

**Reflections on the  
“Challenges and Promises of Quality Assurance in Theological Education:  
Ecumenical and Multi-Contextual Inquiries**

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**PRELUDE**

My context-specific task in this “listener’s report” is to try to make some observations about the ongoing conversations on theological education broadly conceived that have occurred during this WOCATI consultation, to raise some questions about some of the issues that I believe are embedded in these conversations, and to offer an interpretive perspective about the conditions of possibility that may have a bearing on the transformation of theological education in our time.

Entering the discussion in this way does at least two things, for the future of this ongoing, turbulent and necessary conversation. First, by situating the conversation within an ongoing discussion of the relevance, adequacy, and desirability of theological education worldwide, I wish not only to recognize the importance of the conversation, but the necessity of re-affirming the public character of theological education as an antidote to the re-emergence of auto-referential, self-serving, and therefore fragmenting subjectivity in theological education and its destructive consequences.

Second, by affirming the multiple locations and positionalities of “our” multi-stranded diversities as the methodological and spiritual starting point for transformative theological education, I wish to signal an affirmation of diversity and a recognition not only that the boundaries, territories, and containers of pluriform theological education are far more permeable than has often been acknowledged, but also that the virtue of living in leaky containers lies in the strength it provides to refuse the temptation of essentializing or homogenizing theological education and its curricular forms.

**DILEMMAS IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION:  
SOCIAL, POLITICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL, INSTITUTIONAL**

I am particularly grateful that this consultation, unlike some that I have attended, has insisted that theological education, not unlike the institutions out of which it arises, namely, the church, academy, and the world, are creatures with multistranded histories comprehensively and variously understood as “space,” as “political-economic-cultural artifact,” as “religio-moral event,” as “sites of ministry,” as “structures and processes of capital, goods, information, people,” and, as “ecosystem.” It is not surprising, then that our discussions about “quality in theological education” have sought to carefully, intentionally, and passionately attend to these histories that not only gave it birth, but which continue to nurture and shape it.

In the first place, there seems to be consensus that our world in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century no longer resembles the world, which gave birth to the seminary, theological school, or university-affiliated divinity schools with its decidedly “monastic” self-understanding.

In the second place, there seems to be agreement among us that institutions of higher education continue not only to be intensely contested, but also continue to be *sites* of substantive, metatheoretical, methodological, and political/institutional contestation. We know in our hearts that there are real differences among a small denominational seminary in Richmond, Indiana, USA, a large university-affiliated theology department in Kwazulu-Natal, a diocesan theologate in Manila, Philippines, a cluster of theological schools in Serampore, India. Location and positionality make a difference. Bodies shape ontologies, which in turn disciplines epistemologies.

For example, the notion of community which is central to the language and experience of seminaries, theological schools and university-affiliated divinity schools, and on which many ground their *raison d’être* has raised more questions than it has provided answers—a theme eloquently articulated yesterday by Farid Esack. While there may be an emerging sense of a globalizing identity, and while we may yet in our lifetime see the institutionalizing of a worldwide theological education oriented around Christian unity—about which Dietrich Werner correctly reminds us—present-day structures and patterns of actually existing communities, tied to territorial claims, particularly of the state and/or of ethnic groups, still remain and continue to hold sway. It is not so easy to extricate ourselves from the reigning asymmetrical definition of “community” that is articulated along dichotomous, if not divisive

lines—the civilized versus the barbarian, the inside versus outside, the friend versus enemy, the domestic versus the international, the resource-rich versus the resource-deprived along with the imagined or real asymmetries of power, position, and privilege that often accompany these asymmetries.

In effect, one of the dilemmas faced by WOCATI is that any pretensions of having a community of learning, teaching, and research, normatively rooted in the primary face-to-face relationship within a shared and common horizon, are rendered problematic, if not illusory by, on the one hand, the actually existing “anarchic” structures at the global level masquerading as centralizing, not to mention, civilizing norms, and, on the other hand, the specificities of local identities desperately asserting themselves in the name of survival. The question is not only whether there can be a community without the ethical face-to-face, but also what the conditions of possibility are for a community that can account simultaneously for both local (face-to-face) and global identities.

In the third place, it is difficult to speak about universally applicable theological education for church, academy, and world, given what for a long time now has been called the “unevenness of development.” This kind of unevenness is probably the most pervasive context of theological education worldwide—and is often legitimated by practices rooted in assertions of subordination based on gender, class, and race. This problem of unevenness lies not only in the vastly different theoretical and practical contexts in which seminaries, theological schools, and university-affiliated divinity schools have come to be situated in the present—contexts which themselves are undergoing profound changes. Nor does the problem of unevenness emerge only as a question of the re-distribution of resources—political, economic, and cultural. In fact, this WOCATI meeting underscores the fact that there are “higher order” differences, both inter-and intra institutionally, in the ways institutions of higher education are organized, supported, and developed, which profoundly shape each institution and which cannot simply be resolved by appealing to some universal pedagogical role which theological institutions are said to play in church, society, and world or by redistributing the resources required for theological education—their importance notwithstanding. In fact, both difference and unevenness raise critical questions about commensurability, applicability, and translatability; and can only be addressed, if not overcome, by intentionally providing contexts and

opportunities for encountering, engaging with, the historical Others who continually *displace* or *replace* our best intentions and desires for quality theological education.

