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Theological Education in a World Perspective

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This article forms the substance of a paper given to the Conference of the Staffs of the Church of England Theological Colleges on 3 January 1978

I suppose that the only excuse I can offer for speaking to such a pretentious title is that I have been asked to do so, and that I had some small part in the work of the Theological Education Fund of the World Council of Churches. That splendid chapter in the story of ecumenical co-operation had its origins in the World Missionary Conference at Tambaram in 1938. Previous world conferences had given scant attention to theological education. It was 'the Cinderella of missions'. The delegates at Tambaram met at a moment when western Christendom had become aware of the fearsome power of the new paganism, when it was seen that the confessing church was the only true agent of mission, and when the slogan 'Let the church be the church' had become a powerful rallying cry. In this context Tambaram drew attention to the shocking neglect of ministerial training in the 'younger churches' which were now the growing counterparts of the missions. It called for a much higher priority for this in the whole work of missions.

The war followed and then the struggle for reconstruction. But the call was not entirely forgotten. Mainly through the tireless and imaginative persistence of one man—Charles Ranson—the Ghana Conference of 1958 was able to launch an ecumenical venture designed to do what Tambaram asked. The Theological Education Fund, with an initial capital of $4 million, and with a brilliant and dedicated staff, was entrusted with the task of assisting roughly twenty centres of theological education in the Third World to come up to the standards of the best theological faculties of Europe or North America, and of initiating a massive programme to improve libraries and to stimulate the production of theological textbooks in the major languages of the Third World.

At the end of two decades it was possible to report that the task had

been—in substance—accomplished. It is rare in history to be able to record the story of a task so clearly conceived, so resolutely tackled, and so fully accomplished. It is even more rare to be able to record that, the task accomplished, the task force was disbanded. The WCC has had the courage to recognize that the TEF has done its job, and that a new kind of action is now needed. What is now needed is an agency which—working on a six-continent basis—can provide a forum for the exchange of experience among all the churches in the whole enterprise of ministerial formation. This is the purpose of the newly created Programme for Theological Education (PTE) in which we in Britain are being invited to participate through the creation of a new national agency.

As always in human affairs, however, the accomplishment of one task provides the unsolved problems for those who follow. As the work of TEF developed, it became more and more clear to those involved that new problems were being uncovered. It was not just that the theological schools of the Third World needed to be brought up to the 'best' western standards. It was the question whether these standards really are the best; whether the models of ministerial formation accepted in Europe and North America are really the right ones for the Third World—or even for the areas where they have been developed. TEF staff and consultants found themselves asking more and more searching questions. These may be grouped under three heads:

1) Questions about structure: sociological questions
2) Questions about method: pedagogical questions
3) Questions about content: theological questions

For the purpose of this paper it will be convenient to look at these three types of questions: first A, as they arose during the work of TEF; and secondly B, as they may perhaps confront us now in the smaller British scene.

A

1) Questions of structure

a) The life-span of the TEF has been within the period of decolonization, and it is well known that during this period the searching questions of men like Roland Allen—brushed aside in the heyday of colonialism—are being raised afresh. The patterns of ministry, and therefore of ministerial formation, introduced by the western missions are now seen to have been the imposition of a style of leadership foreign to the cultures in which the church was being planted. The rapidly growing churches of today are those which rely on more indigenous patterns of leadership and of leadership training. Leaders in evangelism are 'thrown up' from among the ordinary rank

and file of these churches. Their training happens in and through the exercise of their gifts of leadership in the situations to which they belong. The style of leadership envisaged in our western-style theological seminaries can only exist in a colonial situation where there are large foreign funds to support it. The point has been well put by F. Ross Kinsler of the staff of PTE in a recent paper:

> Leaders are not formed by educational institutions; pastors and elders cannot expect to attain the qualities of genuine church leaders by 'going to seminary'. Schools can contribute to the personal and intellectual growth of their pupils, but leadership development takes place in society, in the group, in the life of the church. In recent years schools and seminaries have tried to provide more of an environment for integral development, with simulation and field experience, but these are by and large sporadic and pale imitations of real life. And the socialization process of these institutions can be completely irrelevant or discontinuous or even negative as regards leadership in the churches. . . . Seminaries withdraw their students (physically and socially) from the very context and processes where leadership can best be formed.

b) It has been seen that the standard type of seminary training tends to create a professional *élite* separated from the ordinary membership. A theological seminary is seen as a sort of Sandhurst where an officer-class is trained, thus creating a chasm between 'clergy' and 'other ranks'. The style of training in the church (it is held) ought to be more akin to that of a 'citizen army': something which is available to all, which is not confined to one initial period, which continues all through life as members show growing capacity to profit by training and to exercise wider leadership.

c) This line of criticism leads to the further point that the standard type of seminary training aligns the leadership of the church with the privileged elements in society instead of with the poor and the marginal. It thus serves to perpetuate an improper alliance between the churches and the ruling classes in society.

