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Reflections on Modernity and Post-Modernity for Theological Education

by Rolf Hille

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Introduction

These reflective remarks, which relate directly to theological education, were originally presented as part of the paper by Dr Rolf Hille printed above, entitled 'Transition From Modernity to Post-Modernity: A Theological Evaluation'. They served to summarize the oral presentation at the ICETE Consultation and to facilitate discussion. Footnotes in the paper above indicate the appropriate reference point for each Reflection. Note that Reflections 1-7 relate to Part I of the paper, which was published in our April 2000 issue.

Reflection I

The Relevance of this Topic for Theological Education in the Third World

Modernity and Post-Modernity are related to typical phenomena in the philosophical development of the western world. Is theological education in Asia, Africa, and Latin America unnecessarily overlaid with

these kinds of questions? In response to this justifiable question, I would like to list the following five arguments which seem important to me in dealing with this topic.

1. The 21st century will become the Information Age globally. Certain people in specific geographical areas can no longer be isolated from powerful ideas and intellectual movements.

2. The ideas of the Modern Age, developed in the West (Europe and North America), have brought progress in medicine, industry, and other spheres by means of the natural sciences and technology in which all nations understandably wish to have a share. Yet, one cannot completely separate this scientific-technological heritage from the thought structure and the spirit of the Enlightenment, which is closely tied to these advances. This fact will cause great problems in the future for all cultures and religions which have not yet had any Age of Enlightenment in their histories.

3. The process of urbanization taking place worldwide is increasing the

trend towards international cultural exchange and is even creating, to a certain degree, one unified civilization strongly influenced by the West.

4. The more demanding the academic level of a theological seminary, the more western philosophy, its history, and ways of thinking will influence it through theological literature that is used. This is a reason why, in the past, many ecumenically-oriented churches allowed their leaders to do doctorates in the West. Evangelical leaders in the respective countries must also be able to hold their own in the resultant intellectual/philosophical discussion.

5. Evangelical churches and theologians in the West have had, in part, a centuries-long intensive intellectual struggle with the challenges of Modernity and Post-Modernity. In view of unbiblical and spiritually-misleading influences, western theologians can, therefore, also help the church worldwide in its effort to overcome these dangers. Moreover, treatment of the topic 'Modernity and Post-Modernity' can really support theologians responsible for education only if it shows the roots, respective contexts, and arguments which overcome this way of thinking. 'If one part (of the body) suffers, every part suffers with it . . .' (1 Cor. 12:26)

Reflection II

Theology as Serving Jesus through his Church

It must be clear in theological education that theology has no purpose in and of itself merely in terms of the pursuit of academic brilliance by which people actualize themselves intellectually. It is also not an art which people pursue based on their

own abilities. Rather, theology is done in service to Jesus and occurs through the empowerment of his Spirit. Among the diverse charismatic gifts which are manifest in the church, the gifts of the word, wisdom, teaching, and the distinction of spirits are very important for theologians. They should be given a priority in education, identified and nurtured. In an age of pluralism, syncretism, and multi-cultural societies these gifts must be recognized and exercised when dealing with difficult and challenging topics. Bearing in mind these concerns and methodological aspects, it is most appropriate to study the philosophical debate with Modernity and Post-Modernity.

Reflection III

Theological Colleges and Seminaries as 'Pre-Modern' Sub-Cultures

A theology teacher once used the metaphor of military training for the task of theological education; he pointed to the fact that soldiers are not trained out on the front, but back in their own home country. Something of the same can be said for theology students. They need the protective environment of a Christian seminary where they can be prepared for practical service on the 'missionary front'. In this sense, seminaries where theology teachers live, pray, and work together with the students are islands of Christian faith in a secular or multi-religious environment. However, an evangelical seminary is seen, sociologically speaking, as kind of a 'pre-modern sub-culture' in society.

One must clearly understand that being a purely Christian institution is, on the one hand, a necessity because

of the spiritual influence and the need to concentrate on educational matters; yet, on the other hand, it creates an artificial world significantly different from the reality which surrounds it. It is important that everyone who is a part of the education process agrees that the relative seclusion of this situation is not an end in itself, but serves to prepare one solidly for the challenges of Modernity, Post-Modernity, or whatever missionary challenges there are. Internships in churches and with missionaries during seminary education, therefore, have an important function. The 'pre-modern' situation corresponds, then, to Jesus' practice of taking his disciples aside time and again to a secluded place before sending them out to do public ministry.

