Theological Education in the Context of Global Christianity

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Abstract:
Theological Education is facing a number of advances and setbacks. The Globalization of Christianity, the evolution of communication tools and the strive for formal theological education by groups that customarily shunned it as well as a generalized awareness for the contextuality of Theological Education are among the advances. Setbacks can be seen in the re-confessionalization of Theological Education in many parts of the world and the end of formidable ecumenical initiatives as well as the continuous difficulty of guaranteeing sustainability both to models of Theological Education and to the institutions that offer them. Mindful of these trends, the present lecture seeks to provide a panoramic analysis of Theological Education in the context of an ever growing diversity of Christianity and offer reflections and proposals on what is needed for a sustainable ecumenical and contextual Theological Education today.

Preamble

Dear friends, colleagues, brothers and sisters,

It’s a great honour and, indeed, joy to stand before you today here in this historical Visser’t Hooft hall of the Ecumenical Center. I would especially like to thank Obiora Ike, Andreas Waldvogel, Lucy Howe Lopez and other collaborators of Globethics.net and the whole GlobeTheoLib consortium for inviting me for this lecture. I also thank Amélie Ekué, Chad Rimmer and H.S. Wilson for the time and care they have taken to read my paper and prepare their responses which I am looking forward very much to hear and interact with, as well as with questions and comments from other colleagues in the room. It is most fortunate that they represent different contexts from mine and, thus, can correct and complement the picture I am drawing from their own perspective. My own bias and focus necessarily lies with Brazil and Latin America where I have been living and working for the last 17 years, 15 of which at the Lutheran School of Theology. The Faculdades EST, at 72 years, is slightly older than the WCC and today has around 750 students, most of whom are not Lutheran. There are many Baptists, Catholics, Pentecostals and some people of other faiths like African Brazilian Umbanda. This probably makes us an ecumenical school.

Introduction

It might be rather unusual to start a lecture about theological education referring to a political event. However, I cannot but mention the sad fact of the recent imprisonment of our former president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. It is not my task here to discuss...

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whether or not this was a correct judgment. In formal terms, it certainly was, on the merit there are divergences. But this is not the point I want to make. The point is that, as Lula himself said in his speech before turning himself in to the Federal Police and start to serve the penalty he had been convicted to, Lula is no longer – or rather: never was – (just) a person, but “an idea”. Even with Lula in custody, what he represents for the transformation of Brazil and the dreams and hopes he kindled and continues to kindle goes far beyond a single person. This is one way to understand why it was so difficult for his followers present at the trade-union’s headquarters to let him go from the trade-union’s office to jail. It is no mere coincidence that before the political act with Lula’s speech there was a religious ceremony that showed the historical partnership of the Catholic Church, but also of sectors of other churches with the trade-unions, landless worker’s movement and the worker’s party. It is safe to say that this religious-political partnership made possible the emergence of a new civil society towards the end of the military regime.1 The Rev. Lusmarina Campos Garcia, a Lutheran pastor in Rio de Janeiro and formerly in Geneva, spoke for the other churches. Her voice recalled the traditional Brazilian and Latin American joinder of the struggle for citizenship and ecumenical engagement. To be ecumenical meant to struggle for justice, and Christians struggling for justice considered themselves, with pride, ecumenical.2 Lula, many of you might remember, addressed the Ninth Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Porto Alegre (2006) when he was in office. He thanked the churches for their engagement: “As we fought, decades ago, for democracy in our country, we found not only moral and spiritual support to, confidently, pursue those struggles.” He namely thanked the WCC for having hosted the eminent Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, then prosecuted by the military regime, from 1970 to 1980.3 Freire, as you might recall, worked as a special consultant to the then WCC subunit on Education and professor at the Faculty of Education of the University of Geneva. He refused to remain more than a year at Harvard and preferred to work at the WCC because, as he says, “the Council would give me a space university would not. I feared, on leaving Latin America, to lose contact with the concrete and to start locking up myself in libraries and to work on books, which would not satisfy me and would lead me into total alienation. I was not interested in passing a year studying a book, but a year studying practice directly. The Council gave me that opportunity.”4 Freire emphasized the absolute freedom he had at the time while working with the WCC.5

2 See Júlio de Santa Ana, Ecumenismo e Libertação: reflexões sobre a relação entre a unidade cristã e o Reino de Deus (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1987).
enabling those who are poor, oppressed or otherwise marginalized to become the subjects of their own history. Literacy was thus linked with people’s participation in decision-making, and formal, informal and non-formal education were integrated. Pedagogy was understood as posing problems in dialogue, rather than a merely monological transfer of knowledge from those who know to those who do not know.”