2) Questions of method

a) Theological education of the traditional type inevitably comes into the target area of the whole contemporary attack upon formal education associated with such names as Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. There is a growing questioning of the assumption that education really happens in the formalized structure of the class-room. I do not attempt to enlarge upon this, for the arguments are well known.

b) Critics point to the contrast between the methods employed in the training of the ministry and those used in the preparation of men and women for comparable professions: law, business and medicine. Law schools—it is said—train men through the study of concrete cases and are less and less interested in general courses on the principles of law. Business schools similarly work almost entirely

through concrete projects. Medical schools regard the 'pre-clinical' years, when general theory is taught, as simply introductory to the essential training which is given in the teaching hospital. By contrast, ministerial formation still relies almost entirely on what might be called the ministerial equivalent of the 'pre-clinical years'.

c) As the work of TEF went forward, more and more insistent questions were raised about the relation of what was being taught to the living context in which the churches concerned had to give their witness. The familiar words 'indigenization' and 'acculturation' were found unsatisfactory because in practice they always led to a search for alliances in the conservative and backward-looking elements in society. What was needed (it was seen) was a style of ministerial training which was related to the actual and ever-changing context, which includes of course all the usual tensions between conservative and radical elements in society. Hence the horrendous word 'contextualization' was born. The word is unattractive, but the thing sought for is essential. Ministry must be trained in a way which relates the gospel to the real issues of obedience which the church faces in this particular time and place. One of the key questions which the TEF had to face was that of the language of theology. At the beginning it was assumed that only institutions which used English or another European language could be regarded as qualifying for help, since 'vernacular' training was bound to be on a 'lower' level. It has taken twenty years of struggle to convince church leaders that men trained in the mother-tongue of their church may be equipped to engage in an encounter with their culture at least as competent as those trained in English, even if they are unable to devote their primary attention to the latest scores in the ongoing battles between the various theological schools in Europe.

3) Questions of content

This has already brought me to the third, and most persistent criticism which has developed during the twenty years of the TEF's operations: the criticism, namely, that theology has come to the churches of the Third World in such an intimate relation with western culture that one could not have the one without the other. It is a plain fact that if a theological student in Asia or Africa is to read with any real understanding any of the great classics of modern theology, he must be required first of all to undergo a full introduction to the whole tradition of western thought: its origins in Greek philosophy, its development in the Middle Ages, the significance of the Reformation, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. There is at present a lively interest in 'Third World theologies'. In our supermarket culture a few new varieties on the shelf are always interesting! But, of course, these theologies are all written in

English, by men and women who have undergone many years of acculturation into western patterns of thought, and whose theology is heavily dependent on European models. 'Liberation theology', for example, obviously depends heavily on Marxism. This is in no sense a criticism: matters could not be otherwise, if theology is to be done in western languages. But, of course, there is a vast amount of theology being done all the time of which western Christians must remain ignorant, because it is done in the language and thought-forms of the native culture. The Tamil language, which has a religious and philosophical literature far more ancient than any western language, is also the vehicle of a continuing stream of Christian writing hardly any of which is ever put into English. A contemporary Christian Tamil scholar and poet—in a recent article on the great Christian poet of the nineteenth century, Krishna Pillai—has remarked that it is a matter for thankfulness to God that Krishna Pillai never learned English. He was able to give his whole heart and soul to the task of interpreting Christ to his own Tamil people in poetry which ranks among the finest in the language. A style of ministerial formation which assumes that 'advanced' theological training must be in a European language will exclude itself from what is most creative in the contemporary encounter of the gospel with the cultures of the Third World.

