

PANEL: THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM*

THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM I

So much has been written in recent years about the basic issues in theological education that one wonders if anything more can be said, especially by one who has spent most of his scholarly energy in the past decade thinking about the nineteenth century. But as a brief contribution to stimulate discussion of our theme, I want simply to identify three or four areas of acute concern that I have about the quality and directions particularly of theological *scholarship* in the United States. These may be merely personal "worries" of my own, for I cannot claim to know what is going on everywhere in theological schools, but they are nagging worries that have at least some justification.

1. First, very practical problems or constraints of two sorts, certainly not unrelated, that seem to me to have had a seriously constricting effect on theological scholarship.

One of these is simply the increasing demands on the time of theological faculties. It has always been the case, I believe, that faculty in theological schools have had a dimension of responsibility that does not quite have a parallel in the university scene generally, or even in other professional schools, for example, law or medicine or business. This is the responsibility for deep involvement in the life of the Church, which is over and above the standard trilogy of the requirements for promotion and tenure review of scholarly productivity, excellence in teaching, and service to the institution. And we might add to this the special role that theological faculty are expected to have in the formation, or personal development, of theological students—which certainly does not have a parallel in the university graduate school or the law school or the medical school.

But I said "increasing" demands. We know that over the past fifteen years there has been a total growth in the enrollments in theological schools in the U.S. We also know that there has *not* been a corresponding growth in the size of theological faculties. Even more important, I believe, has been the proliferation of programs in extension education and lay education, in which theological faculty are called to participate. Those are, of course, legitimate, important concerns which must be pursued. But only rarely has this expansion of responsibility in the theological schools been matched by an appropriate enlargement of the theological

*This plenary session consisted of four presentations by members of a panel and then discussion. The papers that follow are revised versions of the panelists' presentations.

faculty. And the consequence has been a serious loss in the energy available for scholarship of a high order.

The other kind of pressure, partly practical and partly theoretical, has been a tendency toward denominationalization, even sectarianism, in theological education, as institutions are pressed to understand themselves more explicitly as Presbyterian or Methodist or Lutheran or Catholic schools. In part this reflects a loss in momentum of the ecumenical impulse. In part it represents more mundane forces of bureaucratic control.

I shall return to this latter kind of issue, but for the moment I only suggest that both of these sorts of problems have led to a decline in both the quantity and quality of scholarship in the theological centers. With respect to the quantity, at least, one may observe that over the past two decades the center of gravity for scholarship in Bible, in the history of Christianity and Christian thought, and perhaps even in constructive theology has shifted from the theological schools to the university and college departments of religion. Note, for example, the doctoral dissertations that are being written—or the proportions of fellowship awards relating to religion that are made in the Guggenheim, Fulbright, and National Endowment for the Humanities programs. (I follow these latter listings carefully, and theological faculties are not well represented.)

2. This leads us at once to the second area of problems about which I worry—the relation of theological education and scholarship to the work of religious studies programs. I do not want to be misunderstood here. The interests of theology and of religious studies are in no way antithetical. After nearly forty years of teaching, about equally divided between the theological school and the general university contexts, I judge these interests to be indeed very close to one another. They are not identical, but they are interrelated. The study of religion may and must include theology, even constructive theology. Without living religious traditions, “religious studies” would become merely antiquarian. And it is not at all to be regretted that so much of our best work in scripture, in history, and in theology is carried on in religious studies departments. After all, given the enormous increase in religion programs in secular institutions since 1960, it is almost inevitable that this should be the case. We should be glad for it.

On the other hand, theology and therefore theological education, which in any way understands that it is situated in history, must now include the story of religious phenomena in the broadest sense.

What worries me here is that we have not yet achieved a real and working partnership in education and scholarship between the theological school and the religious studies department. Too many religious studies programs that I know have no self-definition except that they are not theological schools. And too many theological schools are so turned in upon themselves, their ecclesiastical connections, and their traditions that they are content with such a bifurcation.

3. This brings me to a third area of concern. It may well be that the previous problem, from the side of theology and the theological school, derives from the still dominant tendency to think of theological education as essentially professional training for clergy. Recall here Ed Farley's recent book *Theologia*, which should not go unmentioned in a panel on our topic, though I do not want to discuss

it in any detail. To be candid, the import of his term, "Theologia," does not come through clearly to me, but seems a kind of misty magic word to be pronounced regularly, without precise definition. And the proposals for reform of theological education are disappointingly vague, formal and programmatic.

