

## (56) ETHNICITY IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN AFRICA

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### **Introduction**

In this article I argue that by virtue of its subject matter, theological education ought to infuse life with morals and values, thus moulding a just, moral and peaceful society such as is envisaged in God's *telos* for His world. And in line with its aims, theological education provides knowledge and skills to people to enable them serve the church, together with the wider society where the church lives. A theological curriculum appropriate to its context ensures success in both these aspects of theological education. To their credit Africa's theological institutions seem to have curricula which are relevant to Africa's context. Success in sustaining the relevance of these curricula lies in continually revising the curriculum so that it does not become dated. One such urgent revision is in the offering of ethnic studies which is necessitated by the ethnic crisis in Africa. For this reason ethnic studies in the curriculum of theological education in Africa is imperative. I propose four ways in which ethnic studies could be included in the curriculum of theological education Africa.

A few year ago, renowned theological educator, the late Professor Kwame Bediako, in a passing comment noted the following: 'During the past thirty to forty years, the mushrooming of churches in independent Africa has led also to the proliferation of Bible schools...'<sup>1</sup>. We may not have actual statistics of the current number of theological institutions in Africa but it is a fairly safe conclusion that the hundreds of Theological Institutions in Africa<sup>2</sup> (including university Religious Studies Departments and Faculties of Theology) represent an appetite in Africa to have her clergy and church workers theologically educated or trained. This is a noble desire that ought to be fulfilled since the provision of theological education (unless noted otherwise, TE from here on) is vital in view of its subject matter and goals.

### **Importance of Theological Education**

#### *The Subject Matter of TE*

Theology, and thus the subject matter of TE, is about God and God's created order. For that reason TE is intrinsically characterized by the intersection of issues about God – God's words and actions, agency, nature, character etc., and God's world – human beings, nature and environment, societies/communities etc. In consequence, TE is distinguished by the fact that although it has professional, civic and intellectual purposes, it is, on the basis of its transcendent subject, essentially moral and value-laden. And so, in concrete terms, TE invariably offers inquiry, instruction, knowledge, and practice which, in relation to humans' perceptions and experiences of the transcendent, draw from both the moral and value-orientated domains. As such it can influence most other human endeavours, whether scientific, artistic, social or political, for good or ill. What is more, seen in this perspective, the contribution of TE is distinct and

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<sup>1</sup> See Bediako, K., 'The African Renaissance and Theological Reconstruction: the Challenge of the Twenty-first Century', *Journal of African Christian Thought* 4:2 (2001), 29.

<sup>2</sup> See Bowers, P., 'New Light on Theological Education in Africa', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 14 (1990), 57-63. His paper which although written 18 years ago clearly points to this since there has been no visible drop in the increase of theological institutions in Africa, nor the closing down of African University's Religious Studies departments or Faculties of Theology. See also Gatwa (2002) for more about theological institutions in French speaking Africa.

necessary in any pursuit of a just, moral and peaceful society, which are vital elements in the viability of any society and, for Christians, germane to God's *telos* for His world – a new heaven and earth.

Such an understanding of the subject matter of TE is not to say that other kinds of education and academic disciplines have no moral and value elements, nor any sense of the transcendent among those involved with them as tutors or students. But insofar as they are involved with morals and valuing, they have a theological element. This is the reason why it is argued that issues of theology exist in all abstract academic disciplines. So that, 'Just as problems in the physical theory in relativity can be discussed philosophically ... so, too, problems in ecology and psychoanalysis can be discussed theologically'.<sup>3</sup> Put simply, where moral and value issues in different fields and disciplines emerge, an avenue is provided for the deeper study of religious and ethical issues which are a subject area of theology even though in this case those issues fall within those other fields and disciplines. Moreover, theology relates to other cognate disciplines such as sociology, development, conflict resolution, psychology, counselling, history, etc. To the degree that theology relates to these disciplines, theological issues are dealt with within these disciplines but from the vantage point of matters specific to those disciplines' subject areas. Seen this way, TE is significant because it contributes to our society vital elements we could variously describe as 'morals' or a 'moral vision', 'values' or a 'value system', 'spirituality' and the like, all of which are integral to a just, moral and peaceful society. For this reason theological institutions in Africa have a very special role of moulding African society into a just, moral and peaceful society in keeping with God's *telos* for His world – a new heaven and earth.

#### *Aims of TE*

The second importance of TE lies in its aims. 21<sup>st</sup> century formal higher education ideally strives to provide knowledge and a variety of skills which are necessary for public service and other vocations. For this reason, higher education is viewed as existing to benefit a nation's economy (of course with its corollary benefits of giving individuals access to income and professional status).<sup>4</sup> So strong is this perception of the goal of higher education that in many places universities have been blamed for failing to offer the right, or quality, education (that is to relate theory to practice in the field) when the services for which its graduates are employed are inadequately delivered.