If we set the experience of the TEF in broad historical terms, we may see it as reflecting in a tiny mirror the larger movement of our time—the movement from the first stage to the second stage of decolonization. In the first stage, the invaded culture masters the invading culture and uses its models (intellectual, juridical, political) to expel the invader. In the second stage, there is a return to the original roots of culture and the effort to find the basis for a new independence. The TEF has been an instrument to enable churches of the Third World to come through the first stage, to develop a leadership which has fully mastered the theology which the western world brought to them. Apart from the work of TEF it is difficult to see how the present generation of outstanding Third World theologians could have developed. Now we move to the second stage. Here there is no place for the idea of 'lifting' Third World theology to the level of the older churches. Here we need to create a new type of forum in which we learn together, and from one another, how to develop styles of ministerial formation which will help the churches in all our varying cultural situations to bring about a real encounter between the gospel and the contemporary world. This is what the PTE exists to become.

At this point, therefore, I move to the second part of my paper to ask (and the questions must be very tentative) whether there are lessons to be learned from the experience of TEF which may be worthy of attention in the theological colleges and faculties of this country.

B

1) Questions of structure

Must we not face the fact in this country also that the model of ministry as a full-time salaried professional group, analogous to the doctors and the lawyers, is a legacy from a period of history which has now passed? We know, in fact, that it has already broken down. We are not happy with the spectacle of aged clerics running round three or four parishes on a Sunday morning to administer sacraments to congregations of which they are not a living part. I know that we are trying to remedy the situation by the development of non-stipendiary ministries to relieve the salaried clergy of part of this load. I am wholly in favour of this. But would not a sound theology of the ministry lead us to reverse the roles as they are normally understood, to see these non-stipendiaries as the normal ministry, and the salaried clergy as auxiliaries? Would it not be in accordance both with Scripture and with our real situation if (at least in many of our scattered parishes) it was a local and respected elder of the local congregation who normally presided at the eucharist, and a full-time salaried person who would be his auxiliary both to supplement his teaching ministry and also to assist him in the continuing process of leadership-development?

I am certainly not implying a total rejection of present patterns—which would be absurd and destructive—but development in the ways I have suggested, which would include the following:

a) Flexibility in patterns with room both for the salaried full-time and for the non-salaried part-time minister. (It is important, in this respect, that St Paul, by both claiming the right of support and refusing to exercise it, has providentially left the door open both ways for the succeeding generations. It is impossible on scriptural grounds either to exclude a salaried ministry, or to demand that it shall be the only norm.)

b) Development of a salaried ministry which is primarily concentrated on the development of local 'indigenous' leadership in each congregation.

c) Acceptance of the fact that the *normal* local leadership would be that of non-salaried members of the congregation.

d) Willingness to learn from such rapidly growing bodies as the Pentecostals about the way in which Christian leadership can be developed in the living situation. This would not necessarily mean that we have the same criteria of leadership. With (perhaps) a more sophisticated understanding of the ministry of the church to the public sectors of society and to those who hold specialized positions in the ordering of these sectors, we might wish to use other criteria of fitness for leadership and other models of training than the Pente-

costals. But we would be willing to learn from the basic pattern of leadership-development 'on the job'. (I am assuming here that we are planning for our contemporary type of urban society in which the private sector is sharply separated in the lives of most people from the public sector.)

e) In using the word 'leadership', I am obviously distancing myself from the currently fashionable attack on *élites*. (I have sometimes thought of founding a society for the encouragement of *élites*!) I fully recognize the justice of this attack. But I think it is one of the illusions of our time that the participation of the whole body comes about otherwise than by the exercise of gifts of leadership. There are types of leadership which cause individual initiative to wither. True leadership seeks it out and encourages it. But 'leadership' within the Christian vocabulary can only mean that leadership which Jesus exercises when he calls his disciples to follow him on the way that goes to the cross.

f) If these lines of thinking were followed, it would mean that the normal customer for what we offer in the way of ministerial training would not be a young man (or woman) at the beginning of a professional career, but someone of mature Christian experience who is proving himself in actual situations to have the kind of capacity for leadership (defined in the sense of the previous paragraph) which is appropriate to the life of Christ's people.