Reflection IV

A Model Study of how the Acceptance of an Idea can be seen as a Fundamental Change of Paradigms

The transition from theo-centric to anthropo-centric thinking presents a model whereby the significance and effect of a paradigm change for theology can be studied with respect to culture and the history of philosophy. One could say that the new paradigm gains acceptance, as it were, in concentric circles. With Descartes, it begins with one of his epistemological questions (*cogito ergo sum*). This is continued by Kant in the area of practical moral behaviour (freedom from all heteronomous divine commands), and becomes a universal model for all of human existence (humanity creates itself) with Fichte. Students can learn through this process how a culture can be shaken

in its foundations and changed by a new approach to thinking as well.

Reflection V

A Model Study of how the Radicalising of an Approach to Thinking can Lead to a Serious Crisis

The worsening of modern anthropocentric thinking in Post-Modern individualism makes clear the momentum, yet also the self-destructive power, of a kind of thinking which has separated itself from God and his Word. The gift God gives to us as humans of creating us as free and independent individuals is 'damned to freedom' for Sartre. In this separation from God, social relationships are also abandoned. The individual is pushed into the loneliness of egotism and loses the capacity for responsible, loving fellowship. The study of Post-Modernism can illustrate concretely the fruits of such thinking.

Reflection VI

Learning How to Deal with the Gift of Individuality

Characteristic of biblical anthropology is, first of all, the positive view of the individual; an interesting comparison could be made here with the East Asian religions or Marxist-collectivist ideology. Modern individualism is basically rooted in the premises of Christian anthropology, yet, as mentioned in this paper, it perverts this foundation.

Then, theological education, especially in the context of a seminary, offers many different opportunities to exercise a healthy self-understanding as one develops a balance between individual freedom connect-

ed to Christ and loving responsibility for a fellowship. The possibility of individual development and, at the same time, integration in a fellowship is important for future service in the church. This has to do with learning how to accept certain rules and authorities. If this is learned in seminary, it helps greatly in the service of the church and presents a good Christian witness especially in a Post-Modern environment.

Reflection VII ***Learning to Think*** ***Discriminately***

The fact that one intellectual development has led to disastrous mistakes should not lead theological education to fall into the error of a 'black and white' kind of thinking. Every heresy gains its attractiveness because it contains elements of truth and good. Thinking with discrimination helps to distinguish between truth and error; note the admonition: 'test everything; hold on to the good.' (1 Thess. 5:21)

This means that, for good reasons, even Christians do not want to do without the advances in technology and medicine made possible by the European Enlightenment. The same is also true for the development of democracy and human rights which were not realized as such in the Pre-Modernism of the so-called Christian West. Theological education must provide a foundation showing which impulses of modern thinking are compatible with the Bible and which are not, i.e., learning how one can affirm the positive potential of a certain approach to thinking, and yet, at the same time, avoid its wrong developments.

Reflection VIII ***Showing the Freedom and*** ***Obligation of Faith for*** ***Theology***

An evangelical seminary assumes that in doing academic work one recognizes the authority of the Scriptures and, in part also, special church creeds. However, this approach may be seen as Pre-Modern in contrast with the highly pluralistic Modern and Post-Modern world in which the seminary exists. This Pre-Modern presupposition has been radically called into question by scholarly and philosophical criticism since the Enlightenment. Therefore this approach to the foundation of faith must be supported strongly by the system of theological education. This does not mean every Christian active in church has to be able to understand this basis, but certainly every full-time preacher, teacher, counsellor, or missionary who serves in the church of Jesus Christ must have this understanding.

Theological Education requires a certain balancing act on the part of the teachers. On the one hand, it must remain clear that every theology teacher should be anchored in faith and biblical teaching. The evangelical teacher should not be a person who is a representative of doubt and uncertainty, but, rather one who can offer help and security. On the other hand, students should also experience an atmosphere of intellectual freedom in which they may honestly and openly ask all questions which arise among them as they encounter modern criticism. If this freedom is not permitted, then we are educating young people to be hypocrites and we are not helping them at all to overcome the problems of doubt in a scriptural way. If

they have not learned it at seminary for themselves, then they will not be able to help their church members who have temptations, nor can they convince people of other religions or unbelievers of the message of Jesus.

Reflection IX

The Importance of Discriminate Learning and Modelled Learning Examples

European Enlightenment took on different characters in France, England, and Germany; these differences provide a further interesting model for learning how to think critically in theological education. The same intellectual approach in thinking can, in different historical situations and with different cultural preconditions, lead to very different consequences. The latter is becoming increasingly true in a global world with contrasting cultures.

