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# The Relevance and Effects of European Academic Theology on Theological Education in the Third World

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## The table and the respective sitting arrangements

The table can be round but who sits where is usually well established. At least it works like that in our home where we have a round table and everyone knows who sits where. That should be respected. There is also a table in terms of theological education. But who sits where has been changing. The table has become bigger, that is true. In the past, European and North American academic theology had a fixed and predominant place at the table.

It is not difficult to reach that conclusion and I am talking as a person coming from a historic church. The theological faculties and the seminaries we have in Brazil were built according to the possibilities of a for-

eign budget and even a foreign architecture. The library received foreign books and theology was taught by foreign people in a foreign language or with a strong foreign accent. I remember being a first year theological student, trying hard to take notes of a 'Vorlesung' in the German language. Impossible! There I was waiting for the verb to come in order to start writing the sentence in Portuguese, where the verb comes first. But when the verb came, in German, the sentence was finished; a new one was started and I was lost. Even worse. The lecture was in Systematic Theology. Systematic Theology taught in German and with notes taken in Portuguese .... do we get the picture?

But I wanted to get a place at the table. In order to do that I had to become familiar with the rules of the game—learn the language and try to read the books; learn how to do adequate research and capture the logic of the theology that was taught; become familiar with the way of thinking and arguing—theology was, after all, a science, and I had to become acquainted with it. I even got a scholarship for my graduate studies at a school abroad.

I think I am proud of my theological education. But I have to recognize that some of the things brought to the table were unusual and even strange. Some of it was good food. It brought nourishment and opened the appetite of my mind and soul. But some of the food was strange. It had a strange taste and produced some side effects in the digestive process. But you already know all of

that. You know how much was produced and what was produced. And you also know what are the effects of exporting theology—be it at the level of theological faculties, denominational seminaries or faith Bible Schools—be it at the level of research—meaning books, or content—meaning local theology, curriculum and syllabus, or teaching qualifications—meaning degrees—or budget arrangements—meaning money.

The situation has changed. There are many books in our local languages today. Some of them were even written by people with a native accent. There are many graduates around here and they are eager to teach. This comes at a time when you in the North do not have the same number of people available any more. And while we do not necessarily have the money to do theological education as you taught us—or as we copied from you, you also don't have the same financial resources for theological education any more.

The theological school I went to does not have any lectures in German any more. And many of the books in their library are in Portuguese and Spanish. But they have been struggling with the model that was inherited. After all, lengthy, full-time theological studies are very expensive. The voices coming from the headquarters of our Lutheran Church are saying that they can no longer continue to pay the total cost of that education. Therefore, the school had to learn how to raise money and the students have also to

pay for their studies or to get outside support for it. The curriculum was adapted in order to make the study program shorter and there is an attempt to make theological study also an evening program in order to allow people to work during the day.

At the Centro de Pastoral e Missão, which is my home, we started a theological program ten years ago. It was to be (urban) mission oriented and have a ministerial outlook. There would be no housing for the students—they would be living in the city. The program would run in the evening and the students were expected to work during the day. The whole program would be built around modules, allowing us to bring people—mostly pastors—for a week of teaching and exposing our students to many different experiences, ministries and approaches. Henceforth, we would be more practical and ministerial. We knew we would be less academic.

We wanted, by deliberate purpose, to offer something different from a 'housing-seminary' model. Frankly speaking, we did not have the money to pursue the classical model. However, we saw students coming, the centre growing and we are happy with our first graduates. However, only the future will tell us about the relevance and the meaningfulness of what we brought to the table.

### **How to look at what you brought us**

We are thankful for what you, from the West, brought to us and shared with us. It was important and it was necessary. You brought to us what

you had and the very nature of the gospel demanded that you should give to us what you too had received. We received it and then tried to copy what you had brought to us without asking many questions and without reflecting much upon it.