2) Questions of method

The implications of what I am saying would—I think—lead to a shift in our styles of ministerial formation which would bring them nearer to the patterns suggested in the training of lawyers and doctors. A much larger place would be given than is now common to the study of particular cases in which the issues for Christian faith and obedience can be teased out, discussed, and related to the great themes of the Bible and of the classical Christian tradition. I do not think that this can ever be the *only* way in which theology is taught, but I think it could and should have a larger place than at present. Here, however, I would want to enter two *caveats*.

a) I am not advocating the sort of 'contextualization' which in effect eliminates the text in favour of the context. The statement that 'real theology arises out of concrete situations' can be taken to mean that one arrives at a true theology by purely inductive processes: studying the world in order to find out 'what God is doing'. In that case it parts company completely from the Christian faith, which depends upon a unique revelation which can never be replaced by any other sort of communication. The end of 'contextuality' in that (false) sense is either some sort of paganism, or else some sort of crusading

moralism. The gospel is not discovered by analysing the situation. The true sense in which we should say that theology must be contextual is that we can know God as he has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ only as we are continuously engaged as his disciples in the actual context of secular affairs in which God has placed us, and that a theology divorced from such discipleship will be a false theology.

b) I am also disinclined to endorse without qualification the phrase constantly repeated by the theologians of liberation that 'true theology is a reflection on praxis'. It is certainly true that there can be no authentic theology which is not part of a life of faith, worship and obedience within the believing community. These are the conditions for a true contextualization of theology. What must be rejected is the idea that one begins with praxis based upon a Marxist analysis of the situation and then proceeds to reflect theologically upon it. It seems to me that some of the exponents of liberation theology, in their justified rejection of the philosophical idealism which has so often formed the (unacknowledged) presupposition of traditional theology, have swallowed uncritically the Marxist idea that all science depends upon class-orientation. In fact, of course, the doctrine that in order to evaluate a statement one must first ask 'Whose interest does it serve?' has not been uniformly applied in Marxist theory. Michael Polanyi has discussed this point in several of his writings. To summarize the matter briefly: Marx and Engels seem to have accepted nineteenth-century physics, chemistry and mathematics as giving a true account of reality irrespective of the class-orientation of the scientists. Consequently these sciences have been allowed to develop in the Soviet Union without ideological control by the party. Human sciences, such as economics and sociology, have never been given such autonomy. The borderline case of biology has been the subject of a well-known effort at ideological control (under the leadership of Lysenko) with disastrous results. The effort has had to be abandoned. It seems to me that there are no good reasons for trying to do for theology what has never been attempted in respect of the natural sciences and has proved disastrous in respect of biology.

Having made these negative statements I would go on to affirm that true theology can be done only in a community which is committed to faithful discipleship, including both worship and practical obedience. It is this conviction which has led to efforts to involve theological students in action programmes of various kinds. The most impressive of these known to me are those in operation at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary, Madurai, South India.

But, as has been pointed out, there is an element of artificiality in these programmes. Having withdrawn students from their normal secular activities into a residential community, you then try to

reinvolve them as a community in secular situations. There does seem to be a case for saying that the norm for theological training should be the extension type of programme. Here the theological training runs concurrently with the secular engagement, and there seems to be more possibility of an authentic 'contextuality', since the students will be coming to their theological reading and discussion with their minds already fully involved in secular situations where ordinary Christians have to find and do the will of God from day to day. There is also, it seems to me, a much greater possibility that the theology learned in such a way will be a genuinely missionary theology: a theology concerned with the world and God's purpose in it, not just with the church. If this kind of ministerial formation were the norm, there would not have to be specialist training—for example—for industrial mission; the trainees would themselves be hammering out their understanding of the gospel in the midst of their actual wrestling with the powers at work in industry, in public administration, in the professions and in the media.

And this brings me to my third section.

3) Questions of content

Here the possible issues for discussion are so vast that I can only skirt the edges of them. If a 'world perspective' has anything to contribute to the reshaping of theological training in this country, I suggest that it may be chiefly at the point of helping us to be aware of the unexamined assumptions which underlie most of our contemporary English theology. I believe that English theology is to a dangerous extent encapsulated within a particular culture, and that it may be the role of our partners in other areas of the world to make us aware of this.

The word 'myth' is being bandied about freely at the moment, and much confusion is caused by the differing senses in which it can be used. Let me use it in a non-pejorative sense to denote the models, the images, the patterns through which a whole community grasps and makes sense of its experience. In this broad sense there is no sharp break between the models used by science to make intelligible the structure of the molecule or the gene, and the models used by ordinary people to make sense of their experiences of joy and sorrow, pain and comfort, guilt and death. In fact we usually use the word 'myth' to describe the models used by other people, for the simple reason that we are normally no more aware of our own 'myths' than I am of the curvature of the lens in my spectacles. We do not 'see' our own myths; we see by means of them, and we normally take it for granted that we are seeing things as they really are.