It can be a fruitful exercise in a seminar class to consider how the acceptance of the rationalistic presuppositions of the Enlightenment would work in Islamic, Hindu, or animistic cultures, and what effects this rationalism would have on the evangelization of such cultures. It has been justifiably emphasized, especially by Evangelical theologians in the Third World, that dealing with the diverse theological ideas of the West (such as those of Rudolf Bultmann, or Paul Tillich) presents a senseless foreign infiltration into theological education. They say students should learn more about the intellectual conflict within their own cultural context. One can only agree with this demand. Of course, the strong influence of western theology means that the challenge remains of studying thoroughly the position of

at least one of the most important liberal theologians of the Modern Age. It is senseless to work on all of modern theology, and conversely, it is helpful to require work on individual representatives of this theology as models for intellectual analysis. If students have understood and thought through this example of liberal theology, they can also see through other theologies and overcome them biblically.

Reflection X

The Pedagogy of Relative and Absolute Truth

The relativizing of truth has never been a pedagogical concept. Just as one cannot educate a small child in an intellectual vacuum without diverse decisions made by parents beforehand, so the question of truth also cannot be left open for a long time in an open society. People are created for the knowledge of truth and they will find inner peace only when they have attained certainty of truth. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary as a precondition for a successful education to found a theological seminary on the clear and unambiguously defined truth of faith.

Reflection XI

The Importance of Apologetics in Theological Education

Because of their spiritual heritage, evangelical theologians tend to think that a thorough education in biblical exegesis is enough to qualify one as a theologian. But it is, in fact, the missionary orientation of the evangelical movement which points to the great importance of Apologetics. Christian Apologetics tries to under-

stand the thinking of non-Christian discussion partners, to discover aspects of their world view which are still open, and to connect the message of the gospel to them. Work in Apologetics, which calls for solid faith as well as the openness of love, is thereby the specific and overt missionary dimension in theological education.

Reflection XII

The Importance of the Scriptures as the Intellectual/Spiritual Centre of all Theology

Because missions have gained completely new horizons in a global world which has become relativistic, the apologetic task of theology has become almost boundless. Thus the question of the real core of theological studies is an increasingly important issue. We have already referred several times to the function of learning by the use of models. Because our world has become so complex and multi-layered, it is quite easy for students to lose themselves in the boundlessness of the teaching material. It is impossible to become completely acquainted with all religions, philosophies, and theological ideas.

In the Information Age, it is important to have a strong intellectual centre for studies. The Scriptures are this for us. In the multiplication of words, we ask for the one eternally true Word. 'Blessed are those whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they mediate day and night' (Psalm 1:1-2).

The study of the theology must be structured according to a hierarchy of priorities. Therefore, in the centre of studies for all students must be the very intensive study of the entire

New Testament; then comes the thorough and broad knowledge of the Old Testament; next, the foundational creeds and documents from church history, followed by solid knowledge of some conservative, biblical theological systems. Only thereafter comes the acquaintance with a liberal method, using models showing its consequences. Finally, besides basic overview knowledge in philosophy and comparative religions, it is important to have knowledge of the most important cultural influences of the geographic area where one will later serve as a pastor or evangelist.

Theological studies which are not clearly structured in their curricula in a hierarchical way lose themselves; they have no real organizing centre, and fundamental defects will show up later. The link between theoretical knowledge and the abilities needed for practical service should be guaranteed by closely dovetailing academic education with periods of practical training, appropriately spaced out and under well-guided supervision.

Reflection XIII

The Fruit of the Absurd and the Gift of Truth

Post-Modern relativizing of truth is well suited to be a model for studying the way a fundamentally unbiblical mode of thinking develops. Modernity's belief in reason is led *ad absurdum* through Post-Modernity; at the end of this historical process reason cancels itself out in irrationality, emotionalism, or in pragmatism. In today's western world, Post-Modernity is seen as the dominant cultural reaction to Modernity. Humanity cannot, however, live for-

ever in a realm of total absurdity. In view of this situation, it should be even more clear in theological education what a gift it is to have truth from the outside, that is, from God's revelation. 'The truth will make you free' (John 8:32) The meaning of these words of Jesus can be shown quite clearly in the history of western philosophy and ideas.

Reflection XIV

The Positive Task of Missionary Apologetics

The goal of apologetic work is not primarily contesting non-Christian religion and worldviews with the use of rational arguments. However,

according to 2 Cor. 10:5, 'We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.' (Cf. Col. 2:15). Thus, even this destructive aspect is a part of theology. Instead, the aim of Apologetics is to invite people to come to Jesus in a winsome way so that those of other religions find the gospel is attractive. Ultimately, theology is always about giving well-founded and edifying testimony to the truth according to the apostolic admonition: 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15).

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Editor: John Colwell

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