As we redraw, globally, our ways of doing education and, not least, theological education, I think we should continue to be mindful of this Freirean thrust: to be an education with the people, by the people and for the people. At the same time, we do have to acknowledge that the notion of “people”, who and where they are, has to be clarified and reassessed.

As Freire, an ecumenical Catholic, many of the leaders of the ecumenical movement in Brazil and Latin America were eminent advocates of a transformed society. And this is not so by mere coincidence: it was the WCC’s programme of Theological Education, later ETE that insisted on contextualization, with exponents like Desmond Tutu, Shoki Coe and Brazilian (of Armenian descent) Aharon Sapsezian. In the words of my Doktormutter Christine Lienemann-Perrin who wrote the major study on the Theological Education Fund as her doctoral dissertation: “The significance of TEF lies mainly in having given input towards a theological education that is geared towards the tasks and forms of organization of the churches in their respective socio-economic and political context.”

So in this first, introductory part, we can already see a number of presuppositions of ecumenical theological education I would like to highlight in the form of short theses:

1. Ecumenical theological education joins academic reflection with practical insertion – it can never be “just” an academic nor “just” a practical enterprise, but promotes a constant dialogue and mutual enrichment and criticism of both.

2. Ecumenical theological education is concerned with the world. Although being in the world is, for Christians who belong to and live in eschatological expectation of the city of God, an always and necessarily precarious thing, it is the proper place for them to live and serve.

3. Ecumenical theological education is the task of churches situated in a specific context. The context is part of theological reflection and not only the field of its application. This includes the task of theological education for this wider context and its relationship to civil society and the state, also in terms of accreditation.

Given these presupposition, I shall now present three elements of challenge and opportunity for ecumenical theological education in a globalized and ever more diverse, also religiously diverse world: (1) the need for a fresh look at the concept of ecumenism; (2) the need to situate, with wisdom, theological education between the

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church and the state; (3) the inclusion of new groups into theological education, namely Pentecostals.

1. What Is, After All, Ecumenism?

There have been some advances in the recent work of the EEF Commission which I have the privilege to serve as moderator, together with my colleague Esther Mombo from Kenya. One of the initiatives that we agreed upon right at our first meeting in early 2015 in Bossey was to create a network of teachers of ecumenism. As most things in the ecumenical movement, this initiative has its predecessors, even if unconsciously. After a three year study on the so called “viability” of ETE in the early 1990s, the Oslo conference on this matter held in 1996 had already called for a network of teachers of ecumenism. The official name, after a first meeting of this new network, has become NIHETE – Network of Institutions of Higher Ecumenical Theological Education. Its first testing point was to assist in the preparation and selection process for facilitators of the recent GETI at Arusha, Tanzania, in the context of the Conference for World Mission and Evangelization. I would like to especially thank my colleague Amélé Ekué for her tremendous effort in articulating the network in this way and getting a very significant GETI going. My Brazilian colleagues who participated were very enthusiastic about GETI and the whole conference.

Now during the meeting of a group of representatives from such Institutions of Higher Ecumenical Theological Education in Halle in June 2016, one of the discussions that came up was about “what do we understand by ecumenism”? This might be a surprising question after more than a century of the modern ecumenical movement and at 70 years of the WCC. Well, it is one of these central concepts that survive precisely because they are open to new interpretations and change as the context in which ecumenism is lived out changes. After all, the biblical use of oikoumene is nothing near what we would like to construct today – it had a certain amplitude of meaning, but mainly referred first to the Greek and then to the Roman Empire in contrast with the Barbarians. The Emperors Nero (54-68) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180) had themselves venerated as “good spirit of the oikoumene” and as “benefactor and savior of all the oikoumene”. Also under Christian emperors, the term retained its imperial connotations as it was the Emperor who called the ecumenical councils and ensured their efficaciousness. Is, then, oikoumene to be an intrinsically imperial term? I would certainly like to say “no”, but it is perceived as such by a good number of people,