The most powerful myth of our culture is that which is usually described as the 'modern scientific world view', in contrast to the world view which preceded it. The study of the exact nature of the

change which took place, mainly during the eighteenth century, in the way in which western European man understood his world is a fascinating one. It is perhaps especially important at the present time when this 'modern' view shows many signs of disintegrating. The point, however, is that this view—though it has been and still is enormously influential—is still only one of the possible ways of grasping the totality of human experience. My criticism of much contemporary theology is that it so often fails to recognize this. I find it very interesting, for example, that such a brilliant and sensitive expositor of the Christian faith as Hans Küng can write that the theologians of the other great world religions will have to develop a 'modern scientific theology' before there can be real dialogue among the world religions. In contrast to such a view, I would want to assert that the great service which the ecumenical movement can do for us is to confront us with ways of affirming the Christian faith which are formed by other cultures than our own. It is only with this help that we shall be able to subject our own cultural 'myth' to examination in the light of the gospel. Without this ecumenical correction we are always tempted to judge the gospel in the light of our myth; the real task of ecumenical theology will be to learn how to use the different myths of different cultures to communicate a gospel which transcends them all.

In fact we are still far from such a truly ecumenical theology because we have created a situation in which the only languages in which the ecumenical conversation can be conducted are the languages of Western Europe, and consequently the only theologians of the Third World who can play a real part in the conversation are those who have been co-opted into the dominant European culture with its accepted myths and models. Nevertheless the voice of protest is coming through. I am thinking of the witness of those churches which are the contemporary growing edge of Christendom—the Pentecostals and the African independent churches. Their way of doing theology is—I am convinced—bound to become a more and more powerful critique of those which are dominant in this country. I am sure, for example, that the extreme nervousness and circumspection with which English theologians of today approach the subject of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead will eventually have to meet the challenge of these vigorously growing communities of believers for whom it is precisely the resurrection which is the very heart of their gospel.

The ultimate commitment of the Christian theologian is to the biblical myth. Yet he is also a man of his own culture and his whole way of thinking is shaped by the myths of that culture. He cannot absolutize his own cultural myth, and from within it judge the biblical; that is, it seems to me, the temptation of contemporary English theology. His task—and it is the unending task of a missionary theo-

logy—is to open his whole being to the biblical myth in such a way that his own myth is placed in its light, and then to find ways in which the biblical myth can be expressed in terms which use the form of the cultural myth without being controlled by it. But this, I would claim, can only be done if he is continuously open to the witness of Christians in other cultures who are seeking to practise the same kind of theology. In fact, as I have argued in another place at some length,[1] I believe that a true theology can only be done in a triangular field of which the three points are: a) Obedient discipleship within the Christian community and governed by the tradition of which the Scriptures are the primary embodiment; b) Openness to the witness of Christians in other cultural situations as they seek to communicate the gospel in the models of their cultures; c) Openness to the culture within which the theologian has to live out his discipleship.

One practical implication of this, it seems to me, is that the task of theological training cannot be simply handed over to the universities. It is the task of the church, and the church must take the responsibility. But, provided the proper independence is maintained on both sides, the opportunity to do theology in a university setting is something which must be welcomed. In this connection I am impressed by the possibilities contained in the development of the Cambridge Federation of Theological Colleges. Here there is an impressive recognition of the need to do theology in the context of the confessing and worshipping church, and at the same time a very open involvement in the work of a university faculty which is not committed to this context. This seems to me to provide the opportunity for real dialogue between the gospel and our culture. The test will come, of course, when the Christian theologian has to raise questions about the very presuppositions upon which the university faculty operates. Certainly an alert church will not be beguiled into thinking that a flourishing university department of religious studies is any kind of substitute for a centre for Christian theology.

The newly created Programme for Theological Education of the World Council of Churches provides a forum in which the kind of inter-cultural sharing of experience in theological training which I have indicated can take place. I hope and believe that the initiative taken by the British Council of Churches to provide for vigorous British participation in this will be effective.

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NOTE

1 'Christ and the Cultures', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 31, 1978, pp 1-32.