

Christian Higher Education in a Global Context: Implications for Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Administration

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GLOBALIZATION¹ IS THE context in which we must reflect on all of our tasks—academic-professional, psychosocial, familial, religious, environmental, daily life, or whatever other issue we face.

I The Global World

We used to live in a small community, but now it is global and this change has multiple consequences. It has been

said, and I am sure that we all agree: 'we do not live in a season of changes, but rather in a change of seasons'. Faced with a world that seems too complex from time to time, what is our reaction? Are we concerned with understanding it, or do we assume the attitude of the ostrich and hide our heads in the sand? Have we asked such a question? How should we respond? I invite you to reflect on the characteristics of this historical moment that, as we know, has been given the name 'postmodern'. In my understanding, there is no consensus about how to define it.

Faced with the difficulty of finding a satisfactory definition, let us explore some attempts by institutions and authorities that are qualified to do so.

UNESCO has characterized postmodernism as a time of uncertainty, where fear and uneasiness are the fac-

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tors that are common to all of us (Eduardo Galeano). It is characterized by 'presentism': What is important is today because we cannot count on tomorrow. Also, we live in a world of sensation. So much so that parents, along with educators, artists, merchants, and communicators, are concerned about offering varied and fast options if they want to capture their audience. Brian McClaren, a Christian leader in the United States, said a few weeks ago in the Universidad Bíblica in San Jose, Costa Rica, that children, adolescents, and adults now have available 'weapons of mass distraction'. These allow us to 'kill' time without feeling so bored. Lisbeth Queseda, head of the Office of Civil Rights of Costa Rica, in an appearance before a Commission of the Legislative Assembly, characterized the present culture in the following terms:

We are moving toward a culture that has changed the means into the end itself. It has left the person behind as a cause and an end of all of the activity of the institutional system. It is about a culture that changed wellbeing into 'well-having'.

This apparent play on words helps us to think about how the values of our societies have changed. We are taught to love people and use things. Often however, even among self-proclaimed Christians, there are those that passionately cling to things and use people, for example those that preach the 'Prosperity Gospel'. The struggle between being and having that was raised several decades ago by Erick Fromm is still valid. The most wonderful commandments, to love God above

all things and to love one's neighbour as oneself, remain and have even greater significance now.

Many experts point out that poverty continues to grow in and between countries, and not only in the Third World. No doubt this has many causes, but among them is the unjust distribution of resources with the increasing asymmetry between the rich and poor. Logically, this situation brings about perplexity, resentment and anger, as well as tension, anger and violence. Evidence of violence can be seen in street children, assaulted women, gangs, traffic accidents, suicides and murders.

La Nación, the Costa Rican newspaper, on September 25, 2006 had the following article, '*Violencia sin control. Grupos de Exterminio*,' (Violence out of Control. Extermination Groups), that mentioned some groups in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador that carry out what is called 'social cleansing' and concludes, 'In Honduras, since 1998 there have been more than 3,300 young people under the age of 23 that have been killed in alleged acts of social cleansing.'² Sometimes it seems that the only news that we hear is bad news. Could it be that nothing else happens in our countries?

The phenomenon of immigration is another characteristic that distinguishes our context. People have always moved for various reasons: to flee from an imminent threat like war; to find food; in search of better options for life like work, education, health, adventure; and many other reasons.

2 'Violencia sin control. Grupos de exterminio' in *La Nación*, September 25, 2006.

The existence of this type of relocation today has several alarming characteristics. Since many people are moving to other places, it is important to be aware of potential dangers and the possibility of failure that they have to achieve their goals, knowing beforehand that there are barriers that are almost impossible to overcome. Through varied means of communication and from the stories of survivors, we hear about the thousands of people that die trying. They die from hunger, cold, heat, accidents, violence and from merchants' deceitful promises to cover large sums of money with the promise of helping immigrants cross the border. These groups include many children, as well as women who embark on difficult journeys in search of sustenance for children who often die in their mothers' arms.

The suffering does not end when they reach 'the promised land' where they are taken as prisoners and are searched for their papers. Upon returning 'home' they still do not have any hope or any belongings. This situation exists in many places, but currently the situation is particularly distressing for the thousands of Sub-Saharan Africans who are struggling to get to the Canary Islands, Spain, and other coastal European locations. How appalling!

