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Theological Education in a Multireligious World

Many seminaries and graduate schools of theology today are training students who hail from within the Christian tradition but who may not necessarily be working with only Christians. Some theological schools have students coming from literally across the globe while others have students who will be sent on mission all over the globe. If the world is fast becoming a global village, the seminary should be that place where candidates learn how to minister to and in a world that is also fast becoming multicultural and multireligious.

The Context of Theological Education

Traditionally, seminaries have been ecclesial establishments that prepare their adherents to serve primarily in their own parishes or parish-owned schools and similar institutions. A typical mission of a seminary would sound something like this: “To proclaim Jesus Christ by preparing students for faithful discipleship and to lead in church and world through worship, education, and service.” As preparation for the ad intra aspects of mission, Catholic seminaries usually ensure that candidates are adequately trained in the understanding of Scripture and Tradition, the basic foundations of church life and ministry. It makes sense therefore that biblical studies, church history, spirituality, doctrinal studies, ethics, and liturgy are the main components of the seminary curriculum. This education is primarily in the service of the preaching and teaching or kerygmatic aspects of mission.

Traditional Approach to Mission

Today, however, more schools are requiring students to take courses such as understanding other religions and cultures or courses on intercultural communication and understanding human behavior. By and large in a traditional approach, these are aimed at preparing them for the ad extra aspects of mission, and the courses are specifically meant to equip the candidates

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to be better prepared so as to be able to reach out in a mode of evangelism to people outside of the church. In many cases the education about the religious “other” has as its goal the seminary’s mission to proclaim Jesus Christ and to preach the Gospel. In this traditional approach, mission is understood in light of Matthew 28:19 (“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”), and seminaries see their role is “to equip the saints,” in the spirit of Ephesians 4:12, “so that the body of Christ may be built up.” Thus, in studying about the “other,” especially their religions and cultures, the graduate will be better disposed to appreciating where and how the Gospel can most effectively be presented so as to be successful soul-savers and church-planters.

**New Understanding of Mission**

The recent decades have seen different reasons for seminaries to be emphasizing the study of other cultures and religions. This is a consequence of the shift in the theological understanding of the church’s mission, especially in light of not only the fact of religious pluralism (de facto) but also increasingly the acceptance in principle that the pluralism of the religious landscape may well be willed by God (de jure). In such a context, mission remains relevant but is understood rather differently. It is perceived not so much in terms of saving souls and bringing them into the church to ensure an afterlife salvation but more in the spirit of Jesus’ wish that we have “life in all its fullness” (John 10:10), beginning with the here and the now. Thus, mission entails saving the broken bodies that fill the earth and ensuring the possibility of justice and peace not only for Christians but also for all of God’s people before they leave this life.

In this context the people of other religions and cultures are looked upon not so much as subjects or targets of mission but as partners and collaborators. The broken world is too huge for Christians to do it alone. Moreover, people of other religions are also as concerned about the world and see it also as their mission to alleviate the suffering that constitutes a great part of it. Mission is understood not so much as *missio ad gentes* (mission “to” the people) but as *missio inter gentes* (mission “among” the people). Thus, the building up of the institutional church takes second place to the building up of the Kingdom of God. The teaching of Matthew 25:35 (“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me.”) serves as inspiration for this *diakonia* aspect of mission. Consequently, it makes sense for candidates preparing for such an understanding of mission to be well versed not only with how to relate with the adherents of other religions but also with what their religions stand for and how they understand what Christians refer to as the Kingdom of God.

**Challenges Confronting Theological Education**

Now, even if one does not subscribe to this latter understanding of mission, the signs of the times have it that there is no denying the need for seminaries to offer at least an exposure to, if not a thorough study and understanding of, religions other than Christianity. Graduates of seminary education can no longer expect to be sheltered from interactions with persons of other religions. Christian ministry can no longer be exercised in isolation. Religious pluralism has become almost normative in today’s society and is bound to confront practically every Christian minister of the Gospel.

For example, chaplains in hospitals (even Christian hospitals) will not be dealing with only Christian patients but may also have to organize healing rites for Wiccans or grieving rituals for Jains. Those working in
prison ministries also have to be prepared to give counsel on issues such as dietary regulations for inmates of Seventh-day Adventist background or conduct worship sessions for those of the Confucian faith. Even ministers who do not have to work directly with persons of other faiths are still bound to encounter situations where dealing with the religious other is necessary. Whether the Christian minister is a member of the neighborhood network of civic organizations or an advocate on immigration issues, the minister will probably be working alongside persons who are other than Christians. Or, it is likely that pastors may at times have to give advice on issues that impinge on other religions, such as the legitimacy of Christians engaging in zazen or yoga, or make statements on religious-political events such as zealot Christians burning the Qur’an or protesting the right of Muslims to build mosques in America.

That is why the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has embarked on a consultation to explore how and to what extent seminaries will have to include the study of other religions and aspects of interfaith engagements within their curriculum. This is in view of eventually making this course of study a requirement for those institutions seeking accreditation from the ATS. There could not be a more daunting task especially in light of the diverse understandings of what seminary education stands for or is aimed at. In an interview with Time magazine, ATS Director Daniel Aleshire had this to say: “I think that we are on the cusp of a lot of change, but we are at the front end of it, so it’s not clear which of these are going to be the survivors, what new models might in fact emerge” (Dias).

Aside from having few models to follow, the ATS also has to contend with the challenge that the leaders of some seminaries might even view such ventures as going against the very objectives and spirit not only of theological education but also Christian witness in general.

A case in point is Claremont School of Theology’s move of “going interfaith” (see Arca). Its most recent strategic planning has poised the Christian seminary to move toward a partnership with a Jewish and Islamic institution for the training of future pastors, rabbis, and imams together. In other words, not only will Christian seminarians be studying about other religions, they will be studying that alongside Jews and Muslims, just as the latter will be learning about Christianity with Christians as their classmates.

The venture did not come without its critics. Many Christians have condemned the project, some of them even accusing the school of committing apostasy or at least heading down the road of cultural and religious relativism and watering down the Christian message and especially its mission of preaching and conversion (see Daleiden 2008; Daleiden 2010). It also nearly resulted in the United Methodist Church, which Claremont has been affiliated to for more than a century, to withdraw its sponsorship and funding. This near setback was offset by a $50 million donation by a philanthropist couple who were specifically attracted to the idea of a “multi-faith university that reflects the power and potential of the ‘Golden Rule,’ which the many faith communities have in common” (Smith).

**Pebbles in Our Shoes**

As can be seen from Claremont’s case above, the challenges confronting theological schools moving toward a curriculum which is relevant in an increasingly multi-religious world cannot be underestimated. The jury is still out as to whether faithfulness to the Gospel entails responding to this world by attending to religious pluralism or by shielding one’s disciples against external
influences by reinforcing the traditional Christian message.

Whatever it is, perhaps the advice of the student speakers at the 2011 commencement ceremonies of Chicago's Catholic Theological Union might be helpful. In relating how theological education has assisted them in apprehending the world, Angela Paviglianiti and Hugo Esparza-Pérez had a message that sounded like this: “We must walk the path of life as if there were pebbles in our shoes. While the pebbles may be a source of discomfort, they also remind us that we must tread cautiously and sensitively.”

References


