

**Theological Education  
at the interface between congregation and society**

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**Overture**

Let me summarise what I would want to emphasise for theological education in Australia today:

- it should be *academic* rather than popular or indoctrinating; only as such will it set people free to discover and risk their own creativity.
- it should be *ecumenical* rather than denominational; only as such will it be obedient to the Word of God and escape provincialism.
- it should be *trinitarian* and *christological* rather than biblicistic or religious; only as such can it avoid the dangers of fundamentalism, liberalism, and the ecclesiastical captivity of the Word of God.
- it should reflect about God for *God's own sake*, but in doing that, it must show that worship of God cannot by-pass the violence and injustice that are rampant in the world.
- it should openly and unashamedly use the *historical critical method*, but at the same never forget the poverty of reason, and the difference between the *ground* and the *content* of faith.
- it should include a theological response to *other religions* and especially to *Aboriginal spirituality*.
- its initial period of study should be *full time for 4- 6 years*; part time study cannot prepare for a competent and credible ministry today.

**Context, promise and conflict**

Theological education, if then it is *theological*, and if it is *education*, is bound to live in *tension* with both church and society.

This tension is occasioned by the fact that theology wants to serve church and world, but it wants to do so from a *primary commitment to the Word of God* – which is neither identical with the church nor with society.

The *immediate context* for theological education is the *church*. The churches support theological education and in return they expect a supply of motivated and competent ministers, and relevant theological education for an increasing number of interested lay people.

At the same time, church people and church leaders are often suspicious of theological colleges. They fear that with the exercise of reason and the use of scientific methodology, divine revelation may be subjected to human reason, theology may be dissolved into anthropology, and faith may be substituted by reason.

The situation is not made easier by complaints from within the *academy*. Students want less Hebrew and Greek and Augustine and trinity, and more Pastoral Care and Urban Praxis; less form criticism and more devotional material and sermon input. Educators lament the fact that theological schools have become “filling stations” for theoretical information, rather than centres for

shaping Christian disciples. Theologians complain that the constant longing for praxis has inflated theological curricula by so many “how to do it” courses that there remains insufficient time for theological reflection.

And *society* views theological education with suspicion, suspecting that our commitment to God and God’s Word is unscientific, irrational and sectarian.

Theological education, if then it is *intentionally* theological, must expect and accept these tensions at the interface of church and society. It must not be afraid, but it must affirm, as part of its mission, to be the proverbial “thorn in the flesh” of church, academy, and society.

### **The *aim* of theological education**

Theological education is concerned with the *identity, content, and relevance* of Christian faith.

As an integral part of the church’s vision, that God through Christ has reconciled the world with himself, theological education wants to unravel what that means, and thereby help the church to *be the church*. The church must be empowered and enabled to *echo the word “God” in a responsible and relevant manner*. What does it mean for the church to be the “light of the world”, “the salt of the earth”, the “body” (sw=ma Xristou=) through which Christ wants to minister the riches of grace into the poverty of human existence?

The word “God” has had a terrible and blood stained history. It has functioned to justify the killing of Jesus. It served and serves to motivate and justify anti-Semitism, slavery, ethnic hatred, sexism and racism. With God’s name dreadful weapons have been blessed and horrible wars have been validated.

We cannot simply go on using the word “God” without spelling out exactly *what we mean*. At the same time, the theologian knows that we cannot arbitrarily stop using the word “God”. With the prophet Jeremiah we feel a fire burning in our hearts (Jer. 20:9), and with the apostle Paul divine necessity (a)na/gkh is laid upon us to witness to the reality “God” (1 Cor 9:16). Helmut Gollwitzer is right when he says that it is the task of theological education to make evident what we mean when we use the word “God”.<sup>1</sup>

### **The *tasks* of theological education**

How can that aim be best fleshed out? How does the general aim of bringing the word “God” out of ambiguity into clarity, issue into the tasks of theological education?

**The constructive task.** There is, *first* of all, the *constructive task* of training and empowering women and men for Christian ministry. Gifts must be recognised and developed. Students must be instructed and motivated to hear, understand and obey God’s word.

In the attempt to understand God’s word, theological education teaches the *Old and the New Testaments*. The bible contains the primary witnesses to the events of the word of God, which climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. *Church History* seeks to discern the history of the word of God in the ongoing history of the human race. With studies in *Practical Theology* (Pastoral Care, Christian Education, Homiletic, Worship, Spiritual Formation, Mission, Evangelism, Ethics) theological education seeks to discover the best ways in which the word of God can modify, transform and interpret human life here and now. And under the designation of

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<sup>1</sup> Helmut Gollwitzer says: “Man kann dies als Zentrum der Aufgabe der Theologie angeben: das Wort ‘Gott’ aus der Vieldeutigkeit in die Eindeutigkeit zu bringen.” (*Gottes Offenbarung und unsere Vorstellung von Gott* [München: Kaiser Verlag, 1965] p. 8).