### ORIENTATIONS:

#### TOWARDS (BEST) PRACTICES IN QUALITY THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

While I am somewhat skeptical about the capacity of theological institutions including my own to exercise a consistent and sustained transformative role in church, society, and the world, I do not believe that they will wither away—more so that they should. For these institutions in their medieval, modern, and post-modern forms have always re-presented society: its “scenography, its views, conflicts, contradictions, its play and its differences, and also its desire for organic union in a total body.” In fact, these institutions—such as we know them today—are more necessary than ever, because they are already implicated in society as *topoi* for practices that shape human experience.

Among the many lessons I have been gifted by all of you in this consultation, I would like to underscore at least four normative, orienting practices.

First, there is the practice of *engaged* deliberation. Deliberation cannot be reduced to mere speech. It encompasses the whole range of participative practices, which our morning bible studies with Sarojini Nadar so lightly but profoundly exemplified. These practices pre-suppose a recognition and affirmation not only of the plurality of theological institutions, celebrating difference as constitutive of community, but also of meaningful and direct participation in the production and reproduction of theological wisdom. Here, “community” has less to do with the aggregation of groups based exclusively on racial, gender, class, or disciplinary identities or solidarities, and more with the *sites* where human beings, if not theological educators, recognize and affirm their mutual responsibilities, obligations and relationships while simultaneously accepting norms of principled diversity and non-exclusion.

Second, there is the practice of creating, nurturing, and defending what Hannah Arendt called, in a different though not unrelated context, the *res publica*—the “public thing.” Contrary to those modernist practices that reduce the public to a pre-given structure of reality, or even to an ethnocentric project given ontological or universal status through its imposition worldwide,

the “public” is the space for difference carved out by deliberating communities as they seek meaningful consensus. By being committed to the retrieval and preservation of the *res publica*, understood primarily as practices of intersectionality, of living in the interstitial, one casts suspicion on the logocentric, self-referential, and totalizing pretensions of modernist narratives that continue to cast their long shadows on theological education today. It also redefines the public beyond the conventional notions of territoriality, recognizing not only our shared contexts or our profound pluralistic existence, but also of our *human specie identity*. The discussion we had around the *Kairos* documents is illustrative.

Third, there is the practice of utopia—of living in the “no place.” I suspect many of us would agree that, “Where there is no vision, the people perish...” (Proverbs 29: 18, *NIV*) This vision, not unlike Namsoon Kang’s notion of “remembering the future,” is not a description of the future, rather, it is an orientation in the present, a point of entry, a beginning, a departure, but not a final solution. While this orientation is mediated through our limits and the limits of our institutions of theological education, this unavoidable, if necessary, limitation, can be transformed into a practical critique of universalizing hegemonies, that, in the language of Foucault, makes transgressions possible, making it *imaginable* to undermine, subvert those dominative practices—particularly of pseudo-universals and false dichotomies—which discipline present-day experience of the church, academy, and world. The strategies undergirding the discussions on the geopolitical and socio-cultural issues of Session 6, as well as in the panel with Nico Botha, Simon Dossou, and Priscille Djomhou directs us to the transformative theological imagination that arises out of and returns to our unconditional limits.

Moreover, the possibility of transgression rests, largely, on a critical consciousness and a creative imagination that are not imprisoned by the logic of modernity nor bound by conventional wisdom. Such an imagination and consciousness, which are windows into time and eternity, will need to be nurtured, cultivated, indeed, disciplined in order for them to be *informative* as well as *transformative*. It will require that imagination be at home with memory; and that critical consciousness not be a disembodied emancipatory interest. Indeed, one of the lessons we have learned for theological education as a whole, particularly from the feminist/womanist movements—caringly represented in this consultation, is the impossibility of dissociating mind and body, reason and passion, thought and action. What is at stake, moreover, is both the freedom to reflect in ways that go beyond present structures of thought

and action; as well as the practical wisdom that avoids the pitfalls of the “first naiveté” that often mis-recognizes reversals and rejections of the practice of modernity for the transformative act.

Finally, there is the practice of truth-saying, of theological education institutions striving to be places of truth in church, society, and the world, as part of its commitment to self-critical accountability. Despite their implication in modernity’s “meticulous rituals of power,” seminaries, theological schools and university-affiliated divinity schools, by intention and design especially in terms of learning, teaching, and research and the specific forms they take in their respective theological curricula, can provide alternatives to the practices of thought and action generated by the grand narrative of modernity which intersects with other historical narratives including (hetero)sexism, racism, classism. They can seek to articulate, as in John Gichimu’s presentation, different understandings of the world in which they are situated, provide alternative readings of political, economic, cultural, and religious life—without pretending or aspiring to be legislators for the worldwide church, academy, and world. Such truth-saying is a necessary condition for the ethical, though it is not yet its completion or its apotheosis.

#### **LOCATIONS/POSITIONS:**

##### **TASKS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION IN GENERAL, AND WOCATI IN PARTICULAR**

Let me conclude by suggesting several tasks for WOCATI and theological education.