In the last decades of the last century some of us were very harsh in analysing the content of what you brought and the way you brought things to us. It was a tense time, I know. And all that produced in you some kind of paralysis. But it was also a rich and helpful time for us and for you. It demanded that you look at what you were bringing to us. It required us to think about what we were receiving and also to ask why and how we were receiving it. I will refer to that a little later. Here I just want to recognize that by using narrow tools of interpretation—some just used the 'oppressor vis-a-vis oppressed' tool—no justice was done, neither to you, nor to ourselves. Some, around here, even embarked in a delusion about what was to come and about what our societies would experience ... a radical, necessary and positive change. As we know now, that change did not come.

To acknowledge the historical mistakes that were done, from here and from there, should push us into a learning path, whereby we could learn about our task and about our journey together. Both of us need that examination in order to understand better our vocation as well as our common journey as disciples of the Lord. Would you agree with me if I try to summarize some of the pre-

suppositions you brought to us when you came down to the South and brought with you your package of theological education? We understood that you were telling us:

- Christian faith had to be understood in Cartesian categories;
- Christian faith is best studied in an academic environment;
- the way it is studied is similar to the scientific methods by which other subjects are studied;
- evidence and consistency are shown through bibliographical research and references;
- it is possible to study theology objectively, without being a personal believer;
- the study of theology and the exercise of ministry should be kept separate;
- in order to become knowledgeable, the academic ladder must be climbed;
- to study theology meant, normally, to become part of the professional clergy.

We came to your table and must recognize that your presuppositions became very much ours too. After all, we wanted to sit at the table. We wanted to look like you. Today, however, we could say that neither of us did a good job of deeply re-examining what we were doing. But this we say today.

In the South, and referring more specifically to Latin America, we experienced a double and contradictory phenomena. On the one hand we saw an explosion taking place in theological programs. The number of seminaries multiplied quickly and

energetically. On the other hand, however, this was an area where very little was achieved in getting our act together and really experimenting with contextual models of theological education. Multiplying seminaries basically meant that we had more of the same. Among us theological education is very much an untouched frontier—an area where we are doing business as usual within the outlines of the old models and the old curriculum. Most of them are out of touch with the life of the church and the challenges of the society.

As you will know, the church in the South has been growing a lot and has been moving into very different and new areas. This church knows how to grow—how to start new churches and have them expand. This church knows how to enter different levels and areas of society in a very creative way. This church knows how to challenge people to respond to the missionary calling and is moving fast into the worldwide missionary community. But this church has not done well in terms of doing theology or shaping theological education. We think, unfortunately, that to do theology and spend a lot of time, energy and resources in establishing theological programs is not very relevant. Therefore, we became pragmatic and repeated the old models which include some of those you taught us quite some time ago. While I recognize and celebrate some of the new attempts made at this area, I am afraid to say that there is no major movement that calls for significant changes. This is a pity because we need it.

### **Clothes made of paper**

This is a hard comment, I know, but for better or for worse, it mirrors well what we saw happening around us. 'Liberation theology', it was said, 'opted for the poor, but the poor opted for the Pentecostal church.' Liberation theology, as we know, was born out of a right and very important concern. The church, it was said, was too much at home in the palaces and mansions of the rich and powerful. Now it was time for a conversion—a conversion to the poor. Quite a movement in that direction took place. The Base Ecclesial Communities movement and Liberation Theology expressed, in theory and in praxis, that the decision was serious and was taken up fully.

But Liberation Theology was also a sign of despair—the kind of despair that comes from experiencing and seeing too much injustice, oppression and poverty. It was a scream of despair that looked around to see if there where any signs of hope written on the walls of history.

Today we know some of the chapters of the rest of the story. The writings of the wall, while offering a good picture of reality, offered an illusory solution. And this was painful. The changes that were dreamed about did not come. The hopes that were supposed to overcome despair vanished from the horizon and we were overcome by a long silence. A sad silence. Liberation Theology went

into some kind of a disarray<sup>1</sup>. The Basic Ecclesial Communities, for different reasons, experienced a deep existential crisis and had difficulties in keeping up enough steam to go on. And another long and sad silence took place. Not because all of us believed in the same expected changes, but because there would be no major changes. The structures would continue to be corrupt, injustice would continue to prevail, the poor would continue to be poor and the disparities between the rich and the poor would not diminish.

