

Terrence Merrigan

E pluribus unum?
**Catholic Theological Education
in a Pluralistic Context**

The starting point for these reflections is a study which was undertaken, in the United States, nearly twenty-five years ago. The study was dedicated to the consideration of “ecclesiastically independent theological education,” that is to say, theological education which is developed independently of any “denominational label.” The institutions under consideration were Graduate Theological Union (Berkeley), Harvard Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary, University of Chicago Divinity School, University of Notre Dame Department of Theology, Vanderbilt Divinity School (Nashville, Tennessee), and Yale Divinity School (Lindbeck, 1976). It seems to me that Lindbeck’s analysis of the situation in which these institutions found themselves nearly a quarter of a century ago, and his proposals for dealing with that situation, are remarkably relevant to the situation in which Catholic theological institutions find themselves today.

Moreover, the apparent discrepancy between manifestly Catholic theological institutions and those centers which are “ecclesiastically independent” is only skin-deep. In the first place, the schools targeted by Lindbeck are not ecclesiastically independent in the sense that they have no denominational links. All of them are possessed of a recognizable theological (and denominational) pedigree which has shaped their programs of studies. Second, the idea of “ecclesiastically independent theological education” is, in any case, not completely foreign to Catholic theological institutions, certainly not if those institutions are located in university settings (Catholic or otherwise). It is clear, for example, that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is convinced that some theologians and some theological institutions are rather too independent of the Church.

In what follows, I would like to reflect on Lindbeck’s analysis of the American theological scene twenty-five years ago and to inquire whether there might be lessons for today. This reflection will proceed in two steps, each of which is divided into two sub-sections. In a first step, I shall (1) examine Lindbeck’s analysis of the challenges facing theological education twenty-five years ago, and (2) ask whether there are parallels with our own situation. In a second step, I shall (1) examine Lindbeck’s proposals for meeting those challenges and (2) ask whether

those proposals are relevant to us today. By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect briefly on what I call the paradoxical repercussions of pluralism and how we might live—and even thrive—in the midst of them.

THE NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXT THEN (1976)
AND NOW (2000)

The North-American Context Then (1976)

Lindbeck explains that by “theological education,” he means “the academically and intellectually responsible transmission and development of particular religious heritages” (Lindbeck, 1976: 2, 78, 80). Elsewhere—and in anticipation of his most important work, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Lindbeck, 1984)—Lindbeck explains that a religious heritage is best understood on the analogy of a language, namely, “a vocabulary and grammar of symbols and patterns of thought, feeling and behavior which groups and individuals use to map the cosmos, to locate themselves in reference to the ultimate issues of life, death and meaning” (Lindbeck, 1976: 76, 1, 4, 15, 64, 66–67). In other words, a theological education aims to introduce students into a comprehensive tradition of interpretation, and one which is avowedly *particularistic* in character. The “particularism” of a theological education is its most salient feature, its *raison d’être*. However, in a pluralistic context, it is also its Achilles’ heel, the greatest threat to its survival.

Writing in 1976, Lindbeck identified two major shifts which were affecting the traditional role of theological institutions. The first of these concerned the *public* addressed by such institutions; the second concerned the *content of the programs* on offer.

With respect to the *public*, Lindbeck observed, first, that the traditional link with the churches was in decline. Theological institutions were no longer as important to the churches as direct suppliers of ministers, teachers, and scholarship. At the same time, a new public was beginning to appear, namely, students who were drawn to the study of theology “not because they are seriously thinking of the ministry or teaching religion, nor even because religion is personally important to them, but simply because they find it interesting.” Many of these, Lindbeck noted, “are attracted by non-Western religions,” and many “do not use their theological education as laymen [and women] in the churches.” Indeed, “for a fair number,” the study of theology “represents the last serious involvement with organized religion” (Lindbeck, 1976: 32, 56, 61).

It was inevitable that the decline of the relationship with the churches, and the emergence of a new public, with less-focused interests, would have an impact on the *programs* on offer. Lindbeck highlights above all the tremendous expansion of religious studies components in what

had once been clearly-defined theological programs. Lindbeck perceptively observes that the shift to more religious studies “need not be curricular. It can occur through a change in research interests, mood and milieu. And the milieu, needless to say, is altered when professional ministerial (M.Div.) education weakens or disappears in the university centers” (Lindbeck, 1976: 10, 38, 41).