Desperation can be seen in the faces of the people that have made every effort to improve their lives. When they find out that they are going to be deported, some say, 'Now I will not be able to keep the promise that I made to my mom to send her money for the family's sustenance and to buy back the cows that she sold to pay for my trip.' The destination countries in the European Union are frustrated and con-

cerned about these situations. A wall is being built on the border between the United States and Mexico that will prevent undocumented immigrants from crossing in hopes of reaching El Dorado.

In Costa Rica this phenomenon is seen in the exploitation of immigrants, especially those from Nicaragua. There are many corrupt acts that happen like granting fake permits for profit, paying smaller salaries to immigrant workers and avoiding paying social taxes for healthcare and retirement.

In the 21st century, as people are seeking greater equality, there is increased awareness about the difficulties that women have experienced throughout history. Women and children are among the poorest of the poor. Women constitute 70 per cent of the world's poor, as cited by Elsa Támez in her book, *La sociedad que las mujeres soñamos*. In some societies women are not considered worthy to deserve educational opportunities. In fact, they often receive discrimination at work. For the same working day and the same type of work, women are paid less just because they are women. Furthermore, many women suffer oppression, violence and sexual harassment by their bosses, co-workers, husbands and other men.

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the violence in the home has increased in the last few years. And in macho societies where unemployment rates are high, men's frustrations are taken out upon the women, women's frustrations are taken out upon their sons and the boys' frustrations are taken out upon the little girls. The dream

is to break the vicious cycle of violence, which is impossible if the socioeconomic situation is not seriously considered.³

Our abusive relationship with nature explains many of the natural disasters that affect us today: global warming, droughts, floods, the hole in the ozone layer, water shortages, trash, lack of energy for cooking and working, and excessive heat and cold. We see nature as an endless resource that we can exploit for maximum profit. This all seems to indicate that we humans are not aware of the fact that we are part of nature that God created for our wellbeing, and that the abuses that we commit against creation directly and negatively affect us. We forget that we were called by God to care for the earth and cultivate it.

Today, there are many people that lack water, an essential resource, which translates into famines, disease and death. Experts say that the wars of the 21st century will be over water. If wars are currently being fought over oil, it will be more serious to undertake struggles over water, without which we cannot live.

This problem is tackled in various movies like *Si le vent souleve les sables* (*If the Wind Lifts the Sands*) by the French film director Marion Hansel, based on the novel written by Marc Durin Valois. Hansel refers to her work in these terms: 'It is a universal story. I wanted the whole world to be involved. Durin himself remembered

that 1.5 billion people around the world lack water.'⁴

The book that Al Gore, former vice-president of the United States, recently wrote led to a documentary. This documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, has caught the attention of many people. It is a warning about global warming, the result of the greenhouse effect in the atmosphere, produced by the indiscriminate burning of combustibles. It also warns about the serious effects that global warming has on atmospheric phenomena which will hurl all of humanity toward an eco-catastrophe and back again like a boomerang, which will end life and its different expressions.

It is true that what we have alluded to is tragic and evil, but people are starting to act positively, which gives hope. Technological advances in the last decades let us communicate more efficiently. Just a few years ago, we could not have imagined such fast communication. How great it is that available technology allows us to instantly communicate with people on different continents! It also lets us learn about events that occur in distant regions. Above all, knowledge of this information can build empathy, solidarity and advocacy for those who suffer most.

What would happen if we were not able to learn about the disasters that provoked the war between Israel and Lebanon or about the aftermath of tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes and floods? People around the world are still reacting to the pain that our neighbours in Nicaragua, New Orleans,

3 Elsa Támez, *La sociedad que las mujeres soñamos* (San José, Costa Rica: DEI, 1979).

4 *La Nación*, September 25, 2006.

Sudan, Ethiopia, Palestine and other communities have suffered in the last few years.

II Challenges for Christian Higher Education

How do we then orient Christian higher education in a way that organizes curriculum, methodology, and the school administration in such a way that the true objects of these educational concerns, the students themselves, are taken into consideration? If we do not dialogue with our context, we are dancing with danger, not only of being irrelevant, but also of being unable to offer necessary training to students who should be enabled to move forward in a world that is constantly becoming more complex. And if we cannot reach this goal, what is our role as Christian educators?