But the churches would be open and in business. People, in fact, crossed the doors of churches—significantly, evangelical churches, and mostly Pentecostal and Neo-pentecostal churches. Should this not be a sign of hope? An expectation of change?

In terms of theological education, Liberation Theology made some significant advances. In the first place, it questioned the package coming from the North. It said we cannot simply copy what had been sent to

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<sup>1</sup> In the context where I come from, within the historic protestant churches, Liberation Theology was very much a discourse in the realm of theological education. It had many difficulties in reaching the level of the communities. Once the Berlin wall was down and the elections in Nicaragua were lost, as happened in 1989, the fervour for revolutionary change vanished and the discourse lost its centre. It is very interesting to see how the original strong political and social emphasis has been moving in two different directions. On the one hand there is a movement toward macro-ecumenism, asking for intra-religious encounters, and into some ecological concerns. There the claim is for a kind of 'alliance for life'. On the other hand, there is an inward movement, that aims at conquering the political power within institutional churches as well as trying to work on a liturgical expression that cannot deny a high liturgical flavour.

us. We needed to develop something different—something that would be consistent with the theological proposal that was contextually elaborated. After all, theology should be done with the eyes fixed on the context and reality. Theology should not be articulated in abstract but in historical terms. Theology should not simply speak the language of philosophy but of social sciences—as expressed in dialectic materialism—because that would offer a more coherent and consistent mediation between the word of the gospel and our environment of poverty, injustice and oppression. Furthermore, we would need a new pedagogy in order better to understand and convey what God was demanding from us today and what we, as the church, should be proposing and how we should be involved in our context. One more step should be taken, according to some liberation theologians. There should be a clear option for a revolutionary utopia and at this point the Marxist proposal enchanted many and represented an attractive alternative model.

Looking back we must say that it was an exciting time. But it was also an ideological time. If someone would not embrace the package he or she would be considered as someone ‘from the other side’. Here we faced not only another way of doing theology but a closed view of reality and of change that needed to be implemented. Once the continental and international scenario changed, that proposal also disappeared. It was a radical change into silence, depression and disarray.

But something very difficult remained: a pedagogy of conflict that made it quite difficult to work in a democratic environment and according to the democratic rules. That pedagogy did not form people for belonging to an open society, or for building Christian communities. Those who were formed in that context usually only know how to see or create conflict. It was a fabric of antithesis which never reaches a synthesis.

Liberation Theology, among us, disappeared quite quickly from the horizon of theological education. While continuing here and there the excitement was gone and its captivating effect had vanished. There was a time when it would be quite difficult to write a paper without mentioning Liberation Theology. Today it is difficult to know what to do with it—sometimes we do not even know how to refer to it at all. It is hard to capture the adrenaline of the younger generation with it. The bitter taste of injustice and poverty, however, remains, but without the dream that changes were around the corner. Worse than that, nothing was put in its place. Only the sad silence remained. Or should the growth of the evangelical church be a sign of hope?

### **What about today’s clothes?**

It is true that the poor opted for the Pentecostal church. In Brazil this is quite evident. The last official census gave us the following numbers: from 1991 to 2000, the evangelical church grew 70.7%, going from 9.1% to 15.5% of the population

and reaching 26 million people today.<sup>2</sup> More than 12 million of those 26 million are people belong to only three Pentecostal churches.<sup>3</sup> This is the case not only in Brazil, but you can find it in bigger and smaller numbers in many places in Latin America. The pattern is common throughout the continent: the Catholic church is decreasing and the evangelical church is growing. Among the evangelicals, the Pentecostal and the Neo-pentecostal churches are growing the most. Furthermore, the church is obviously not only growing in numbers, but also in influence, in power, in social appearance and in visibility.<sup>4</sup>

I saw the church growing throughout most of my life. In my younger years the evangelical church was small and almost hidden, but today it is big and is almost everywhere. To see that growth and to see it happening at almost every level of soci-

ety was beautiful. Soccer players became Christians and *Atletas de Cristo* (Athletes of Christ) was established. Artists became interested in the gospel and became Christians—a movement started among them. Brazilians like music and a whole world of Christian musical experiences and adventures came about. And I could go on: Christian businessmen, Christian politicians, Christian medical people, Praying women and Spiritual warfare specialists.