Religious studies can be either particularistic or generic in character, Lindbeck notes. In the first case, one makes use of the descriptive and explanatory approach which is typical of religious studies to acquire competence in one particular tradition. In the second case, one employs the same approach but now with a view to identifying features common to many traditions. Lindbeck observed that the second, generic approach was expanding most rapidly in North-American institutions (Lindbeck, 1976: 38–39, 17, 28–29, 33, 35, 36, 38, 41, 93 n. 20, 94 n. 22). This expansion was making itself felt especially in the proliferation of elective courses, a tendency which was contributing to the notion of theological education as “broad, fluid and ambiguous.” Indeed, Lindbeck declares that “the shift in balance from theological to religious studies constitutes the greatest structural alteration in the place of religion in American higher education in the last 150 years, that is, since the beginning of distinct divinity schools in the first decades of the 19th century” (Lindbeck, 1976: 5, 35–36).

The upshot of these two shifts, i.e., with respect to the public and the programs of theological institutions, can be summarized as follows:

Proportionately less of the work of the university center is directed toward the churches and more toward the academy. . . . The divinity schools are becoming more like departments in faculties of arts and science (or like miniature general education faculties) (Lindbeck, 1976: 13).

On the credit side, this has led to theological institutions being “better integrated into the university,” an increase in their academic status, and a greater feeling of belonging among students and faculty. On the debit side, however, “the gap between [theological institutions] and the churches has widened,” and their contribution to the life of the churches has become less obvious (Lindbeck, 1976: 13).

The North-American Context Now (2000)

A study of Catholic theological education which appeared in 1997 would seem to indicate a remarkable parallel between the situation described by Lindbeck in 1976, and the situation in which Catholic theological institutions find themselves today (Carey & Muller, 1997). Among the challenges facing the latter, the contributors to the study highlight

the following: the growing laicization of theology; the tendency to approach theology from an ecumenical—and inter-religious—perspective; the emergence of a student body which is socially diverse and often religiously illiterate, as well as being intellectually unprepared for theological studies; the emergence of curricula which are highly specialized and characterized by “an unintegrated elective system;” and the eruption of “highly controversial and public institutional disputes over academic freedom,” which have “brought to the fore the issues of ecclesial communion, ecclesial authority, and a legitimate freedom for theological research and reflection” (Hellwig, 1997: 73–74; Wister, 1997: 161–63; Schuth, 1997: 169–71).

There is, in other words, a striking isomorphism between the situation described by Lindbeck in 1976, and the situation described by Carey and Muller in 1997. Is it possible that Lindbeck’s response to the situation then, is also relevant to the situation now? This is the subject of the next section.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE THEN (1976) AND NOW (2000)

Meeting the Challenge Then (1976)

Lindbeck’s response to the challenge confronting theological education in 1976 was to appeal for a greater commitment to scholarliness, particularism, and pluralism (Lindbeck, 1976: 53, 57). In his words:

. . . The work of theological scholarship . . . should be unashamedly academic, unmistakably particularistic and, in this post-Protestant and increasingly post-Christian era of American religious history, genuinely pluralistic whenever this is feasible (Lindbeck, 1976: 18–19).

One of the great merits of Lindbeck’s study is his willingness to put flesh on the bones of this paradoxical appeal. Let us look briefly at his discussion of each element.

By *scholarliness*, Lindbeck means that theological education should be “academic, not occupational.” That is to say, unless an institution is dedicated specifically to ministerial formation, its main focus should be the promotion of intellectual competence, and scholarship in the field of religion. Those institutions which are able to do so “should capitalize on the strengths provided by their university connections.” The object of scholarliness is to enable students “to think theologically” just as training in mathematics enables them “to think mathematically.” Lindbeck provides a detailed discussion of the way in which a scholarly theological program ought to be organized. The stage of initiation is one in which the student is “basically receptive,” and the range of electives is limited. The object is to acquire basic skills, which will enable

students to proceed to the second stage in which they can opt to pursue either research or more practice-oriented undertakings (e.g., the ministry). In both cases, Lindbeck insists, "scholarly aptitudes and interests" are indispensable (Lindbeck, 1976: 14, 64).