Educators like Simón Rodríguez (Simón Bolívar's teacher), José Martí, Gabriela Mistral, Carmen Lyra, Mariano Fiallos Gil, Paulo Freire, Omar Dengo, Joaquín García Monge and other excellent Latin American teachers have reiterated that education is an act of love and that it is formed in the dialogue between teachers and students with their environment. Along with the formal education that we have, we need to be conscious that there is a life-long informal education that includes the participation of many others. Families, friends, books, neighbours, the media, political and sports leaders sometimes have a greater educational influence than those called to be educators.

Today, people declare that education is a dialogue as if the idea were a

novelty, but this type of pedagogy was already practised by Socrates in ancient Greece and by Jesus in his ministry in Judea, Galilee and Samaria. Jesus' followers Peter, Paul and Luke also joined in.

Dialoguing, besides being a pedagogical strategy, demonstrates an attitude of honesty, transparency, and humility on the part of the professor. The professor recognizes that he or she does not know everything or have the absolute truth and that he or she has to learn from the people with whom they are in dialogue. Is this not what God was communicating when he said, 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. We all stumble in many ways' (James 3:1-2a).

What is the Christian's responsibility, then, as an educator, student, administrator, parent, communicator, business person, carpenter, mechanic, engineer, lawyer, or religious leader in a sad world where discouragement and confusion reign? *How do we re-encounter a love for the world that God made for us?* This question was asked a few weeks ago by a Brazilian theologian in a meditation in the Comunidad Cristiana Emaús in San José, Costa Rica.

III Dialogue and the Kingdom of God

The theologian, Silvia Regina de Lima, reflected on the kingdom of God in her meditation. She pointed out that the reign of God has a place in history. *The time has come.* It is the time of God. The reign of God is near. We cannot fully

comprehend it, but it is near. This reign of God is proclaimed by a Christian community that undertakes life in the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is present in social and religious organizations. It has a liberating presence in people's lives and has a political impact. To proclaim the kingdom of God is to propose another way of doing things.

The kingdom of God is a different proposition from the image of God. It is presented like a seed that is fruitful and can make a difference. God is the fire that is under the coals, and with his action he can create a strong reaction in the world. This revolution can be seen in the life of service of the Christians who have been told to practise what is right, not only with their friends, but also with their enemies. By doing this, Christians accomplish what Jesus taught in the beatitudes (Matthew 5) and in many other passages like Mark 1:14-15.

For a true dialogue to exist, the participants must listen to each other. Often what happens is that teachers, professors, and all educators find themselves driven to speak and speak and keep on speaking, because they consider it their responsibility to provide information to their students. Frequently, they do not take the time to see if the students are interested in what they are saying or if they are day-dreaming. The Argentine writer, Julio Cortázar, used to say that for this reason, the fantastic or the unreal is much more real than reality and through what we imagine, we can find profound truths.

As we question what constitutes an academic dialogue, we should keep in mind that speaking is not the same as

communicating. How often do we find ourselves voiceless in a dialogue because no one is listening to what the other person is proposing? Sometimes we think that taking a few minutes to listen to the other person is a waste of time, when we could be able to provide more information to the students. We are faced with a problem that has to do with what we understand as the function of the educator in the process of teaching and learning. Is it really your mission to provide information? And if the information can be found through other means, what is left for you to do?

Several remarkable teachers have made well-known statements that give us key ideas to better understanding of the function of the professor. One such teacher is Joaquín García Monge. Through his work as the Director of the *Revista Repertorio Americano* magazine, García Monge kept Latin America alive in the minds of many in the first part of the 20th century. This teacher used a well-tested metaphor, 'to teach is to give the soul wings'. I understand that he used the word 'soul' to express all that which characterizes human beings, who are unique and indivisible. Therefore, an integral and humanistic formation is required that takes into consideration all of the different facets of people: the rational, the affective, the feeling, the will and the spiritual. Jesus Christ taught us to see people as whole beings, not having false dichotomies.