In a very Brazilian way you saw a lot of creativity, initiative and dynamism, especially in the rapidly growing urban environment. At the same time you saw a lot of division and separatism. It does not take much to start something new, be it for a good or a bad reason. According to the ISER statistics, every working day you have a new church being registered in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>5</sup>

It should also be noted that this environment of growth is a very open one. We receive ideas, suggestions and theories very easily, especially if they are pragmatic, can be easily tested and produce quick results. We like to experiment and to mix things. We don't like to say 'no' but integrate things in our own way. This is why various expressions of syncretism find such a fertile soil among us. Therefore, the 'prosperity gospel' and the school of spiritual warfare were welcomed and found leaders who were eager to experi-

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<sup>2</sup> *Censo 2000. Especial A 1*. Published by *Folha de São Paulo*, May 9, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> The Census has shown some of the following numbers: 8.1 (in millions) belong to the Assembleia de Deus. 2.3 belong to the Congregação Cristã do Brasil and 2.0 to the Universal do Reino de Deus. 3.0 would be Baptist and 1.1 would be Lutherans. Published in *Folha de São Paulo, Cotidiano—C 1m* May 13, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Some of the available numbers show that clearly. In 1982 evangelical politicians in the National Congress numbered 12. In 1998 there were 51. In 1995 there was only one religious program on the TV while there were 90 in 2001. Two million jobs (directly and indirectly) are offered by the evangelical industry today. There are around 1000 Christian artists and bands. There are 96 recording brands and 5 new CD's are coming out every month. In terms of education there are 934 protestant institutions that receive 734,000 students today. These numbers were published by the national magazine called *Veja* (July, 3, 2002), 88-95.

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<sup>5</sup> Ruben Cesar Fernandes, *Censo Institucional Evangélico 1992* (Rio de Janeiro: Núcleo de Pesquisa, 1992).



ment with those theories and assumptions. Among us they were combined very well together. Today, in fact, it is very hard to separate the growth of the church from the announcement of prosperity and from a quasi-dualist view of reality in terms of God and the demons.<sup>6</sup>

This is not the place to analyse those two 'world view' expressions, but I just want to remark that they are very damaging to us. First, to talk about the mandate of prosperity in an environment of poverty does violence to the gospel as well as to people and their human dignity. Second, to interpret life according to the laws and demands of fighting spirits is very common among us. By falling into the temptation to read and interpret the Christian faith as well as reality, almost exclusively, in that way, you are not changing people or culture, but only becoming another syncretistic expression of the Christian faith and forcing people to continue to live a life of imprisonment.

There are many ways in which this colourful and multifaceted experience can be analysed. However, in spite of these analyses, and in spite of our many mistakes, the fact that people are coming to know the Lord, having their lives changed through the gospel and becoming real human beings is worthy of recognition and celebration. And while we celebrate all of that, we also need to examine carefully what is happening and raise the concerns that we see.

I would like to share with you just four of them:

1. By growing fast, by looking for a productive methodology and being willing to experiment with new theories as long as they work, we are bringing big shadows over the credibility of the gospel and are producing too many victims in the name of the Lord. People who had too many things promised to them while continuing to face the struggles of life tend to become disillusioned with the church and with the gospel. Some early data seem to show that in those same areas where the church has been growing most, the number of people who declare themselves non-believers is also growing. How many of them have passed through our churches?

2. We tend to behave like those people who want to grow as much and as fast as possible without being concerned for the consequences. With that attitude we are not being responsible for the new generation. We need not only a big church, we also need a healthy church and a church for our children.