Scholarship and *particularism* are not mutually exclusive, Lindbeck insists. The advocacy of a particular tradition of thought need not mean the loss of intellectual respectability and academic credibility. There is no inherent contradiction in defending a particular vision of (religious) truth in a pluralistic setting. What counts is the ability to argue one's case convincingly, in line with scholarly conventions. Of course, this does not mean that theology's place in the academy will be undisputed. If it is to be faithful to its own identity, Lindbeck argues, theology must be prepared for "collisions with what the world or the academy consider reasonable and proper." The only other option is capitulation to shifting (and possibly destructive) cultural norms (Lindbeck, 1976: 66, 80).

A far greater threat to particularity, Lindbeck felt, was the tendency to replace specifically theological studies with the generic brand of religious studies discussed above. This movement was prompted by two factors in particular, namely, student interest and the concern for institutional survival. In an effort to ensure continued funding and support, Lindbeck observed, theological institutions "have been tempted to become all things to all people, simultaneously advertising academic quality, practical training, personal religious searching and self-fulfillment, revolutionary potential, conservative value, ecumenical outreach and cultural breadth. . . . As long as students, faculty and money keep coming in, it is perhaps impossible to recognize the threats this poses to educational quality and coherence" (Lindbeck, 1976: 5).

Ultimately, the loss of particularism is detrimental even to the broader study of religion. Evidence seems to indicate that students who are unfamiliar with any particular religious tradition are less capable of serious engagement with religious issues in general. "There is often a peculiar abstractness, a failure of feeling and of interest in the concrete realities to which . . . scholarly studies refer" (Lindbeck, 1976: 60).

In an ideal world, institutions would be able to provide both a thorough grounding in particular traditions and a truly interdisciplinary program of religious studies. But this world is not for tomorrow and, in the meantime, choices must be made. As Lindbeck rather bluntly puts it: "If a given institution does not have the resources to mount distinct generic and particularistic programs, then it should decide which it shall be." Lindbeck warns that the movement from the particularistic to the generic may ultimately be self-defeating, in an age which shows signs of disillusionment with "the homelessness of mass society and reflects a longing for historic roots and communal tradition." Moreover

—and this is especially relevant to Catholic institutions—the price of the abandonment of particularism may well be increased polarization. As Lindbeck explains:

The consequence for American religion of the weakening of particularism in theological education is likely to be increased polarization. To the degree that [institutions] fail to transmit intellectually responsible versions of the historic traditions, “fundamentalist” reactions can be expected to gain ground among [those] interested in maintaining their religious identities. Church members would view the [institutions] as subversive and would either withdraw support or strive to reassert ecclesiastical control and to interfere with scholarship. . . . Thus the long-standing anti-intellectualism of much American religion and ministerial training would be reinforced. Ultimately, all that would be left would be fundamentalisms of various kinds and new forms of religious consciousness (some of which are fundamentalist in temper . . .) (Lindbeck, 1976: 4, 11, 41, 53, 60).

In brief, the temptation to “widen or alter the concept of theological education,” should be carefully scrutinized, and short-term goals should not be uncritically pursued (Lindbeck, 1976: 5).

Lindbeck is insistent that particularism need not give rise to parochialism, as long as it is balanced by a healthy dose of *pluralism*. In the light of what has been said already, it is clear that Lindbeck does not understand “pluralism” to mean a grounding in generic religious studies. He means, instead, that theological education should promote knowledge and awareness of all those religious movements which have achieved “significant institutional presence in the American mainstream” (Lindbeck, 1976: 67, 15). Such knowledge and awareness can be promoted by developing optional programs which provide an initiation into those (other) traditions which are relevant in a given context. Here, too, choices will have to be made in view of local needs, and the availability of funding and expertise. Lindbeck is well aware of the practical difficulties involved in combining particularism with pluralism, but he insists that the ideal, at least, ought never be lost sight of (Lindbeck, 1976: 57–58, 67–75, 106 n. 75).