Another famous educator, Simón Rodríguez, Simón Bolívar's teacher, stated in reference to education, 'that which does not make one feel, is of no interest; that which is of no interest, is not understood'. In the process of teaching and learning, we should

appeal to the whole human being. We should also concern ourselves with making the discussion appeal to the emotions, because we know that this can motivate the rest of the person. If we manage to motivate the student to have a desire to learn, we have achieved a fundamental part of our mission. A principle in education says this: '(N)obody can teach anyone anything (if they are not willing), people learn when they are motivated to do so, when they want to.'

IV Educators as Facilitators

Therefore we deduce that an educator is a facilitator who provides the conditions in which the educational process can be achieved. In many instances, it is the parents that take this role without realizing it. This challenge is an opportunity for service and a gift from God for people that facilitate learning. The educator should be an alert, inquisitive, observant person who loves his or her work and who is prepared to invest a great deal of time in personal preparation. He or she should be comprehensively trained and have up-to-date knowledge based on research. No one can give that which he or she does not have.

Students catch their professors' interest from the first moment. If the professor is apathetic, or unenthusiastic, he or she is not going to light the spark needed for the student to want to learn. The educational process runs the risk of becoming cold or even boring. In Costa Rica, the students have coined the phrase to describe this type of professor: he is a 'yawn'. Albert Einstein spoke many times about the importance of knowing how to raise

questions that create a desire to learn.

We can ask the questions of ourselves, others, or the context in which we live. Possible questions include: Who am I? What am I doing in the world? What is the meaning of my life? Why should I have relationships with others? Who is my neighbour? May I use natural resources for my personal benefit only? Who is God? Why would he want to relate to me? Why does evil exist? Who created it? Why is there so much violence in our time? And the questions continue—leading to other questions and the search for answers.

Jesus was called the Teacher from Galilee. Why? What did he teach? Did he have compassion on those with whom he spoke? How did he resolve the problems that were posed to him, for example, the multitude that was hungry after hours spent listening to him? How did he explain the miracle of multiplying the loaves and fish? Did he take into account the context in which he carried out his mission? Why was it necessary in that time and in that place to wash feet as a demonstration of love and consideration?

I know that some presenters will delve deeply into related subjects of the main theme in this conference. I would like to finish my part with two simple charges from Latin America: first, to all of the Latin Americans that are meeting here and, second to all of our friends and neighbours that are representing other countries.

V A local challenge

To the Latin Americans, I remind you that we have dignity because we are God's children, created in his image and his likeness. Nicaragua is a beau-

tiful place where we can appreciate the God-given ability to be creative human beings. This is a land of poets, singer-song writers, painters, sculptors, skilled artisans, and artists. I must mention Rubén Darío, the poet who dared to start the first clearly Latin American movement, Modernism, with its own way of writing that did not take on foreign characteristics.

I hope that we have the opportunity to know other outstanding writers, not just Central Americans, but globally recognized authors, like José Coronel Urtecho, Ernesto Cardenal, Gioconda Belli, Sergio Ramírez and others too numerous to count. In the same way, each country from the so-called Third World represented here, has valid reasons to be grateful to God for the talents he has distributed around the world.

Latin America history has been difficult because some people came to Latin America saying that they represented God, but, in reality, they selfishly made us slaves. These people also made us believe that we were children of the treachery, which seems to have soaked deeply into the conscience and personality of our communities, to the point that we feel unworthy of God's grace. Thank God that along with the conquistadors and gold prospectors, people also came to Latin America that wanted to claim the Good News of salvation and wanted to share what they had learned from their experience with God. (Bartolomé de las Casas is an example.)

Today, Latin America is a region where we are learning to live together: indigenous, blacks, mixed-race, *zambos*, *mosquitos*, Asians, and many other mixes unimaginable in the past. The

Mexican philosopher, Leopoldo Zea, used to say that Latin America is the best prepared continent to succeed in this globalized world because we have the experience of having interacted with very diverse cultures, a factor that is very relevant in this time. Of course, there are other factors that do not work well for Latin America like the idea that foreign relations should be modelled like markets, where everything is the product of supply and demand.

For many decades, the dominant religious vision in Latin America was that described by Juan Mackay in his book *El otro Cristo español* (The Other Spanish Christ): Christ was hidden in great and beautiful cathedrals, but the people did not have access to him. The Peruvian novelist, José María Arguedas, refers to that Christ and his followers in his book *Los ríos profundos* (The Deep Rivers).