*Systematic Theology* theological education measures and evaluates the many words by the one word which God has spoken in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This education is not primarily done by instilling in students a data bank of theological information, which could then be recalled to meet the needs of various situations. Rather, students are given tools and methods, they are given paradigms and insights, they are introduced to resources that should enable them to creatively live with the word of God, to let it shape their existence, and to communicate it to church and world for the rest of their lives.

This raises two important, but controversial issues. Both issues concern primarily those who feel called to the full time ministry.

*One issue* is, whether the foundation for a life-long effective and satisfying ministry can be laid when students study theology while at the same time working as pastors or other part-time jobs. My answer – drawn from observation and from personal experience – is a clear “No”! The ministry is so demanding that church leaders must face this issue. The alarming drop out rate of ministers will increase, we will not attract the best people for the full time ministry, and we will not increase the needed respect for ministers, unless we make a demanding, competent and full-time study of theology possible. Why should the study of theology be less demanding and take less time than the study of law or medicine or physics?

The *other controversial issue* is, whether a theological school should turn out “finished products”; or whether theological education best serves the church by providing the basics in information, attitude, resources and methodology and then provide the structures for a continuing lifelong theological pilgrimage?

Much criticism of and frustration with theological education can be met if education is seen as being a necessary part of the *minister's total life context*. The brief time in a theological college – I would prefer 5 rather than 3 years full time! – would then be viewed as a few years of “withdrawal” to study the biblical languages and the content of the Bible, to learn methodology, to become acquainted with the basic content of faith, and to inquire how the gospel can be related to life, while the deepening and the widening of the educational process will then continue in the context of praxis.

For the *theological school* this would mean on the one hand that it must provide the context and input for a necessarily limited but *foundational education*, while on the other hand it must seek to accompany the practicing minister with courses and conferences in *continuing theological education*. For the *minister* him- or herself this would imply a commitment to theological education as a part of the ministerial agenda for all of life. And for the *churches* it would mean that they provide the structures and the resources for such a continuing education.

The present tendency in many colleges – part time study; evening courses; no biblical languages; no time for theological reflection; practice driven – is disastrous for a sustained ministry of the minister and the church.

**Critical task.** Besides the constructive task, theological education also has the *critical* task of *distinguishing “between spirits”* (1 Cor 12:10; 1 John 4). By confessing Jesus Christ as *ku/riou* and as *lo/goj* *qeou* =, by recognising the authority of the biblical canon, by formulating creeds and confessions, the church has confessed its identity, and with it has demarcated what traditionally has been called heresy. Theological education cannot avoid the question of *truth*. Given the church's commitment to Christ as Lord, but at the same time, knowing the reality of human self will and institutional self interest, it becomes necessary to formulate norms and guidelines by which the church's practice, theory and experience can be measured and evaluated. Theological education must therefore be assigned the *critical* task of helping the church to be the church.

The Christian virtues of freedom and courage may come in handy for the theologian. A Philosopher and a historian at two of Melbourne's prestigious universities have said that academic freedom is hard to find these days. Robert Manne of La Trobe University comments: "Our radicals have either gone to water or settled into grumpy silence. It's hard to say why. Fear, material comfort, family"<sup>2</sup> Are theological colleges fulfilling the prophetic and critical role of theology?

**Spiritual formation.** It is important, *thirdly*, to recognise that we train *Christian ministers and church leaders*. This highlights the *spiritual dimension of ministry*, which poses a difficult challenge for every theological institution. How can you teach and learn gifts given by the Spirit *as the Spirit wills* (1 Cor 12:11)? How can you unleash the creativity of students rather than making them conform to church expectations and middle class morality?

We need to tread cautiously. Spirituality cannot be taught! Courses in Spiritual Formation should be descriptive rather than prescriptive. They can talk about Augustine and Bonhoeffer and Nouwen and Romero, they can reflect about prayer and suffering, but they should release students to discover their own journey with God.

Freedom is at the heart of the Christian faith, but given our self-interest and sleepiness, we need to find ways of relating to ministers the awareness that freedom demands discipline, that commitment implies courage, that credibility presupposes hard work, and that calling entails professional competence.

**Social responsibility.** *Finally*, we must understand that knowledge implies responsibility. Knowledge shapes and changes us. When the prophet Jeremiah says that to "know God" means to "do justice" (22:13-19), he simply verbalises that a responsible use of the word "God" implies engagement for the partiality and justice that the word "God" stands for; it implies accepting responsibility for what we know.