3. Historically speaking the evangelical churches accumulated a significant capital of credibility. I am afraid we are spending that capital very fast. When pastors are seen as merchants, when Christian leaders are seen as 'smart people' who want to prosper, when well known Christian figures become lavish and materially ostentatious, when well known figures in the society become Christians and are immediately promoted to become interpreters and spokespersons for that faith, when

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<sup>6</sup> I say 'today', because historic Pentecostalism cannot be understood by those categories

evangelical politicians are no different from other politicians and when churches are seen as common businesses and the IRS is running after them with a very suspicious attitude, then that capital of credibility is not likely to last long.

4. When David Stoll wrote his book *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?*<sup>7</sup> he said that our society would change with time. The values of the gospel would start to permeate society and we would feel the ethical influence of the Christian faith in our traditionally corrupted societies.<sup>8</sup> However this change is taking a very long time to come. Let me go back to the last official census in Brazil. That census showed that the evangelical church is growing very strongly, as we have already seen. However, the census also showed that the number of poor people is increasing and that the disparity between rich and poor is not diminishing. The level of inequality is the same yesterday and today. But the church is growing and 26 million are saying they are evangelical. That data forces us to ask the question about the gospel we are preaching and the church we are building.

### **There is homework to be done**

All the growth that the church has

experienced has not produced much in terms of the process of doing theology or of theological education. All our creativity and sense of initiative has not been seen at the level of theological education. In fact, much of the growth of the church has not passed the doors of our seminaries.

Classical Pentecostalism did not stress theological education. However when it experienced growth and sophistication and came to develop its theological education, it copied the old and imported models, generally inspired by the North American experience.<sup>9</sup> The more recent Neopentecostal churches do not stress education either. There the tendency is to practise what works. Marketing and salesmanship are more important than a theological degree and, in some cases, more important than the classical foundations of theology.

Therefore, while the church has done well in terms of growth and has increased its level of social and political influence and even of missionary outreach, it has not done well in producing a theology that would solidify that growth, or in preparing leaders for the church of today and tomorrow. But we need to do it in spite of going against our cultural tendency. As we have already seen, we like to be loose and creative, emotionally responsive and action oriented. We like to be noisy, to party and to be gregarious. To reflect, to study, to look for coherence and consistency and apply a sense of discipline to our

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<sup>7</sup> David Stoll, *Is Latin American Turning Protestant?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)

<sup>8</sup> Antônio Flávio Pierucci, a professor of sociology at the Universidade de São Paulo, argued recently that it would be a mistake to expect from the growth of the Brazilian Protestantism the same consequences, in terms of entrepreneurship, that happened with what he called the puritan Protestantism. Release presented by Marluza Niattos, entitled, 'A debate of the expansion of the evangelical churches'.

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<sup>9</sup> The model that inspired them was mostly the Bible school, and that model, as we know, was born in the fundamentalist era.

thinking and doing is not something we like to do. We also don't like structures very much. Structures are there to be broken and to be replaced. Therefore, we need to stress theological education in spite of ourselves.

All of that just shows us that there is a lot of homework to be done—for the sake of the church, for the sake of the younger generation, for the sake of our own credibility, for the sake of the opportunity God has given to this generation today, and for the sake of the gospel.

I would like to outline some of the shapes and colours of such a theology—a theology that would take into account the moment in which we live as well as the history we have experienced, a theology that hears the joys and the screams of our day but is willing to submit to the Word of God, a theology that comes out of the life of the community of faith, be it the local or the universal one, or be it the community of today or the heritage of the community of yesterday. Therefore, I dream of and search for a theology that can be transformed into theological education and has some of the following marks:

A theology that—

- is built upon and inspired by the Trinity.
- dances around the Word of God.
- likes to hear stories—the stories of yesterday and of today.
- digests well the signs of the times.
- is born out of human relationship—a community and relational theology—a big and warm-hearted theology.
- smiles when life and deed, signs and wonders, knowledge and spirituality walk together.
- asks for bread on the table for everyone and screams when the available bread is not divided well.
- is always in a state of surprise and openness.
- cannot avoid being mission oriented.
- likes to talk about the family and the simple things in life.
- knows that the end is near and that new things are to come, or better, *HE is going to come and to make all things new.*