Because of the faithfulness of many Christians from around the world, including several educators, Latin Americans were able to know God who is the light, the way, the truth and the life. He has lived among us in mud shacks and rickety homes made out of cardboard, as well as in huge condominiums, schools, universities, coffee fields, banana plantations, lakes, volcanoes and markets. He has reached to the heights and depths of our continent; to the plateaux, rain forests, wet high lands and deserts. The security of knowing that we are his children allows us to grow, and for this reason we can move forward toward the consolidation of his kingdom.

In our churches we sing a song *Gente Nueva* that goes like this:

Gente nueva, creadora de la historia

Constructora de nueva humanidad,
Gente nueva que vive la existencia
Como riesgo de un largo caminar.⁵

(New people, authors of history
Builders of a new humanity,
New people that risk their lives
To forge a new path.)

We are a diverse people with a mission that derives from being professors at the service of the kingdom, in a continent that cries out for justice, peace and a concern for the creation.

VI A global challenge

Now this message for our friends from the so-called first world, members of economically powerful countries, and keepers of cutting-edge scientific and technological knowledge: The love of God drives us to tell you that, like Paul, we know that by the grace of God, we are what we are and that his grace has not been in vain among us.

The Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, gave an address when he was in Stockholm. In the speech, he asked the more powerful peoples of the world to let us make mistakes, if necessary, in order to find our own way and not to have to spend another hundred years in solitude. Be our ambassadors, and being the Christian educators that you are, tell your countries that we can learn a lot from other people and cultures. Internationalizing the curriculum of our schools, our teaching methods, and the way we manage our

educational tasks should show that God is at the centre of our lives. We cannot be indifferent to the outcries of millions that live in helplessness, poverty, fear, violence and loneliness, as they also have the right to an education that allows them to develop the talent and potential that God has given them.

José Míguez Bonino, the Argentine Christian leader, in his book *Poder del evangelio y poder político* (*The Power of the Gospel and Political Power*), calls us to a deeper reflection. This is what he says,

God commissions us to work for 'a full life'—fertility, growth, vigor and fullness. Our responsibility is to defend the fullness of human life, humanity's access to the world's good resources, the possibility of growth and expansion, the cultural mandate to govern animals and things; and to defend the dignity of humans made in the image of God. This 'fulfilled Adam' is the object and goal of our mission.⁶

As Christian educators, we can indeed have hope in God's work in people and Christian communities. In Isaiah 65:17-19, 'Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth...be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.'

Is this not what we all yearn for?

5 *Celebremos Juntos* (San José, Costa Rica: Seminario Bíblico Latinoamericano, 1989), núm 75.

6 José Míguez Bonino, *Poder del evangelio y poder político: La participación de los evangélicos en la política en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairós/FTL, 1999), 61.

Dear colleagues in Christian higher education, let us remember the tools that technology provides. These advances should be used to increase awareness and to act Christianly in the world where we live, declaring the kingdom of God.

We cannot delay our commitment to include in our university's curriculum those topics that include respect for all forms of life and for all human beings. It is necessary to be aware that we are partly responsible for the environment. For this reason, we should denounce society's aggressive consumption that causes the emission of gases and the greenhouse effect, the hole in the ozone layer, and planetary consequences associated with accelerated climate changes, global warming, and the consequences of ultraviolet rays on the health of the ecosystem.

We need to remember that our vocation as educators is founded in the truth and knowledge of our discipline, historical reality, and the diligence and enthusiasm with which we serve. We remember that it is based on humility as we relate to one another in our collegiate environment, in the strength of Jesus' love, and in the grace that he gives us.

As Christians committed to higher

education, we need to renew our call to serve young people. We can do this by joining together in fraternity and solidarity in the context of a changing of seasons in which the coming generation will develop.

In conclusion, the final message is for everyone present here, for those from the North and the South and for those from the East and the West; it is a message of solidarity of communion and love that fills our lives of service to the kingdom of God and that allows us to sing Psalm 133 together:

How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron's beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

May God, our Lord and Saviour, allow us to be the salt and light in our universities. May he allow us to fully achieve the objectives of this conference, that each and every one of us would be able to respond to his or her call as obedient servants that want to say, 'Here am I Lord, send me!'