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8 “It also was stressed that here is an urgent need for establishing a global network of those teaching ecumenics and working as ecumenical educators (here cooperation could be sought with Bossey)”, as formulated by the suggestions of the 1996 Oslo Conference on the Viability of Theological Education ‘Towards a New Mandate an Structural Framework of ETE/WCC’, in: John Pobee, ed., Towards Viable Theological Education, Ecumenical Imperative, Catalyst of Renewal (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 158-162, 161.


churches and institutions. There are some within the Christian fold that believe ecumenism to be an imposition from outside, especially from the Catholic Church. They may, thus, resent to be left outside, as if they were Barbarians, or else to be forced to adopt positions they are opposed to in order to come into the field of the “civilized”. Some turn the game round, however, and make themselves the rulers and see the ecumenists the Barbarians. This game works all to well, as long as “we” are always the insiders and “the others” remain the outsiders.

Others lay the emphasis, precisely because of the potentially imperialistic overtones of oikoumene on the difference. Argentinian Methodist and eminent ecumenist José Miguez Bonino was one of those who brought this up in the 1970s., stressing the imperial economic and political forces as well as the domination of theology from the “old world” and its dogmatic undergirding of ecumenism. He also showed, in the Latin American context, the different kinds of being “evangélico”, as immigrant, evangelical, missionary, Pentecostal and ecumenical, the latter based on a view on the Trinitarian God that emphasis both unity and diversity.

Very recently, Argentinian Baptist Nicolas Panotto claims, for ecumenical theological education, a necessary re-orientation by what he calls an “ecumenical principle”. This reminds us of, and indeed he refers to, Tillich’s famous Protestant principle. Such principle would and should be the central reference, over ecumenical institutions and event over the ecumenical movement. Such ecumenical principle is already invoked by Magali Nascimento Cunha, a former member of the WCC’s Central Committee and continuously active ecumenist despite her Methodist church’s withdrawal from many ecumenical initiatives and institutions. She writes: “The ecumenical principle is much bigger than the ecumenical movement as we know it.” And she adds: “Ecumenism is, then, a term referring to the biblical and theological principle of unity of the creation of God which calls us to value others and diversity (Gn 2:18) and results in acceptance, respect, dialogue, responsibility towards Creation, partnership and love for others (Dt 10:19). It is a Christian principle of overcoming divides in the name of the loyalty to the unity of the Father with the Son (Jn 17:21)”.

Nicolás Panotto takes this further into a critical principle: “In short, Latin American theological education can bring a revival of the ecumenical principal through a critical evaluation on its underlying worldview, institutional and pedagogical paradigms, with the purpose of pluralizing its epistemologies, the subjects from where stems the heterogeneity of the existing theological discourses, which mold into a curriculum and structural planning that transforms the traditional thematic axes, the theological worldviews monopolized within the ecumenical movement. If I see well, while

15 “En pocas palabras, la educación teológica latino-americana puede aportar a una revitalización del principio ecuménico a través de una evaluación crítica sobre sus paradigmas cosmovisionales,
Nicolas and Magali agree on the need to cherish and foster diversity, it seems that Nicolas values much less the importance of unity, even if in diversity. This is understandable against the background of many authoritarian, monopolizing, even fundamentalist and certainly anti-ecumenical tendencies among churches in his context. With all contextual differences, it matches well with European liberal proposals of a “hermeneutics of difference”\(^\text{16}\). I believe, however, that too much emphasis on difference can reveal a lack of interest in the other or in giving expression to catholicity, the principle of unity that seeks coherence in Christianity across all times and spaces. Christianity, it seems to me, has to be recognizable as such across the globe. While I say this, I am aware of the many exclamation and even more question mark this claim invariably provokes. It is, however, a task which we need to tackle again and again. The reference to the Trinity, one God in the diversity of three persons, still appeals to me in this context as a kind of ecumenical paradigm, so aptly laid out by Konrad Raiser in his “Ecumenism in Transition”\(^\text{17}\). And, of course, to the least we seek to discover our common pilgrimage towards justice and peace.