Theology needs to make clear, for instance, that in contemporary Australia, the church's engagement for reconciliation with the Aboriginal people is an essential part of our worship of God. Protest against mandatory sentencing and commitment to the "Journey of Healing" are not merely consequences of faith in Christ. They are part of Christian faith in our given context. According to Matthew 25, Christ is not only present in the word and in the sacrament, but he has located himself in the oppressed and marginalised. Being with them and for them, is not merely a consequence of faith, it is part of our relating to God. It is the task of theological education to make that clear.

### Theological temptations

In fulfilling these tasks, theological education must constantly be *self-critical*. It must be aware of the temptations which are inherent to its work.

Theological education is, *first of all*, in the constant danger of forgetting or overlooking the difference between *theology and religion*. We need to be relevant, but not by endangering our identity. We have our own subject. We know a secret that the world does not know. The word of God alone makes theological education theological. If that is forgotten, then the Old Testament scholar might as well teach in the University department of Semitic studies, and the church historian join the University department of history.

The *second* danger is related to the *critical and scientific nature of theological education*. On the one hand, theology needs to be scientific and critical. It has to do with learning languages, with analysing and understanding ancient texts, with using transparent methodologies. We cannot leave the understanding and communication of the content of Christian faith to the subjective intuition of every scholar and student.

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Ellingsen, "University Inc," *Good Weekend*, Dec. 11, 1999, p. 27.

On the other hand, this scientific and critical approach implies the danger that the mystery of faith may be lost. How, for instance, can a scientific method capture the meaning of a text like Romans 6:9 "... we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; *death no longer has dominion over him.*" How can we, who live under the shadow of death, speak about a reality that transcends the dominion of death?

This problem lies behind the debate, in how far the historical critical method is adequate for the interpretation of biblical texts. I would argue that the historical critical method is necessary for safeguarding the *content* of Christian faith, but that it must not be allowed to determine the *ground* of faith.

Related to this is a *third* danger. Theological education can become so fascinated with the prevalent understanding of reality in church and society that it will only make statements which are acceptable to the respective ethos.

If, to use an illustration from the church, in a denomination there is a dominant view that there are no errors in the Bible and that the Bible is equally inspired in all its parts, and if the people who hold such view control the finances for the college, then there is obviously a lot of pressure on the theologians not to say what they know, and not to communicate what is commonly accepted in the theological community.

If, to use an illustration from the world, one accepts a view of history according to which all events are interrelated by cause and effect so that there can be no genuinely new event, then it would be difficult to understand and explain the biblical portrayal of creation, of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, of conversion, and of final consummation.

Theological education must therefore constantly remind itself of its primary commitment to the Word of God, and at the same time work with a concept of reason which does not pre-determine reality, but which "enables the mind to grasp and transform reality".<sup>3</sup>

*Finally*, we mention the constant danger of *provincialism* which, due to the tyranny of distance, is an ever present temptation to us in Australia. By being so far removed from the wider theological community we may lose the vigour that comes from dialogue and challenge. By being situated in the context of a certain denomination, we may forget that our commitment to the one word of God implies an ecumenical thrust in theological education. By being concerned with the Christian faith, we may fail to ask in which way God may also be at work in other Religions. By being primarily oriented toward the church, it may forget that ultimately all authentic theological education must contribute to making and keeping human life human and therefore, be concretely aimed at solving the problems in and of the world.

Having alluded to the nature, aim and task of theological education, we must now pick up a couple of intimations from the introduction and apply them to the relationship of theological education to the church and to the world.

### **Theological Education and the Church**

Theological education is rooted in the church. It comes from the church, is sustained by the church, and feeds into the church. On the whole, the church does not question the need for some sort of theological education, and theological education does not question its commitment to the church.

And yet, in spite of this mutual recognition and interdependence, there are often tensions between the church leadership and theological institutions. Why is this so?

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3[3] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. I (1951) p. 72, see the whole discussion on pp. 71-81

There is general agreement that the theological college must serve the churches. Church leaders often interpret this to mean that it is the task of theological education to teach and communicate the generally accepted faith in the churches. A Church of Christ college is to teach what Church of Christ people believe. A Lutheran college is to teach what Lutherans believe. An Evangelical college must be guided by the evangelical tradition. Such opinions are often reinforced with solid financial "arguments": those who pay claim the right to determine what is taught. The saying "don't bite the hand that feeds you" has been addressed to many a theological teacher.

What are the theological consequences of such an attitude?