TE is not divorced from the dynamics and impulses of general higher education that we have just alluded to above. Such a thesis is clear where TE is offered through faculties of theology and departments of religious studies in African universities. Elsewhere, TE usually subscribes to the purposes of higher education in endeavouring to offer 'certificate', 'diploma', or 'degree' level education in the field of theology. In fact, in a number of instances, theological institutions are offering TE in partnership with universities, or are seeking accreditation through institutions which impose on them purposes and standards that would be expected of higher education in universities.<sup>5</sup> TE, therefore, has been understood in a variety of ways and with different shades of emphases, to exist for the purposes of providing knowledge and skills for services in the church and in the wider society where the church lives. The following few examples of the observations and reflections by those involved in TE will suffice to underline this *raison d'être* of TE.

<sup>3</sup> See Toulmin, S., 'Theology in the Context of the University', *Theological Education* 26:2 (1990), 61.

<sup>4</sup> See Grubb, W. N., and Lazerson, M., 'Vocationalism in Higher Education: The Triumph of the Educational Gospel.' *Journal of Higher Education* 76.1 (2005), 1-25. His article provides for more on this. Even though their article is written from an American context, the issues and facts they look at resonate with higher education across the continents (see Matos [200] and Vilakazi [2000]).

<sup>5</sup> Such as the Commission of Higher Education in Kenya. The commission was established in 1985 through an Act of Parliament to regulate growth and ensure quality in higher education in Kenya. To date this commission has granted a number of theological institutions in Kenya the licence to offer degrees in TE having certified that they meet the standards expected of university education. For more on the commission, see their website <http://che.or.ke>.

Tinyinko Maluleke in the context of TE in South Africa writes, '(South) Africa should be producing theologians, priests and religious workers who are able to participate and/or facilitate in the addressing of Africa's peculiar problems'.<sup>6</sup> Klaus Fiedler and Kenneth Ross are of the view that TE in Malawi should be equipping its beneficiaries 'to think out the meaning of the gospel in their particular social and ecclesial situation'.<sup>7</sup> Kwame Bediako feels that TE should end up 'equipping God's people for mission and for the transformation of African society'.<sup>8</sup> Plueddemann forthrightly puts it thus, 'The aim of TE is to develop leaders to build and strengthen the church'.<sup>9</sup> As a last example, I cite Anderson who argues that, 'Theological institutions are called upon with exponential force to produce ministers capable of addressing the complexities of modern life. Frequent questions emerge: "How shall we best teach our students to minister to the world?...".'<sup>10</sup>

It is important to be aware that in the context of Africa, the importance of the goals of TE, just mentioned, are magnified. This is on account of the fact that in Africa Christianity (together with Islam and other forms of indigenous religions) is a major presence or factor in life. Consequently, it is incumbent on theological educators to understand that the provision of TE which directs and channels Christianity in constructive ways for public and social good is an important agenda within TE's proscribed goal which relates to the church's habitat, the wider society. Maluleke puts it thus:

If official statistics are to be trusted, Africa is a very religious continent with Christianity – however nominal it might be – occupying a place of pride in this. This means that TE in Africa has public consequences beyond the narrow confines of seminaries and church congregations. In many countries therefore, African theological and religious education is public education – quite apart from whether governments recognize this or not.<sup>11</sup>

To sum up, we are saying that the subject matter of theology and its goals brings out the importance of TE into sharp relief. This importance has to do on the one hand with the infusing of life with morals and values, thus moulding a just, moral and peaceful society such as is envisaged in God's *telos* for His world, and on the other, providing knowledge and skills to people to enable them serve the church, together with the wider society where the church lives.

### **The State of TE in Africa**

#### *Inappropriate Curriculum?*

For TE in Africa to engage adequately with the subject matter of theology and at the same time meet the goals of TE, it must have a curriculum which is appropriate to the African context. In this regard, TE in Africa has been cited as not appropriate for the African context.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly TE cannot engage adequately with its subject matter if that subject matter is not related to the context of those engaging with

<sup>6</sup> Maluleke, T., 'The Africanization of TE: Does Theological Education Equip You to Help Your Sister?', *Journal of Constructive Theology* 4:2 (1998), 15.

<sup>7</sup> Fiedler, K and Ross, K. R., 'Postgraduate Theological Degrees at the University of Malawi: Vision and Reality', *Ministerial Formation* 72 (January 1996), 15-19, 15.

<sup>8</sup> Bediako, K., 'The African Renaissance and Theological Reconstruction', 29.

<sup>9</sup> Plueddemann, J. E. *The Challenge of Excellence in Theological Education*, (1989) 11.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson, R. C., 'Infusing the Graduate Theological Curriculum with Education about Disability: Addressing the Human Experience of Disability in Theological Context', *Theological Education* 39 (2003), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Tinyinko Maluleke, 'The Africanization', 15; See also Bediako's article (2000) on the role of Christianity in Africa in the new millennium.

<sup>12</sup> For example, De Gruchy (1994), Maluleke (1998), Bediako (2001) and Gundani (2002). Of course, evaluations of TE as inappropriate to their context are not unique to TE in Africa (see Farley [1983], Cobb and Hoff [1985], and Ott [2001]) nor even, as alluded to above, unique to TE.