Lindbeck’s threefold appeal was inspired by a concern to preserve and promote the distinctive character of theological scholarship in a manifestly pluralistic culture. It seems to me that both his concern and his proposals are still relevant. Let us reflect briefly on this suggestion.

Meeting the Challenge Now (2000)

In discussing the nature of the challenges facing Catholic theological institutions today, I drew upon the work of Carey and Muller. I would like to do so again in reflecting on possible responses to those chal-

lenges. Here, too, the parallels with Lindbeck's study are striking. In the concluding essay of the 1997 study, Earl Muller addressed the points which had been raised by contributors. I would like to group Muller's reflections around the three points raised by Lindbeck.

Of course, no one contests the idea that theological education ought to be characterized by *scholarliness*. The problem is the determination of the precise meaning of this term, in a time when there is no uniform theological methodology and a pluriformity of theological specializations (Boadt, 1997: 256; Wood, 1997: 280). Muller observes that "work needs to be done on establishing a broad consensus on the criteria of Catholic theology which could begin to bring some methodological order to the current disarray and allow professionalization to proceed in a way authentic to Catholic theology" (Muller, 1997: 360). As Muller points out, "the respectability of theology departments vis-à-vis other academic departments depends in large measure on the establishment of disciplinary criteria and the construction of programs posited on those criteria." In this regard, it is fitting to recall Lindbeck's earlier warning that one of the greatest threats to the future of theology is the temptation to "widen or alter the concept of theological education," in an effort to ensure institutional survival. There may be short-term gains in "keeping the notion [of theological education] broad, fluid and ambiguous," but the long-term consequences may be the loss of scholarly credibility (Muller, 1997: 360).

The temptation to "fluidity" is, of course, also relevant to the matter of *particularism*, that is to say, Catholic identity. Muller insists on the need for theology to be part of the academy, but he also points out that theology cannot allow itself simply to be defined by the academy. Theology is undeniably a critical and rational enterprise, but it is an enterprise that is undertaken with a view to the community of faith. Hence, Muller observes, "we cannot presume that the academy will recognize as legitimate every element or criterion which makes theology to be authentic." Muller points to the "oversight of theologians by the hierarchical magisterium" as an example of such criteria. "Sometimes," he points out, "it will be necessary to refuse to be intimidated and to resist the demands of the academy." The same is true of theology's relationship to the broader society. "Dialogue with the culture is important," Muller insists, "but we cannot assume that the culture will be transformed simply because theologians are in dialogue with it. It is important that we do not lose our nerve in the face of indifference or even hostility" (Muller, 1997: 362-63). Here, too, Muller echoes Lindbeck to the effect that theology must be faithful to its own vision of truth or risk capitulation to shifting cultural norms (Lindbeck, 1976: 80).

Of course, theology cannot be oblivious to such norms. It must take account of the signs of the times. One such sign, which has already

assumed the status of a norm, is respect for plurality. The theology of the future must incorporate the new understanding of *pluralism* which has emerged in this century. It is striking that a particularist like Lindbeck is so intent on giving pluralism its due. But Lindbeck is also a pragmatist. Hence, he recognizes that most theological institutions cannot do everything and that choices have to be made. Muller, too, acknowledges that an authentic theological vision will be "open to all cultures." But he also recognizes that "what is being expected of theology in terms of the integration of society and culture is enormous. If the Middle Ages are any indication," he observes, "it is the task of centuries, not of decades. The obstacles are formidable and the resources are restricted." Hence, "what is called for, if discouragement is to be avoided, is the development of broad strategies for dealing with 'the impossible'" (Muller, 1997: 371).

With regard to such strategies, Muller remarks that one of "the most valuable things an institution can do, if it has not already done so, is to clarify its mission statements and the values it wishes to encourage throughout the institution" (Muller, 1997: 364, 371). In other words, before it begins to address the question of its relation to a pluralistic world, a theological institution must address the question of its own identity.

Once again, therefore, the theme of particularism makes its presence felt. Indeed, it appears as if this theme is the pivot, the key to understanding the two other themes of scholarliness and pluralism. By way of conclusion, I would like to say a few words about the importance of particularism in an age characterized by religious pluralism.