It raises the question of *authority*; and in fact it makes *ecclesiology* the dominant motif. Traditionally Protestants have charged Roman Catholicism with subordinating Christology to ecclesiology by making the teaching office of the church the ultimate judge for the truth and content of faith, and then expect theological education to teach and propagate that truth. This means in effect, so the Protestant charge, that the Lordship of Christ is dissolved into the church's self-understanding. But do not Protestants do the same? Only that here the "teaching office" is replaced by "the generally accepted faith of the people", and since it is never the generally accepted faith of *all* the people, it is in fact the faith of the church leaders who formulate the generally accepted faith. Consequently the "catholic" principle remains determinative. The decisive question is: should the faith of the people, or should the ground and pioneer of that faith be primary? Should ecclesiology or should Christology be the dominant motif? There is consensus that you cannot have one without the other, but it is vitally important where the theological priority is placed.

What is the alternative? Should theologians tell the church what to believe and what to practice? No! That would again give inordinate authority and power to a "teaching office". Rather, the church and theological educators must together confess their primary commitment to Jesus Christ. Both must be self-critical enough to be sensitive to the pride of power and to collective egoism, and together they must seek structures to affirm the Lordship of Christ. This demands continual repentance and turning again into the future which is promised and determined by the crucified Christ. *For the sake of the church, theological education must refuse to become a functionary of the church.*

Theological education can serve the church best by a *critical* commitment to the denomination in which it is situated, by maintaining an *ecumenical* openness to the whole church, and by emphasising a *responsible commitment* to and involvement in the world. This brings us to our final considerations.

### **Theological education and society**

We live in a secular society. Even though there is a religious veneer, and many of our leaders still pay homage to the Christian faith, there is, as far as I can see, a fairly wide consensus that our society and its values are driven by a social Darwinism and economic rationalism.

Such a vision of reality is in fundamental tension with a faith that is focussed on the Crucified Christ and as such sees the ultimate value of the human being not in its performance and achievements but in their inherent divinely bestowed dignity.

We cannot withdraw from the world. According to Romans 12:1f. worship of God takes place in the market places of life. Theologically and existentially the world must feature on every theological agenda. We are all citizens of this world and as such are responsible for its present and future. It is also our conviction that God is the creator and sustainer of the world. God loves the world (John 3:16) and in Jesus Christ has reconciled it with himself (2 Cor 5:20).

With the church, theological education is woven into the world. Yet its relationship to the world must be one of *tension, struggle and even dispute*. It must accept the conflict with the world in the struggle for the best understanding and interpretation of reality.

On the positive side we note that theological education, like all education, uses rational and transparent methods in its research and scientific analysis. The Old and New Testament scholars use in their interpretation of biblical texts the same historical critical method as scholars would do to determine and interpret texts from the Enuma Elish or from Aristotle. The Church Historian observes the same methodological steps in reading Anselm or Luther as a historian would do to interpret Machiavelli or Locke.

Theological education shares in the struggle of making and keeping human life human, and it seeks to equip the church for a critical and constructive encounter with the problems and ideologies of the world.

Yet, at the same time, The church knows a *secret* that the world does not know. The apostle Paul distinguishes between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world (1 Cor 1-2; Rom 12:1f.). Theological education is grounded in and committed to the wisdom of God as it has been made known in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This understanding of wisdom and power can only be folly to the world because it is based on a different vision of reality and its inherent values. With his life, Jesus claims that true worship of God leads to a healing identification with the marginal people of society. With his death, he risks this understanding against the institutional claims on God and power, and with the resurrection, Jesus' way is not only validated, but it is validated in such a way that it cannot be apprehended by the neutral, objective and scientific onlooker. Theological education must therefore accept the role of being a thorn in the flesh on the world.

This would mean, *firstly*, that although using the *method of reason*, theological education questions the *autonomy of reason*. It is the theological function of reason to receive, understand and explicate the content of reality and of faith; it is not the function of reason to postulate what is real and what can be believed.

It would mean, *secondly*, that theological education refuses to understand the human person as an insignificant speck in the universe, or a sophisticated animal, or a complex of subconscious drives, or a mere product of history and of society. Rather, the human person is a relational being, created in the image of God with an *inherent dignity* which the structures and institutions of the world cannot grant.

And *finally*, theology has discovered *nature as creation*. It will therefore help the church to understand that concern for the integrity of creation is part of its worship of God.

### **Conclusion**

We have come to the end. Theological education finds itself at the interface between church and world. It wants to serve both from a primary commitment to the crucified and risen Christ. Theological education must help the church to be the church and as such it also makes the best contribution to society.

***TL: Canberra, 08/06/00 .***

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