In any case, there is a fragility of the “old style” ecumenical projects which, not too rarely were too personalized and too dependent on money from abroad – the same problem many civil society organizations are facing, be they faith based or not. Magali do Nascimento Cunha, a well-known Brazilian ecumenist and former member of the WCC Central Committee, states in the preliminaries of a recent book chapter that “leaders engaged in the ecumenical cause are unconcerned with an appropriate communication pedagogy to reach the church ‘bases’ and to socialize theology and proposals for actions. Because of that, unawareness and prejudice are bolstered”\(^\text{18}\). Magali further cites “ecumenical indifference” and “antiecumensism” as to the main obstacles to ecumenical practice. While she considers the indifference the main problem, antiecumensism is rooted in exclusivisms on both sides – Catholic exclusivism as well as anti-catholicism, Pentecostal exclusivism as well as anti-Pentecostalism, to just name the main ones. During the Ninth WCC Assembly, roughly 100 students from Latin America and around the world followed a two week Ecumenical Congress, a kind of GETI avant la lettre originated\(^\text{19}\). Despite the highly demanding programme, energy was very good and motivation was high. It is nothing new to state that concrete experience, encounter and personal interaction are what has the most profound effect on ecumenical engagement. Reflection can follow and, to some extent, prepare such experience, but cannot be a substitute for it. In analogy to fides qua and fides quae, the faith by which and the faith that we believe, i.e. lived faith and explained faith, there is an ecumenism qua and an ecumenism quae. The latter depends on the former if a


personal transformation, motivation and engagement is expected. We later tried to 
mount a Latin American ecumenism project to 
sustain and 
reinforce what was achieved, 
with the help of Matthias Preiswerk, a Swiss-Bolivian specialist for popular and 
intercultural education, and with support from ETE. Sadly, it did not get very far 
because the engagement was weak. People are too much occupied with the survival or 
growth of their own church so that ecumenism, if it has a place at all, comes in priority 
after everything else. The Methodist church in Brazil, once a strong defender of 
ecumenism and the struggle for social justice, has largely given up on both. The 2006 
decision to leave all ecumenical institutions that have the RCC as a member is far from 
being revoked. In sum: we do need to redefine what we mean by ecumenism, and even 
more so, discover what is meaningful to believers under that name. Digging further in, 
we discover that there is, avant and après la lettre, a dire need for the establishment or 
reestablishment of trust, dialogue and cooperation. With this need it is we have to work, 
whether we always call it ecumenism or not. And formation in the wide sense, but more 
specifically ecumenical theological education has a crucial role to play in this situation 
of an undigested, ever growing religious pluralism that rather than exciting and 
inspiring diversity brings about competition and even violence and hatred. The 
situation, my friends, is dramatic.

2. Under “Two Masters”: Responding to Church and State

If we now go to formal theological education in Bachelor’s or other degree courses, the 
situation becomes outwardly cooler, but remains hot inwardly nonetheless. An 
advantage is that in many contexts, not only institutions but students seek a diploma 
with state accreditation. The reasons for this are manifold: professional, to have better 
chances even in other areas that in church work; financial, because sometimes, 
especially for graduate studies and research, there is state funding; academic, because of 
quality assurance through constant peer evaluation. Surely also legitimation is an issue: 
with a state recognized diploma, one can expect to be taken seriously, possibly more 
seriously than as a church minister, even with a seminary graduation. Accreditation can 
also help to ensure academic freedom to develop critical and innovative reflection 
which might otherwise be little encouraged or even outrightly discouraged. A good 
number of institutions, academic or social, were founded “ecumenical” in Brazil in 
order not to have to submit to the control of bishops. One has to ask, however, whether 
this tactical move did really bring about ecumenical sharing, mutual knowledge and 
acceptance beyond forging a more or less strategic alliance. On the other hand, the 
danger is that churches for this or other reasons retreat from their state accredited 
thological education to go back to a seminary system which is more directly geared 
towards ministerial formation, including the building of a spiritual community. The 
situation can lead to a widening gap between theologians that care, in the first place, for 
their acceptance in the academy, and others that are, in the first place, for the church. 
While the former might be too individualistic and critical, the latter might be too aligned 
to church leadership.