First, WOCATI may need to more fully embrace and experience a continually changing world. The profound transformations, dilemmas, and questions that WOCATI faces today call for articulating appropriate pedagogies, structures, and processes that are adequate for the particular spaces and places in which we variously find ourselves. The work articulated by Reinhold Bernhardt and his emphasis on theological pedagogy in the light of the demands of the Bologna Process; the work of David Esterline that seeks the alignment of mission, resources, and learning/formation in the context of quality assurance and improvement; and, Ravi Tiwari’s suggestions about a more intentional and sustainable practice for educational assessment, exchange, cooperation, and networking of accrediting institutions—provide an agenda for how we might embrace and experience this continually changing world of ours.

What is especially important, in my view, is that while cognizant both of the profound resource asymmetries of our world and the necessity of having resources approaching those of the global north, these examples do not reach for the latter, but are committed to their own sustainable ecologies. In their respective ways, these examples may be interpreted as challenging the fact that the notion of educational quality, for example, has been identified only with the standards set by institutions of higher education in the global north—much in the same way that global capitalism has arbitrarily defined for us what is the true, the good, and the beautiful. Judged even by its own standards, educational quality in the global north is clearly (ecologically) unsustainable; and the premises under which it is achieved arguably anomalous. The challenge, then, is to form our own meanings of *sustainable quality* for our own space, time, and place without surrendering the spirit of quality, which animates even these so-called model institutions, particularly in the areas of governance, faculty, resources, and educational effectiveness (assessment).

But even more than sustainable quality, I believe that the challenge for WOCATI and its member institutions is to look beyond quality itself—beyond matters of accreditation, credentialing, quality assurance—to institutional *strategies of excellence*, that assist individuals in the creation and nurture of a genuinely public space in which persons can appear before each other in the best way they know how to be.

Second, WOCATI may need to develop even more fully *engaged* pedagogies of interpretation, performance, formation, and contextualization. We have been reminded in this consultation that all education is about the discovery, creation, and nurture of creative and critical consciousness. In their own ways, each of you have pointed out that “critical consciousness” in theological education is a process of thinking, feeling, acting which is set in a thoroughly historical, political, cultural context, and, carried on in the midst of a freely-chosen struggle to create a just, participatory, and sustainable society. My reading of Dietrich Werner’s WCC-ETE’s missiological guidelines for quality theological education, of Nico Botha’s UNISA “Charter on Transformation,” and of Gary Reibe-Estrella’s plea for Catholic “friendships” against the backdrop of an almost absolute Roman magisterium, is that they are pressing institutions of theological education to be places for the practice of *embodied* freedom.

This practice of embodied freedom, which is always and already a sustainable freedom, includes the development of the whole person, one who has clearly grasped the simple fact that his or her self is fully implicated in those beings around her or him—human, non-human, Other, and who has learned to care deeply about them. Embodied freedom is relational freedom, by which I mean, it is a *biosphere*. In my opinion, this is part of the message of the film “White Wedding;” of the Apartheid Museum and of Nelson Mandela; and of the dinner celebration last evening. Indeed, the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is yearning for human beings who are fully alive, and who therefore can embody the “glory of God.”

Third, WOCATI may need to attend to building human and humane communities of theological scholarship with its three-fold character of learning, teaching, and research. At the heart of this task is the commitment to, and practice of, dialogue—moving through multi-stranded universes of meaning which, often involves conflict and collaboration, continuity and chance, and the creation of justice. We already know that the way education occurs is as important as its content. What is sometimes overlooked is that *relevant* and *meaningful* education occurs *as* a dialogue, which means, like any good conversation (or degree program), it has purpose, goals, content, location, duration, and resource requirements. In its most comprehensive sense, it means *together* connecting different spaces, times, places, in order to overcome what the American philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern universities.”

We already know that theological education requires positive, affirming relationships among its participants. What is often overlooked is that in order for learning, teaching and research to be *relevant* and *meaningful*, they must involve passion, i.e., connected to *eros*, love, and ecstasy. After all, human beings are more than *logos*; we are also *eros*, *pathos*, and the *daimon*. Unfortunately, despite our being a truly passionate people, we sometimes tend to view with skepticism, if not open hostility, the pedagogical virtues of *eros*, love, and ecstasy in theological education, perhaps, because we fear *eros* may lead us down the dangerous pathway to undisciplined, irresponsible, if fascinating human sexualities; or, we believe love will impair our pedagogical judgments and evaluations by making us “subjective” or “biased;” or, we think that ecstasy is nothing more than esoteric, otherworldly-directed experience. Happily, *eros* is more than the sexual. It is the moving force that propels every life form from a state of mere potentiality to actuality—and therefore, is an entirely appropriate (re) source for theological



education; love and care in the Christian tradition are the bases not only for a fuller humanity, but for a deeper and expansive understanding of self, other, and world; and, ecstasy, “standing outside ourselves,” is the historically-grounded precondition for personal, political, historical, and, indeed, religious, insight and transformation, without which we will only remain myopically pre-occupied with and in ourselves and our own self-interests.