anointed to hear. (p. 178)

Therefore, Pentecostals are expected to share their experiences on Spirit baptism and pneumatic experiences such as speaking in tongues to other believers. However, this is possible when Pentecostals are more open to other religions. This is what will bring authentic and transformative encounters between Pentecostals and people of other religions.

## Implications for the theology of religions

The Pentecostal considerations for interreligious encounters have two implications: firstly, we cannot only view the theology of religion by considering the inclusivist, exclusivist and pluralist approaches, there is also a need to consider encounterology. This is important, as some exclusivist supporters have isolated other religious groups due to their personal experiences. Therefore, encounterology is an important approach; because it allows individuals to have their encounter before they can have a perception of other people's religion. It is important in the study of the theology of religions to consider encounterology as a framework for meaningful transformation. Secondly, the ability of the Pentecostal movement to have an encounter with other Christian denominations opens opportunities for interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, this opens opportunities for global peace and harmony across the world. Santiago-Vendrell (2013:121) points out that 'dialogue between denominational lines and interreligious lines is an important task of global community building'. Therefore, encounterology is consistent with the mission of God who is calling the people of the world to come together in their diversity. It is therefore the call for Pentecostals to join into the broader mission of God and embrace other faiths as much as they seek to reach others.

## Conclusion

This article looked at a missiology of encounters as developed by Kritzinger – a South African missiologist. This approach is

built on two main aspects: firstly, it is a theology of particular interfaith encounters, and secondly, it is a theology relevant to dealing with the differences that exist within the Christian tradition. This article used this theoretical framework in the development of the Pentecostal theology of encounters. This article argued that Pentecostalism as a movement of encounters with the Holy Spirit and fellow human beings is relevant for the implementation of encounterology. For this to happen, there should be a Pentecostal consideration for encounters with the people of faith other than Christianity. In addition, there should be a Pentecostal consideration for the encounters with Christians other than Pentecostals. When this is done, there will be an authentic and transformative Pentecostal theology of encounters. This theology has implications for the theology of religions in the sense that encounterology should form part of the main aspects of the same in addition to religious exclusivity, religious inclusivity and religious pluralism.

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The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

## Author's contributions

M.S.K. is the sole author of this research article.

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## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author, or the publisher.

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