To serve “two masters” does not have a good press with Jesus. We remember 
him saying, as record in the gospels according to Mark and Luke? "No one can serve 
two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the 
one and despise the other.” However, one has to add that Jesus says this in terms of a
very specific competition: “You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Mk 6:24) So I do take permission to say that serving “two masters” in the case of theological education is, more often than not, a benefit, although, again, always precarious. In the case of Brazil, after long years of no state accreditation, and a number of years of accreditation without any curricular restraints, there are now curricular guidelines in place as in any academic study in Brazil. And this is good, because it has been developed in constant dialogue with the existing, Christian and non-Christian, theological degree programmes. The main difference between a non-accredited seminary training and an accredited academic training is that the latter has to ensure knowledge and acknowledgment of difference and pluralism in a way the former does not. Following the above quoted ecumenical principle, without giving up on unity, the acknowledgment of and respect for diversity is a condictio sine qua non of ecumenical theological education. The secular state forces the confessional seminary, if it wants to have state legitimation, to open up and enter into dialogue. This is highly beneficial and we would there would not necessarily be such ecumenism in theological education were it not by force of state regulations. State accreditation, regulation and evaluation may also trigger an interesting discussion on what is “quality” in theological education, as promoted, among others, by Matthias Preiswerk in his call for a “theological education of [high] quality”, one could say a “qualitatively sound” theological education.20

The obvious question is whether such academic training does not lead away from church engagement, whether it does not become sterile and “too academic”. These are, indeed, all real dangers. But then, those curricular guidelines include a practical period within the studies. It also values extra-curricular activities. And: to be able to think freely and to learn how to express such thinking and argue for it in a consistent way is liberating, it is emancipating in line with Paulo Freire and also Jürgen Habermas’ Theory of Communicative Action, not least for those who tend to be silenced within the churches. Not all thinking that comes out of such training is useful, not all is pertinent in terms of contextuality nor necessarily faithful to catholicity. It might not be edifying for the community and not help the churches to grow. This is the risk. However, it is, in my view, a smaller risk than the one we have when we do not allow for such freedom in studies and search for the best argument. We risk to petrify a specific comprehension of theology and avoid creativity – and this, after all, can mean to become unable to hear the voice of the Spirit today. Not least, theology at the academy is a good starting place for public theology, the churches´ presence in the public sphere.

3. A New Search for Theological Formation

A most interesting development, which I can only sketch out at this moment, is the seeking of theological education by sectors and churches that did not have a tradition of such, rather, that shunned theological education altogether beyond what was deemed immediately necessary for the life of the church. An Assembly of God theological seminary at Joinville, Santa Catarina wanted to enhance the qualification of its teaching body and plans to open a professional master´s programme shortly. To that end, most of

20 See Matthias Preiswerk, Tramas pedagógicas en la Teología. Herramientas para una Educación Teológica de calidad (La Paz: Servícios Pedagógicos e Teológicos, 2013), especially the “Manifest for a high quality Theological Education”, p. 213-225. The publication was supported by ETE/WCC
their staff did their Master´s and or Doctoral course with us Lutherans at Faculdades EST, some with other institutions. In Manaus, the capital of the state of Amazonas, 14 doctoral students are doing their doctorate in a joint programme with our school, among them the president, his wife and one of his sons. They also want to start their own Master´s programme there. The churches are becoming aware of the fact that it is no longer enough to repeat the old doctrines in the same language. Fresh formulations and fresh insights are needed. Towards this end, good knowledge of Bible and theological tradition, but also of the world is necessary. One has to know the oikoumene, the inhabited world into which one is placed. Therefore, an interdisciplinary study is needed that visualizes and acknowledges difference. Pentecostals become more and more aware of this need and now seek state accredited higher education even after already a good number of years of activity in church ministry. And these are the churches of a growing minority in Latin America, and already the vast majority among the “evangélico” Christians. The state also is becoming more and more aware that by accrediting even quite confessional programmes, it contributes to better qualification of religious ministers which enhances their recognition of pluralism and pertinent action within the secular state, helping to reduce incidents of verbal and physical violence.

Concluding Remark

Such rather sophisticated theological education as I have been promoting here seems to put new wine into old wineskins, maintain a long-term, residential theological education which is expensive. Yes, it is long-term, mostly residential (although there are interesting E-learning initiatives) and expensive form of education. In view of the ever expanding graduation mills that promote a cheap, but bank-type education, as Paulo Freire would say, without a real incentive to emancipation and autonomous thinking, and the ever more complex situation of churches on our continent and elsewhere, however, I believe this has to be the main thrust, in a wise serving of the “two masters”. Am I right? This might be one of our issues to be taken up in the discussion. And the new NIHETE network would certainly be a very appropriate way of going about it. GlobTheoLib is also a most important element on the way to a truly contemporary ecumenical theological education by providing a platform of access to a huge host of materials that might not easily be accessible at local libraries.