E PLURIBUS UNUM? CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN A PLURALISTIC CONTEXT

In an article published in 1993, Peter Donovan makes a distinction between two forms of pluralism, which he describes as "epistemic" and "ideological" pluralism. Epistemic pluralism involves the recognition that divergent views must be tolerated. In fact, it goes beyond mere tolerance to embrace the conviction that the cause of truth is best served by an open and honest exchange of views. Epistemic pluralism is clearly not incompatible with commitment to a particular faith tradition, although it has to be acknowledged that the world's faiths can claim little responsibility for the actual emergence of this essentially Enlightenment principle. Ideological pluralism, on the other hand, involves a commitment to pluralism as the only acceptable model for truth. For ideological pluralists, particular religious traditions may be necessary but they are, by definition, inadequate. The difference between both types of pluralism has been succinctly expressed by Donovan. While epistemic pluralists maintain that pluralism is "a way to

finding truth," ideological pluralists insist that "pluralism is the truth" (Donovan, 1993: 220; Morris, 1990: 194–96, 201 n. 46; Ward, 1990: 24).

There is no place for genuine particularism—and therefore no place for Catholic theological institutions—in a context defined by ideological pluralism. It is therefore essential that the Catholic willingness to embrace pluralism be preceded by a critical reflection on the type of pluralism on offer.

Ideological pluralism is the pluralism which desires to make the many into one, the pluralism which seeks to level out differences in the name of some vague notion of universal truth. In my opinion, this is the sort of pluralism which is usually operative when theology is invited to "expand its horizons" and become more like religious studies. What makes this sort of pluralism so insidious is the fact that it begins by ostensibly promoting particular traditions. It claims to value every partner to the dialogue. Indeed, it invites every conceivable partner to participate in the dialogue. But it also claims to know the outcome of the dialogue. And that outcome is said to be some point beyond all particularity (Merrigan, 1997: 686–707).

Epistemic pluralism, on the other hand, promotes open-ended dialogue. It allows for the possibility that truth might be disclosed in the particular. Epistemic pluralism does not require of a partner to the dialogue that they concede their individuality before the discussion begins. Instead, it encourages the partners to the dialogue to become more and more themselves. And, of course, as all of us know, becoming ourselves means, among other things, learning to live with our limitations.

Perhaps, in our pluralistic age, the future for Catholic theological institutions lies not in seeking to be all things to all men and women, but in simply being ourselves—in being a very particular one among the many.

REFERENCES

- Boadt, Lawrence E. "Biblical Studies in University and Seminary Theology." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 256–65.
- Carey, Patrick W. and Muller, Earl C., ed. *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. New York: Crossroad, 1997.
- Donovan, Peter. "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism." *Religious Studies* 29 (1993) 217–29.

- Hellwig, Monika K. "Theological Education in the Undergraduate Core Curriculum." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 68–80.
- Lindbeck, George. *University Divinity Schools: A Report on Ecclesiastically Independent Theological Education*, by George Lindbeck, in consultation with Karl Deutsch and Nathan Glazer. The Rockefeller Foundation—Working Papers, 1976.
- Lindbeck, George. *The Nature of Doctrine*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984.
- Merrigan, Terrence. "Religious Knowledge in the Pluralist Theology of Religions." *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 686–707.
- Morris, Paul. "Judaism and Pluralism: The Price of 'Religious Freedom.'" *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*. Ed. Ian Hamnett, 179–201. London & New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Muller, Earl C. "Afterword." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 351–74.
- Schuth, Katarina. "Theological Faculty and Programs in Seminaries." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 168–89.
- Ward, Keith. "Imperialism and Co-existence in Religious Ideology." *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*. Ed. Ian Hamnett, 13–28. London & New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Wister, Robert J. "Theological Education in Seminaries." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 154–67.
- Wood, Susan K. "Liturgy: The Integrative Center of the Theological Disciplines." *Theological Education in the Catholic Tradition: Contemporary Challenges*. Ed. Carey & Muller, 280–95.

Terrence Merrigan is professor of Christology and the Theology of the Non-Christian Religions at the Faculty of Theology, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (The Catholic University of Louvain) in Belgium.