Yet at least two elements of Farley's critique are important. One is the insistence that theology ought to be done as a whole, unified way of thinking, not as a concatenation of independent inquiries subject to unrelated disciplinary norms. The other is Farley's showing, particularly well demonstrated for the Protestant world, of the extent to which theological education has been understood as simply clergy education, which tends to divert the theological school from being the center of learning for the whole church into being a mere training school for ecclesiastical, professional functionaries. That is surely inadequate to a proper theological vision.

4. Fourth and finally, then, I am deeply worried about a kind of parochialism in theology and theological education that seems actually to have grown in the past decade and a half. This is related to all the preceding points, to ecclesiastical bureaucratization, to the question of theology and religious studies, and to narrow conceptions of clergy training. The impetus to ecumenism that was so powerful in the 1960s has obviously weakened. It is not dead, and here and there are signs of renewal, but the signs of withdrawal are painfully obvious. Even more important, however, is the widespread failure, except for a few instances, of theology and theological education to move into the wider ecumenism of interreligious encounter and mutual learning. Instead, I see a pervasive sort of Christo-ecclesiastical-monism.

Yet I submit that at the end of the twentieth century, valid theological work of any sort cannot be done except explicitly in relation to the religious pluralism that is so evident in our world.

The contrary tendency, which I suspect is actually at work, would be to leave the study of such things as non-Western religions and Native American religion to the religious studies programs. (A kind of division of the territory, in which theological schools do the Christian thing and religious studies departments do the other things.) *But this will not do.* If we accept at all, as we must, the demands of the historical consciousness, with the consequence of recognizing the limited and sociohistorically conditioned nature of the theological enterprise (made so clear from the time of Ernst Troeltsch), and if we are at all responsive, as we must be, to the striking growth in the understanding of non-Christian religious phenomena, then Christian theological investigation simply cannot be carried on except in relation to other traditions than our own.

The day is long past when other religions could be judged as merely error. It is also past, I insist, when they can be passed over in silence or relegated to the category of the unconscious or crypto-Christian. The understanding and articulation of our own theological heritage, on the contrary, must itself be informed and influenced by the knowledge of other traditions. Here we need to stand with F. Max Müller, who said that one who knows only one religion knows none, rather than with Adolph Harnack, who thought that one who knows the Christian tradition (in all its history and fullness, that is, especially the Catholic church) knows all religion.

For some obvious examples, Christology can no longer intelligibly be done except in the light of other ideas of incarnation and of the relation of other faith judgments to historical founders. The Christian idea of the human person can be interpreted only in dialogue with (and perhaps influence from) the Buddhist notion of *anatta*. The idea of the being of God needs to be informed by Eastern as well as Western ideas of non-being. Christian eschatology must be related to the hope for *nirvana*. And so forth.

If I am at all correct here, then Christian theological work must be throughout informed by the study of non-Christian thought. And the consequence of this is that theological education must in all its parts explicitly incorporate interreligious (and cross-cultural) dimensions. That theological education is not currently of this sort I take to be its most serious theological problem.

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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AS A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM II THE ONE AND THE MANY REVISITED

What is the unifying center of theological education—or, to use Edward Farley's parlance, what and where is "theologia"? For these past few years theological educators have been wrestling with problems of unity and pluralism within theological education. The questions have been formed by Farley's seminal work, *Theologia*, by the issues research being conducted by the Association of Theological Schools, and by the many new dimensions of pluralism which now challenge theological education.

Farley poses the question by recounting the history of theological education and noting the various forms of unity which it has embodied. Each form relates to the purpose of theological education, whether that be to mold character such that each student is imbued with worship of God, or to equip persons for the complex tasks of ministry. Variations of the latter have characterized theological education since Schleiermacher. However, educators of today find increasing difficulty in making this purpose a unifying center of theological education since in fact the tasks of ministry have become increasingly complex. The traditional areas of scripture, dogmatics, historical theology, and practical theology divide and subdivide as new disciplines clamor for their rightful place in the task of preparing persons for ministry. Sociology, psychology, economics and politics are new entries into the theological curriculum, so that one is tempted to say that theological schools must almost become mini-universities to deal adequately with their task.

Pluralism is not only a factor of theological curricula, it is also a factor in theological students. Gone are the days when the seminarian was a young man in his twenties newly holding his undergraduate degree. Such men now take their places